Thanatopolitics and Fugitive Mourning in Pandemic Death

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has reminded us that death is not only inevitable but also, for those who are constructed as death bound, imminent and immanent. In this paper, I contend that this season of mass death has led to an intensified thanatopolitics where the state has sought to take over full control of corpses and the death world. This has major implications for how we order and relate to the African death world. Mourning and funeral rites are important sites of sociality for the processing of loss, ritual cleansing and renewal. The COVID-19 pandemic and the dramatic rise in deaths associated with it mean that mourning, rites, sociality and potential renewal are fundamentally disrupted. This disruption occurs because rituals and customs associated with how Africans honour and bury the dead have to change as a result of health protocols and government regulations that are promulgated against contagion. However, through media reports on those killed by COVID-19, I demonstrate that thanatopolitics remains fragile in the face of the erotics of mourning and fugitive mourning that families and communities engage in. This paper is an effort to engage with the subject of pandemic death and the meaning of what we lose when ritual and relation are threatened. It presents the erotics of mourning and fugitive mourning as forms of resistance that the black underclasses are always insurgently engaged in.

Keywords: COVID-19; Pandemic; Thanatopolitics; Black rituals; Fugitive Mourning;

Erotics of mourning

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INTRODUCTION

Writing about death and loss in the middle of a pandemic is necessarily animated by urgency and questions to which answers are not immediately available. The questions cannot be fully formed because the data are rapidly shifting and our grasp on the landscape is tenuous. In the fluctuating terrain of contagion and death, the eyes of many are feverishly fixed on the statistics. At the peak of the first wave, South Africa confirmed just over 600 000 infections and just under 15 000 deaths. But these are moving numbers. They can move us to tears, to action, and they can move us to the death world. As I revise this paper in the middle of the second wave of COVID-19 infections, the number of infected people in the country totals 1,20 million and the number of people who have died exceeds 30 000. Negative affect underpins lines of inquiry, and fear is pervasive. Anxiety swirls like a contagion. I recovered from an earlier infection but even as I write, with half my family currently infected, I live with anxiety. Since infection may lead to rapid death, contagion opens onto the death world. Global antiblackness renders black people death-bound subjects (JanMohamed, 2005), and the pandemic has hastened this journey. Death is everywhere. Social media is aflush with death notices. I write under a cloud of anxiety shrouded in black death. If the field of black studies is caught between the erotics of pleasure and black death (Nash, 2019), this paper is decidedly one of black death, even as I recognise the inevitable friction and entanglements between the two.[2] Studying something as it unfolds can therefore only represent a snapshot of the present – and even then, from a particular vantage point infused in negative affect. This colours what and how I write. The place from which I look is South Africa. My gaze is a black gaze that connects with black death everywhere. Against the background of worldwide mass death, the paper is concerned with practices of mourning and their social meanings as understood from the viewpoint of black studies. It also explores emerging forms of fugitive mourning in reaction to the restrictions imposed on traditional rites of death. I read online news coverage published over the period May to August 2020 and personal anecdotes to interrogate the thanatopolitics of the pandemic and how black working-class communities engage in fugitive mourning in order to sustain practices pertaining to people's relation to the dead. I conclude that fugitive mourning decentres administrative rationalities that seek to intervene in people's ritual relation to the dead.

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[2] The branch of black studies that focuses on black death conceives of black life as inevitably bound to death. This is based on the global antiblackness embedded in social reproduction, and the historical and ongoing overrepresentation of black people among the dead. The other branch of black studies focuses on black joy, erotics, creativity and survivance. Of course, these are not mutually exclusive approaches to studying black life and death.

PANDEMIC MOURNING

How do we mourn collective pasts steeped in dying and that keep gnawing at us? More immediately, how do we mourn COVID-19? How do we prepare for dying? How do we prepare our minds for the possible death of loved ones? How does the prospect of mass dying tug at wounds of other losses that occurred in our families and the communities to which we belong? How does our class position and that of our families inflect our fears and anxieties? While death from COVID-19 is a real prospect for most of us, it is potentially more real for others for whom physical distancing and self-isolation remain impossible. How do class and geography inflect our relationship with dying? How does racialisation link us historically to death? How might we read race as an ideology of death? What happens when our grieving is disrupted in the context of a pandemic? If melancholia is, in part, disrupted mourning when the object of loss is unacknowledged, how do we live with sadness? When we cannot travel to funerals or we are "surplus" to the maximum of fifty people permitted to gather, collective mourning is disrupted. To mourn collectively, we have to look at the body of the deceased to witness the reality of death. If what we see in the world and, now, on our shores is real, we should brace ourselves for a coming epoch of dying.

As African governments plan for the worst, ordinary people are not being asked to prepare for the coming pain of grief. This moment compels many to reckon with suspended dreams. We worry if we will ever see our parents who live in distant provinces. With borders closed, will we ever see our loved ones in Malawi and Zimbabwe?[3] The reality is dawning on us. Our phone conversations take on a new level of intensity and now we pay attention to the small things. Many of us who live far away from our families know we will not be allowed to travel home to see the sick. Depending on fast-changing COVID-19 regulation levels, we may be able to travel to their funerals if we can get a permit to move between provinces. We are unlikely to see their faces because whispers suggest that the corpses of those killed by COVID-19 are dressed in airtight plastic bags and placed in sealed coffins. WhatsApp voice notes suggest that soldiers or morgue employees draped in apocalyptic personal protective clothing will bury our dead because we are forbidden from touching the coffins. The sacred rites of our cultures must cease. The body of deceased cannot be brought home for the last farewell. We will bury our dead as

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[3] The long queues and bureaucratic disasters playing out at African borders has converted these sites to places of mass contagion. Refer to, for example, https://www.iol.co.za/news/africa/backlog-at-beitbridge-border-a-potential-superspreader-event--1d5aa222-05f1-4e74-a4c0-eb3f72338ffd.

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deceased bodies to be treated with suspicion of contamination. While this pandemic is certainly different from deaths that occurred in the era of slaveholding and slave ships, there are useful symmetries between the moments if we see them as coeval. Saidiya Hartman (2016) asks us to imagine what space existed for grieving in the hold of a ship as the enslaved began to lose shipmates. She suggests that mourning would be nearly impossible and insufficient, fleeting and furtive. In this moment of expansive death of pandemic proportions, we can only necessarily mourn fleetingly. Precautions against contagion require us to jettison our mourning practices. Our sociality of grief is hobbled, and we must learn anew.

Given this abrupt change to what was customary, how do we grieve? When we die in the context of mass dying, our loss is unexceptional and our grief is unremarkable to those consumed by their own losses. If we are all lost in our grief, who will comfort us? What happens to community networks when we cannot visit one another? How do we embrace and acknowledge one another's cries? How do we gear ourselves towards anticipatory grief? How do we orient ourselves towards pre-emptive mourning when our lives are already shrouded in grief? Perhaps this is the time to open spaces for remote connections where family and friends can come together to hold one another. In August 2020, Twitter became an important site for mourning those killed by this latest pandemic. Giaxoglou (2020) points to the political dimensions of hyper-mourning on social media, arguing that "sharers are interrogating which lives are considered grievable and worthy of memorializing, and which lives are dominating online visibilities as lives worth living, foregrounding the role of age, ethnicity, and class in this unspoken bio-politic" (p. 11). But this is only possible for the middle classes tethered to fibre networks. Perhaps all we have is the aftermath of death on the other side of COVID-19.[4] Maybe then, families, communities and governments need to make space for communal and global mourning. In these spaces, maybe we will be able to finally grieve and hold one another through our wailing. And then, afterwards, we can visit grave sites to say goodbye. Rwanda's mass mourning tradition may be a pathway to consider (Bagilishya, 2000). But how do we find space for the personal in mass rituals? What can we do while we stand on the brink?

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[4] This is premised on the hope that the wave of dying will cease and COVID-19 may be considered a historical footnote rather than an ongoing reality.

THANATOPOLITICS OF PANDEMIC DEATH

A central concern of this paper is the official politics of death, which both produce and exceed institutional power. Guy Emerson (2019) defines this as thanatopolitics. Here, the exceptional state of disaster declared by governments to limit the spread of COVID-19 allows the state to take control of the bodies of the dead. In the official politics of death in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the state takes full ownership of deceased persons' bodies. For Berlant (2007, p. 754), thanatopolitics involves "the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people". This process of wearing out reinscribes people into the death world. We bicker about corpses. While bodies of the deceased previously belonged to families and communities, the state now has full control of them. Confronted with new rhythms of dying and repossessed rituals and bodies, we are forced to engage with death perpetually and occupy the space of the death world (Emerson, 2019). The emerging emergency vaccines are equally implicated in the death world. They are a distant reality for Africans, and their planned acquisition and administration is under full state control, which is imbedded in corporate pharmaceutical monopolies. On this front, too, the politics of death are under administration by institutional power. We are made killable in the official seizure of death. State capture of death (and life) enables the reproduction of the state (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Below, I describe the consequences of this apprehension of corpses.

The material presence of the body of a deceased person is an important site for the bereaved to integrate the loss before the deceased can be released into the ancestral realm. Withholding the body from the bereaved or anonymising it disrupts psychological integration. In other words, to deny or withhold the body of a deceased person is to disturb mourning – that is, stalling, pausing and distorting it – and the ecosystem within which death and life are figured. To detain corpses is to take the dead hostage. South Africans and others who have been subjected to slow death and genocide by necropolitical regimes know the phenomenon of disappeared bodies too well. Here, bodies were burnt to ash, not as a form of internment but as a garish sadistic demonstration of white supremacy.[5] The hot violence that killed a million Rwandans marks our collective African psyche.[6] Christina Sharpe (2016) describes the pervasive atmosphere of mourning as "weather" in order to signal the ever-present and enduring state of mourning that black communities live in. COVID-19 compels us to see the continuity of this history

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[5] Nicky Rousseau details these ways of black dying in apartheid South Africa. For further information on productive engagements with the bodies of the dead (see Rousseau, 2009, 2016).
[6] Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela (2008) provides an account of the Rwandan genocide and its psychological dimensions.

of malice, this "weather" of atrocity. To be clear, COVID-19 cannot be seen as government-sponsored slaughter, but the bureaucratisation of the bodies of deceased and the incursions into rituals align with a politics of withholding.[7] We see this in the growing examples of working-class families who are compelled to bury bodies of people whose identities they cannot vouch for. In other cases, errors are identified after the wrong bodies have been buried. One family who buried the wrong body was that of Vukile Noda, whose widow, Nomsa Noda, told News24: "They refused to allow me to view my husband's body at the hospital mortuary due to Covid-19 regulations. Now I buried the wrong person" (Dayimani, 2020, n.p.).[8] Speaking for the Madlala family after they had buried the wrong body, Bhekukwenza Madlala told SABC News:

> *We are very saddened about this, it is indeed painful to bury a body that does not belong to you. But they have just exhumed the body, they will bring ours tomorrow. The COVID-19 regulation that says we must not view the body is a big problem. I think they must revisit the regulations to allow people to view the body, just to confirm if they are burying the right body. Otherwise, people will continue to bury bodies that do not belong to them. (Nyembezi, 2020, n.p.)*

Unathi Sigamlele from Cofimvaba in the Eastern Cape said: "When the body was about to be laid to rest, we as the family asked to see the body, that's only when we realised that it was not my fathers' body. Our investigation showed us that this body belongs to some family in KZN" (Nyembezi, 2020, n.p.). These instances demonstrate that state anonymisation of the dead has significant, often traumatic, consequences for bereaved families who live in doubt as to the identity of interred bodies. Here, the state does not hold bodies hostage but acts as a necropolitical regime when the consequences of its regulations harm people. We might conceive of this moment as the necropolitics of COVID-19. I use this concept, which I borrow from Robertson and Travaglia (2020), to point to the precarious situation of the working-class dead, who often die in migrant zones and whose disposable bodies are not the subject of care and respect.[9] In these instances, working-class families' demands are dismissed as being of no consequence. To anonymise the body of a person is to render it ahistorical. According to Emerson

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[7] While government regulations to curb the spread of COVID-19 are important and may even be necessary to save lives, we should not lose sight of their multiple effects. The zero-sum game of contagion regulation requires attention.

[8] https://www.iol.co.za/sundayindependent/news/covid-19-traumatised-family-say-they-were-given-wrong-body-to-bury-50449265

[9] The majority of bodies buried by the wrong family had to be transported from cities to rural villages.

(2019, p. 8), the body cannot be conceived as "a mere surface for the deployment of forces of mortality". The body is about much more than death.

Another incursion of the state bureaucracy into the sacred act of burial is the separation of the dead from the living. The body of a deceased person cannot be brought home to be the centre of a wake and to be integrated into the world of family ancestors. It cannot be touched and embraced one last time. Our wailing is muted and uncertain. Sealing a body with layers of plastic and a body bag emphasises contagion and fear and disrupts connection and affection. We are required to be afraid of the bodies of our kin and neighbours. While our customs and traditions require a turning towards the dead, COVID-19 regulations require that we turn away from the dead. Wake work (Sharpe, 2014) is disabled when we cannot assemble around the dead and recite their clan names, extoll their virtues and address them directly by telling them what they meant to us and what their death means. As the bereaved we look to the dead with regret at what we could not do. This continues the tradition of neoliberal disavowal of black working-class suffering. To disrupt ritual is to cast us into a spiral of mourning-without-end. Lissa Skitolsky (2018) has argued that marginalised communities are forever consigned to Orlando Peterson's concept of social death. We whose unhonoured souls wander plaintively live in conditions of social death. Conceived of this way, "the condition of black life is one of mourning" (Rankine, 2015, n.p.). Though this was true of our lives before COVID-19, the pandemic has affirmed this truth and rendered it plain. This moment recalls another neoliberal time of millions of excess deaths to AIDS long after it was treatable in the Global North (Thomas, 2014). We might call this the capital death epoch for how the logics of capital decided which bodies to save and which to dispose of. As it is now, the colour of death was black in the ongoing dying epoch of AIDS.

LOSING RELATION

Marginal and oppressed Third World people have been invested in survival rather than conquest and domination. Édouard Glissant (1997) characterises those who are not disposed to conquest as attuned to a poetics of relation achieved through errantry. This is the curiosity that drives the search for knowledge of the self and the other in order to live relationally. In recognition of the need for black solidarity to foster black survivance, we have ordered our lives as a codependent and fostered community. Funerals are important moments for consolidating and renewing solidarity, kinship, and community ties. This is true for black people (e.g., Cann, 2020) throughout the world, as well as other indigenous people (e.g., Sinclair, 1990) who live with the spectre and material reality of systemic death.

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The bureaucratic disruption of funeral rites is disorienting and constitutes a move towards a loss in relation. It feeds into a politics of what Tyrone Palmer (2017) calls the unthinkability of black feeling. To bureaucratise the space of affect is to deny humanity. Intervening in the relationship between the dead and those who mourn wears into the social fabric of relation. The disruption occurs at three levels – between the body of the deceased and those assembled to pay their respects; between the dead and those prevented from attending the funeral by bureaucratic thanatopolitical regulation; and between mourners and the ancestral world. To be black means to be in relation with the ancestral world because so many of us have been prematurely consigned to death. One can add that to be black is also to be in relation with the ancestral world as part of life and the world of the living.

Over the past few months, since the advent of COVID-19 in South Africa, some of my close friends could not attend the funerals of loved ones. Electronic media platforms, such as Zoom and YouTube, have been poor substitutes for the comforting presence of loved ones. They have been unable to provide the affirmation that comes with a hug and the reassuring touch on one's hand. If mourning requires a body (Reed, 2017), then remote funerals only enable partial mourning. The owner of Sinoxolo Funeral Directors, Siyabulela Jordan, told BBC News: "All the typical African glory at funerals has been overshadowed by the regulations, the entirety of funerals [has] changed. The inability to embrace one another because of social distancing is also a factor for them at this time" ("Coronavirus: How 'secret burials'", 2020, n.p.). The distress of friends on social media has revolved around this loss of relation, which is represented by the inability for people to embrace and the way in which wakes have been banned. The need for internet connectivity to be able to "attend" "online" funerals means that many working-class people are excluded by the wide digital divide in South Africa. Kenny McDillon, a Cape Flats-based pastor, told the New York Times (2020) that the COVID-19 regulations interfere with people's cultural and spiritual beliefs, adding that those who break the law to be with their dead will be criminalised. This move towards further criminalising black people is a worldwide phenomenon that points to how closely black life is lived on the edge of criminality. Reporting for Daily Maverick, Estelle Ellis (2020, n.p.) notes:

> *A health and safety officer was attacked. A coffin was forcibly taken into someone's home. Violent disagreements have broken out between families and undertakers. All this and more is happening around South Africa as frustrations erupt over disaster regulations governing funerals.*

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In this resistance against thanatopolitics, the fight over a corpse can lead to the criminalisation of ritual and those who insist on practising it. In rural communities that live on the brink of starvation, police officers forcefully entered homes to spill food and traditional brews intended for funerals. Here, too, the necropolitical state criminalises and attacks its most vulnerable by coming in the way of black relation. When ritual is disrupted, as in the preceding example, some families and communities resist law enforcers in order to practise their burial rites. Ellis (2020) writes that in Ilinge, an Eastern Cape township, families forcibly reclaimed the coffin of a loved one who had reportedly died from COVID-19 and took it into their house to bid the dead farewell in direct contravention of the law. The community is forced to choose between following regulations or engaging in the journey of the dead where the body returns to the person's place of birth and the place where the umbilical cord was buried. This is actually a non-choice. When one's culture is rendered illegal and superfluous, then actions are taken to resist efforts to consign people to criminality and the realm of outlaws.

EROTICS OF MOURNING

Waves of dispossession and systemic pandemics have enabled us to habituate to what Anthony Reed has termed "the kinds of black selves that are imaginable or desirable" (2017, p. 23). The kinds of black selves we imagine or desire are most evident at death. Even those who lived modest lives are sometimes sent away with grandiose or dignified funerals because they must meet their ancestors as their aspirational selves. The aspiration for dignity is performed as pageantry and excess at funerals. The performative dimensions of funerals are constituted by eruptions of heightened affects that are both painful and pleasurable. This might be observed as the erotics of mourning that are constituted by historically emergent forms of desire and attachment – a demand and practice of freedom (Reed, 2017). Here, I see pleasure and desire as emerging out of the assembled bodies that invest in the object of the deceased and the networks of affect that circulate between mourners. Affects circulate between assembled bodies and objects and, as argued by Sara Ahmed (2004, p. 120), they do things "through the very intensity of their attachments". The erotics of mourning are dependent on this capacity of emotions to do things. Funeral gatherings are also a space of singing and dancing. At black funerals, dancing often takes the form of encircling the coffin in a joyous embrace. Joy is elicited by the collective idea that the mourners are singing the dead into the ancestral realm or into heaven. These can be moments of intense pleasure and pain. For Jennifer Williams (2008), this coupling of desire and loss might be termed the erotics of mourning. To see the coffin or the body of the deceased might heighten emotions in ways that may not have been possible had one not attended the funeral. The appearance of

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the coffin or the body elicits strong emotion and is generally a moment of tears. When a loved one cries, those in proximity to them are likely to be moved to tears, too. Emerson's (2019, p. 8) contention that "the body-as-wound emerges through the particular assemblages generated with other bodies, forces and the relations between them" recognises the body as fundamentally relational. Funerals congregate an assemblage of highly emotive bodies that simultaneously experience pain and pleasure.

Funerals as sites of these erotics, facilitated by ritual and cultural practice, are therefore high-stakes spaces. Regulatory incursions limit ritual practice and come between the assemblage of bodies invested in the erotics of mourning. To regulate funerals is to intervene in the community of mourning – in pain and pleasure. It is to delimit the kinds of imaginable black selves we desire. Seen this way, then, to interpret state regulation as only invested in contagion and numbers of funeral attendees is to unsee the multiple permutations of these regulations. State regulations against contagion literally come in between our joy and pain. Regulations intervene in the potential for solidarity and emotive release. When a close friend died while I was abroad, I felt adrift from the emotions that circulated in South Africa. I could not connect with the pain that I knew I should be feeling. I imagine, then, that the inability to congregate and assemble with the family and community of those who die in this COVID-19 epoch deadens our ability to feel and share in the erotics of mourning that, in part, depend on and are produced by assembled bodies. A funeral congregation might also be understood as the assemblage of history. This is to say that people bring their collective histories with them and these collide together at the site of the burial. For oppressed communities, longings of freedom become validated and reflected in the collective aspirations of those gathered. The funeral can therefore become the sight for desire and practices of freedom. It both includes and transcends the body of the deceased. To disrupt funerals as events may therefore be experienced as a stemming of the energy of everyday vernaculars of collective desire.

Funerals might also be seen as a space for collective storytelling where working-class black people affirm one another's pain and triumphs. One might see the congregation of people at a funeral as a poetic production where they recite clan names, praise the dead through eulogisation and perform their pain. Those gathered are both performers and witnesses of the poetic production. In this sense, mourning and grief are also a poetics of relation (Glissant, 1997). Therefore, while grief is a personal emotion, it is also shared. The loss of the deceased is a shared loss of someone who was part of a network of relations – a friend who was someone's child, sibling, aunt, colleague, neighbour, lover, nurse and confidant. People come together to mourn in relation to all of these nodes of relation within which they held the deceased. This poetics of relation works against the creation of the ideal capitalist liberal

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subject that is bounded and motivated by individualist aesthetics of being. The mourning rites and the affect that circulates at funerals resist the liberal bounded subject that belonged to a nuclear family. The very idea of belonging and hierarchy of mourning is challenged when we see a highly affected person from beyond the immediate family of a deceased person. It is for this reason that many black people are uneasy about the idea of small funerals limited to immediate family members. Moments of heightened oppression such as apartheid reconfigured the space of mourning to that of struggle, desire and performances of freedom (Canham, 2017). As a space to tell collective stories, the function of a funeral eclipses and exceeds the mere act of interning the deceased's body. Therefore, to regulate funerals is to regulate complex needs, histories and ways of being in relation. The poetic parameters of funerals are uncontainable and stretch beyond what regulation is able to imagine. The remains of the dead enable mourners to localise or to ground loss (Reed, 2017). Jacques Derrida (2006) has called this urge for localising an effort to ontologise the remains of the dead by rendering them as present and real. Here, the loss might be conceived of as a magnetic field that assembles not just the loss of the deceased but also losses made possible by dispossession. Mourners can therefore cry not only for the dead person but also for all the dead whose deaths are a function of the overrepresentation of black people among the dead.

A funeral can exceed individual mourning to grieve the dead more generally. In this conception, the poetics of mourning has political possibilities. In the time of COVID-19, as in the post-Katrina floods in the United States and in the aftermath of cyclone Idai in Mozambique and Zimbabwe, the antiblack underbelly of neoliberalism has been exposed like a beached whale in the sun. Black people die of disasters and health conditions because the systems meant to support them are inadequate. Hospitals that have always been underequipped and understaffed are now death zones that people would rather avoid in favour of dying at home. As hospitals run out of space, dying at home is a reality for many. Of course, dying at home means that women stand in for the broken public health system as carers of the dying. Personal protective equipment has been the site of frenzied feeding for political elites, and this means that the equipment does not reach healthcare facilities where it should serve its function (Chabalala, 2020). Naomi Klein (2002) has termed this kind of phenomenon the rise of disaster capitalism. People become infected with COVID-19 when their lives are sacrificed in favour of saving the economy. While job losses are trumpeted as the reason for needing to 'save the economy', almost nothing is said about the high-income classes and elites who own the economy. Racial capitalism (Robinson, 2000) becomes the sovereign decision-maker as to whose life is worth retaining and whose is worth taking. In this conception, following Mbembe (2008) and Emerson (2019), the exercise of sovereignty entails power and control over mortality. Racial capitalism can be seen as being the function

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of the state's abandonment of its role to the white markets and its participation in market consumption by blurring the lines between markets and state. Funerals become spaces for public and communal reckoning with the cheapened condition of black life.

FUGITIVE MOURNING

The erotics of mourning are infused with resistance. Regulating the terms under which funerals are conducted is therefore to seek to regulate resistance. A funeral where mourners yank the body away from the sovereignty of the state represents an act of fugitivity. Here, communities move in a different direction to bureaucratised mourning and stealthily practise tradition and relation. Fugitive mourners might be seen as people who insist on the practice of mourning, even when legislation insists on closing down the of space of mourning. When villagers bury their dead as they have always done despite the regulations, we might call it a practice of fugitivity. I am aware of fugitive mourners in my home village. While families accept that they now have to bury their dead earlier than they otherwise would have, they compel the undertakers to first take the bodies to the ancestral homes of the dead. Once there, the dead are reacquainted with the family and ancestors. This resonates with Fred Moten's description of black fugitive movement that moves in and out of the frame. Moten describes furtive movement as stolen life and contends that "its relation to law is reducible neither to simple interdiction nor bare transgression" (2008, n.p.). We might see movement into the frame as acts of leaning into the rules of burial and movement out of the frame as fugitive acts of tradition and ritual. Fugitive mourning can then be seen as an act of edging along the perimeter of bureaucracy and transgression. To live fugitively is to steal what is taken from you in order to make the lives of the impoverished more liveable. We steal mourning, then, in order to be in liveable relation to the dead and the realm of our ancestors. There is vitality and energy in fugitivity. Following Emerson's conception of the productive relation between vitality and mortality, one might say that fugitive mourning "points to the complex interpenetration of vitality and mortality to produce its own map of relations, affinities and potentiality" (2019, p. 14). Fugitivity is therefore a useful lens to figure black sociality.

To grasp the sociality of blackness is to be attuned to the fugitive and surreal presence of blackness. Black mourning is continuous with stolen life, which is black life (Moten, 2018). Since blackness itself is criminalised and black history is littered with the dead, black people scavenge in the margins to construct liveability. We are well acquainted with the ground being shifted from under us through the introduction of antiblack laws aimed at shoring up whiteness. In response, we play ignorant, we hide in

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plain sight, we lean into stereotypes, we disguise ourselves and we steal what joy we can. Moten (2018) has termed this ability to find pleasure in lives of mourning the erotics of fugitivity. Through mourning, we steal what we can and move off scene in fugitive spaces to honour our dead. To live life in danger (of the law, of COVID-19, of HIV, of the police, of poverty, of white supremacy, of neoliberalism, of patriarchy, of homophobia, of death, of, of …) is to unsettle sovereignty and to unhinge and disrupt thanatopolitics. This is to say, to be black and poor is to live as transgressive outlaws. To think along with Moten on lives lived in danger, the following assertion is instructive:

> *To invoke the more (or less) incalculable is to recognize how life-in-danger takes certain conceptual apparatuses over the limit, in unnatural defiance of their rule, placing them in danger, such that the difference between internal and external imposition, or that between major and minor struggle, fails properly to signify. (Moten, 2018, ix)*

In this formulation, people who live in danger also place rules on danger. As members of the underclasses, those meant to represent the state in the enforcement of the rules (e.g., undertakers) might themselves enable fugitivity, such that the very system of regulation 'fails to properly signify'. The rules of mourning are therefore stretched to the limit by those who engage in fugitive mourning.

Since 'normal' funerals are sites of consumption that undercut the welfare of poor families, some communities have repurposed the funeral regulations for their own wellbeing. For example, the shortened period between death and burial means that fewer expenses are incurred on food for guests and on morgue fees. This has been touted as a return to an earlier practice of burying people quickly in a time that predates the refrigeration capacities of modern mortuaries. A return to earlier custom might also be an opportunity to undercut capitalist consumption that has made the death industry extremely lucrative (Cann, 2020). This, too, is an inversion of life-in-danger since, here, capitalism is placed in danger. These fugitive ways of being in relation while always being at risk are useful for upending conceptions of minor and major struggle. Fugitivity is best represented in the spaces in between rather than in mass resurgence. However, the proliferation of many small acts of resistance may be as threatening as major movements. Sovereign regulation of black life through law, capital and modernity can therefore be a series of small collapses as people thread the shadows of fugitivity in order to do what they have to do to live by honouring their dead. To mourn fugitively is to insist oneself into being against the blows of racial capitalism and state regulation that seek to undercut black freedoms. This insistence is not invested in staking a claim to normativity or in the conquest to be the standard bearer. Instead, it is a commitment to fugitive sideways movements that resist entrapment, occupation and

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stultification. While fugitive mourning is a movement towards the customary, it is also an antinormative sideways movement invested in creating its own rules as part of an irreducible sociality. One might track the various ways that mourners refuse regulation as multiple insurgencies opposed to the very idea of regulation and containment.

CONCLUSION

The thanatopolitical bureaucratisation of death in the wake of COVID-19 has unmade many aspects of blackness by relying on necropolitical lawmaking to prevent contagion. This plays into long-standing fissures that have rendered black life a form of mourning. Black people have, however, acclimated to death and turned mourning into relation, community and opportunity to strengthen kinship and sociality. COVID-19 threatens the very texture of black survivance built on the experience of other epidemics and pandemics such as HIV/AIDS, enslavement, impoverishment, the prison–industrial complex and a range of additional structural pandemics. COVID-19 has rendered mourning and burial rites illegal. To criminalise the very things that shore up black people's existence is to render blackness illegal. But like the families who wrenched their dead from officials in order to take the coffins to the ancestral homes, blackness always resists its annihilation.[10] And, so, even as we mourn in the breach, uncertain as to what is to come, we remain faithful in tending to the dead. We rely on an erotics of mourning to hold to both negative and positive affects, the pain and the pleasures of being together in shared spaces of care and solidarity. We fashion our fugitive knowledge to undercut the regulations of sovereignty in order to practise fugitive mourning that places the very rules that threaten our lives under threat. To mourn fugitively, then, is to place pressure on claims of sovereignty and to enact multiple insurgencies against thanatopolitics. Even as COVID-19 thickens the weather of antiblackness and strengthens the pall of death, it unleashes new ways of black liveability. We congregate fugitively in order to unsettle the normative belief that black life is cheap and not worth fighting for. We rely on long histories of dying and resistance to enact rebellious mourning that refuses black annihilation.

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[10] The very act of resistance might lead to contagion and death.

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Similarly, Babalwa Magoqwana convened a productive thinking community. The kernels of this paper grew out of this expansive space to think about mourning.

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