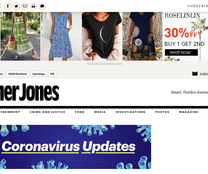

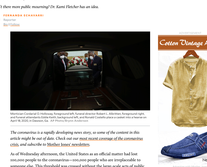

CORONAVIRUS UPDATES MAY 20, 2020

The Coronavirus Has a Disparate Impact on Black Grief, Too

Why isn't there more public mourning? Dr. Kami Fletcher has an idea.

DAVID CLEARWATER
Reporter
Mother Jones

Portrait Courtesy Dr. Kami Fletcher. Inset photo Robert L. Wilson Geographer/Alamy Stock Photo. Background photo Jeff Greenberg/Universal Images Group via Getty Images. Collage by Mother Jones. April 18, 2020, in Clearwater, Fla. AP Photo/Byron Anderson

The coronavirus is rapidly developing news story, so some of the content in this story may be out of date. For the latest on the coronavirus and coronavirus pandemic, and subscribe to Mother Jones' newsletter.

As of Wednesday afternoon, the United States as an official matter had lost twenty-one people to the coronavirus—twenty-one people who are irreplaceable to someone else. This threshold was crossed without the large-scale acts of public mourning with which we typically observe mass death. The closest thing to it was the sobering front page of Sunday's New York Times, which listed the names of 1,000 people who died of COVID-19 in the United States.

Earlier this week I called up Dr. Kami Fletcher, wondering if and how Americans were processing so much death in their midst. Fletcher is Assistant at Albright College, co-author of *Till Death Do Us Part: American Ethos, Coronavirus as Broken Uncrowned, and president of The Collective for Radical Death Studies*. She describes "to analyze how death, mourning, burial, and death investigations have changed over time along the lines of race, class, gender, ability/disability, sexuality." Her work centers on the ways that asymmetries in life power in death—a subject particularly relevant to a disease that has taken a heavy toll on Black and Latino people.

Fletcher and I spoke about the "death denial culture" in the United States, the disruption caused by the coronavirus to Black death rituals, and how the world would be mourning today if the pandemic were disproportionately killing white people. Our conversation has been edited for clarity.

I wanted to start by asking about the cover of the New York Times over the weekend. In relation to how what was going through your mind when you saw that.

A good historian friend of mine shared a similar thing from the Spanish flu of 1918, and looking at the *New York Times* front page, it brings humanity to it. These were people, these were living, breathing people. They were part of our educational system, our job network here. These were Americans. These were people who have left behind family members who are mourning, who are grieving, and who have unanswered questions. Let's start having a real human connection to this.

I've been thinking about the idea of not being physically together at a time of death, and how that is a place of pain. We've been physically apart from our families for a year. We can't gather in each other's homes. We can't travel to be with the society that builds up when you're cooped up at home, learning something this happened and you can't be there. What does that do to how we process death?

We're in a death-denial culture, as Americans—we deny death. That's really the prevailing idea. We put death in a hospital, we put death in a hospice, and we try to have a quick funeral, and it's private. We try our best to deal with it and get on. Which is the complete opposite of what Black folks have been doing. Black people and people of color who have been dealing with white supremacy, with racism, and with the legacy of direct colonial rule have had to adjust and adapt. And it shows in our mourning customs.

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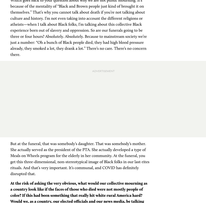
I just want to make sure I have this straight. I read an old Sabrina Carl Magazine piece. Essentially what that two-year-age-gap piece in Harper's Bazaar and others unfortunately it's not an irregular story, it made news. And I remember posting that on Twitter and saying that whatever mourning rituals were happening were to try to explain why the 7-year-old girl is not here anymore. That's what death rituals do. That's what mourning is about. And right now, we cannot group, we cannot sit with the bereaved.

I'm sure you've also had to talk about deaths from the coronavirus and not talk about race. People of color are being hit particularly hard by the virus. As a Mexican immigrant, I think about how this affects my community. So how do Black people in the coronavirus community place right now? Is there grieving within a community when it's so hard to grieve in general?

The cohort of COVID is Black and Brown. I think it's very clear. Every report that has died of COVID in Richmond, Virginia, was Black (or of mixed race). We're also talking about Native Americans—the Indigenous population in certain areas of the country are just being decimated. And some of the reasons why are just bureaucracy. They literally cannot get the funding to the groups of people.

Which goes back to your question about why we are not public mourning. It's because bureaucracy is killing. The bureaucracy is killing people of color and themselves. That's why you cannot talk about death if you're not talking about culture and history. I'm not even taking into account the different religions or ethnicities—what's talk about Black folks, I'm talking about this collective Black experience born out of slavery and oppression. So are our funerals going to be there or four hours? Absolutely. Absolutely. Because to mainstream society we're just a number. "Oh a bunch of Black people died, they had high blood pressure already, they smoked a lot, they drank a lot." There's no care. There's no concern there.



But at the funeral, that was somebody's daughter. That was somebody's mother. She actually served as the president of the PTA. She actually developed a type of Black-focused school. She was the glue of the school in her community. At the funeral, you get this three-dimensional, non-stereotypical image of Black folks in your face with rituals. And that's very important. It's communal, and COVID has definitely disrupted that.

At the risk of asking the very obvious, what would our collective mourning as a country look like if the faces of those who died were not mostly people of color? If this had been something that really hit white rural America hard? Would we be having a different conversation about how we need to be talking about race-double difficulty?

I really am glad that you asked that because I think that lends itself to part of the conversation that we think we know, but maybe we don't. And we need to have a conversation about it. I think when you're talking about African Americans specifically in this country, there is a connection to violence and death that people have taken for granted and are okay with. People really think that Black bodies are disposable. White people are authority figures. That's what white supremacy sets up.

We can draw similarities with heroin and crack. When crack hit Black America, it was about Black people smoking crack and killing each other. But when the heroin epidemic started, it was about opening up centers to help these people. I think everybody should be helped. I don't want anybody to lose this and think otherwise. Everybody needs to be helped. But it's been racialized.

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I keep hearing stories, reading reports, and seeing in social media that Black people are being kicked out of their homes, that people are being evicted. They're being turned away and mistreated. That's what we're doing. And that has to be part of the discussion. You've had medical professionals not believing that Black women are in pain, dying in childbirth. I don't know if people really understand how much they lied with stereotypes.

It seems that—at least for me—that in the beginning of all this we were hearing more about the dead: a profile of a family, a group of friends at a nursing home, the story of multiple relatives who died from COVID-19. As the numbers kept multiplying, we went to tens of thousands. Do we process that new day by day death count differently than, let's say, a plane crash or mass shooting or natural disaster that kills many people at once? Is there a difference in how we process this loss?

The first thing is the idea of death and disaster. A hurricane that we cannot control has killed people, or a bomb has been dropped in a war. It is difference in how we mourn? I think you have to look at when controlling the conversation, who is controlling the conversation. When you're talking about death, when you're bringing it on themselves, you know, lay off the tobacco, lay off the alcohol, I definitely think you lose empathy. And there's distracting going on. I never would have thought—but I guess as a historian I should have known—that these "liberate the state" rallies would pop up. I literally walked out of my house three days ago going to the post office that's a block from my house and the local courthouse, and I was just shocked and really alarmed and fearful at "liberate the state." I'm not a gun person, I don't understand guns, I don't like guns, I'm not you honorably are saying, "No, no, nothing's really happening here, I'm talking to the of COVID for the economy, let's sacrifice the elderly." This is disrupting the kind of national mourning that we should be having when you are Americans are dying.

At the Collective for Radical Death Studies, we're creating this type of library, this mini documentary, because it's so easy for the stories to get lost because they're people of color. So send us your pictures, a brief synopsis saying this is who this person was in your community, and tell us what is happening.

That choosers that we talked about earlier—I can't even imagine not being allowed at a time of loss, at a latter, the hugging, kissing, handholding, sitting side by side with someone is so important for us. This makes me think of the public sight after mass shootings. I've been in a few, unfortunately, as a reporter—most recently the one in El Paso where so many Mexican people were killed—and there's something to be said for having physical space to bring a balloon or a sign, even if you didn't know anybody who died, just to sit together and have a physical interaction with that. This is a time when we can't have sight lines. So we're commemorating like the New York Times front page, much like how's the coronavirus doing?

Yeah, I love that "Much like back into the conversation," because what do you do when you're in a hospital bed and you're dying and you're alone and you can't take a balloon somebody. When you look at how African American and Latino culture have used the "Best in Texas" T-shirt, I think that can be a powerful memorial.

Once again this is one of those things that's been misunderstood because you have this dead person on a T-shirt and you're walking around with it. People associate it with gang-related activity. So again that's that kind of deviant, at least what sociologists call "deviant," cast as to divide, but as to outside mainstream culture. It is a way to memorialize someone by socially distancing yes, because what we're really saying is that these people existed. They lived, they were here, and that's why you have something like the ofrenda table where a cyclist has died. It's a very, very, very, very sacred place to see this person mentioned, something happened here, and we want to address it.

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