

Eulogy for the Lives We'll Never Lead

I would like to begin by eulogizing the physical Black lives lost. They never asked to be martyrs, or hashtags. They weren't looking to start revolutions. They were people. They laughed. They had families. They had dreams, and they had their whole lives ahead of them. Though their deaths may remind us of work to be done, let us never forget their personhood. Let us never make the mistake of discussing the violence they experienced as if it is mutually exclusive from them being parents, and children, and friends, and neighbors, and family members, and lovers, and coworkers. As if it is separate from them being people.

I will spend the rest of this piece eulogizing the hypothetical lives that we, the living Black people who remain, will never live. For part of what happens when you watch people who look like you die in the streets, or in their beds, or in their yards, or in a park day in and day out is this: the part of you that is whimsical, jovial, innocent, carefree, and selfish, dies. Or, that part is muddled with the expectation to be a revolutionary, is weakened beyond usefulness, and then it dies. Our work, our being, our existence is no longer ours but serves the larger collective, whether we want it to or not. Unintentionally and without much choice, we each become figureheads for justice.

For example, I have a friend who wants to be a fashion designer. Before telling me this dream, she'd spend hours of her leisure time piecing together inspiration from runways and magazines or scouring the internet for other up and coming designers to potentially be in community with. "I think I want to be a designer but I know I need to find a way to incorporate social justice in my designs," she told me when describing her interest. When I asked why she said "I can't be *just* a designer, I have to make a difference." Similarly, I have another friend who is a photographer. They love taking pictures of nature and landscapes. Birds and flowers cover their inspiration board, but the pictures they submit for money are usually of urban cities, depicting things like food insecurity, violence, or neglect. I noticed this trend and asked why this is for them and their response was "I used to submit my nature shots but it's more important for people to see this, and this type of stuff is usually what *they* want to see." Personally, as a writer, I try to release myself and my work from anyone else's expectation of what I should be writing about, electing to write about things that are deeply personal to me. Yet when I share my work, my non Black colleagues will often bypass the carefully constructed syntax and meticulously

placed diction, opting instead to tell me how much they learned. As if my intention was to teach them.

What does this do to a Black person's psyche? Sure, my friends and I could choose to never pay attention to the societal pressures to align our work with larger movements, but that would be naive. Even though we haven't created these problems, we know we have to be responsible for their repair. We know our lives depend on it. Stories like mine and my friends aren't isolated incidents. So frequently are Black people looking to find ways to achieve their dreams through "the work" even if that's not how they dreamt it. So frequently are Black people thinking about how to live their lives in a way that will improve the next generations' or change the world in the present. Maybe because we know that when our physical lives end or are taken from us, even if we never thought about what our lives mean in a larger context, it'll happen anyway.

When Audre Lorde describes "imagination without insight" in *Poetry is Not a Luxury*, she's describing the ways that white men at the foundation of literature and poetry would have preferred women and Black people to not tell the entirety of their truths and all of what it means to live in their lives. Please know I am not arguing for imagination without insight. I am not requesting or suggesting that Black people should chase their dreams wearing rose colored glasses and opting out of seeing the burning red flames that coat our existence. Black people have a right to share all of their experience however they choose and it's necessary for us, whether in our work or in our lives at large, to tell our stories and fight for changes we want to see. Especially since oftentimes if we don't tell our truths, many people wouldn't seek them out. Instead, I seek justice for the people we'll never be because we've learned to adapt our dreams to the demands of liberation, which, though necessary, is exhausting. I seek justice for the lives we had only a second to wish for before we realized we'd always live a life of involuntary sacrifice until we save ourselves. Rest in Peace to the soft version of a teacher, writer, fashion designer, photographer, painter, lawyer, doctor and more who were hardened by realization of responsibility.

As we work towards a world where physical and hypothetical Black lives are valued and nurtured, remember: Black lives free from struggle matter just as much as those experiencing incessant horror. Justice looks like Black people being able to be *just* a creative if they choose, or some combination of revolutionary and every day if they choose.

I imagine my ancestors' wildest dreams included leisure, rest, family and community, so in a post revolutionary world where justice has been served, I imagine justice looking like those dreams being fulfilled. I see a world where Black people are free and safe in the physical and hypothetical. Justice for the lives we've lost and the lives we'll never lead until we get there.