

BOOK REVIEW

Jacob Dlamini. *Dying for Freedom: Political Martyrdom in South Africa*. Hoboken, NJ: Polity Press, 2024. \$22.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-5095-6108-7.

In *Dying for Freedom*, the historian and journalist, Jacob Dlamini, weaves together the lives of five South Africans to offer a grounded narration of the persistence of necropolitics before, during, and after apartheid. In an introduction, five chapters, and short conclusion, emerging from a lecture series at Cambridge University, Dlamini investigates conflicting and divergent accounts of death, dying, and murder to reveal how Black South African investment in sacrifice, and specifically mortality, invigorated a masculinist politics via which anti-apartheid activists recast the fight for emancipation from white supremacy as a struggle for manhood.

Dlamini's introduction is a poetic meditation on the escape and escapism a martyred death offered the South African freedom fighter. "Happy are those who are dead," leaps from the annals of colonial history as an adage for the ages. The "face-saving power of death," revealed as a door to freedom and eternal liberty, is problematized by asking who is worthy of martyrdom. While hardly a uniquely South African phenomenon, Dlamini reveals a particularly political instrumentality in the veneration of mortality as proof of conviction. If Zulu warriors valued honor more than they feared death, for anti-apartheid activists, death was the quintessential measure of loyalty. Other forms of resistance were "unworthy" of the Struggle.

With a nod to Augustine, the culture making and memory work of martyrdom flow from the reasoning behind the dying. Individual chapters follow familiar and less familiar South Africans as they either confront the possibility or imminence of death, or endure, or even perish and reemerge after navigating mortality. After the introduction, Dlamini walks the reader through Nelson Mandela's willingness to die for his cause, his trial, testimony, and life sentence, and his brush with execution. He revisits the torture and murder of Steve Biko. But then we encounter three lesser-known historical figures—Justice Mafa Ngidi, the author's namesake, and Phila Portia Ndwandwe—the latter two brutally murdered in the 1980s.

Each figure offers important historical messaging. Mandela's willingness to die—his baiting of the judge to martyr him—was instrumental in bringing international attention to the injustices of apartheid. Biko's murder was iconic; his embrace of Black dignity transformative; and his martyrdom encapsulated in his having never taken up arms against white South Africans. Ngidi's escape from the clutches of death, and the doubt and betrayal this sowed among his dissident kinsmen and women, instantiates the incompleteness and messiness of lives on

the periphery. Dlamini's murder directs attention to the perilous and shifting instability of collaborations during apartheid. And Ndwandwe's abduction, murder, and the concealment and recovery of her remains post-apartheid calls attention to the roles of informants and the ongoing work of reconciliation.

Dlamini is a masterful storyteller. He draws in the reader with pointed rhetoric. He scrutinizes individual actors' decisions, explanations, and protestations. He zeroes in on the contradictions of individual choices at the time and the collective responses then and now to every encounter with death. Each chapter is a complex tapestry of textualities, archival records from courts, prisons, torturers; oral narratives and narrative silences from survivors, perpetrators, and the bereaved. Dlamini marshals material culture in the form of archaeological excavations and even human remains.

If necropolitics, arguably as an extension of Foucauldian biopower, may appear too theoretically abstract to some, Dlamini chronicles a grounded martyrdom and its ancillary industries and agents. He richly and precisely instantiates how and under what conditions death, dying, threats of death, a willingness to confront and embrace death, and even to revivify the deceased, contribute to a political culture in which mortality operates as a powerful weapon of resistance. *Dying for Freedom* is a powerful and punchy work that will generate debate in the undergraduate classroom and graduate symposium. In the highly accessible prose that we have come to expect from the leading writer of his generation, the walking dead are awakened. No longer bodies in suspended states, the dead are legible, historical, and deeply powerful.

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