Learning How to Live and Die With Long COVID

The late artist David Wojnarowicz's work has brought me back from the dead.

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The heady scent of wet creosote hung in the air the morning we skirted impossible alluvial fans on our way to the lowest point in North America. Since the Pleistocene, Badwater Basin, 236 feet below sea level, has primarily been a salt flat, but deluges from Hurricane Hilary and a recent atmospheric river had filled the pan with billions of gallons of water. Lake Manly was a zombie, back from the dead. Many said it was the largest it had been for decades. Pushed by strong winds in March, it even drifted two miles north, like some kind of restless soul.

In the towering shade of the Funeral Range, my boyfriend and I blew up our rafts as our friend made roadside coffee. The ephemeral lake was so calm that I feared we would break its spell when we pushed off its crystal-laced shores. Its trance only grew stronger as we paddled over the yard-deep lake and got lost in the optical illusion of water: Manly was the elastic band of a jockstrap stretching toward every horizon, and it smelled just as earthy as one.

It was surreal paddling across the abyss of light blue, knowing what one of my favorite artists had scribbled here, when the lake was still asleep. In May 1991, David Wojnarowicz and his close friend Marion Scemama signed their names in the salty mud somewhere below my raft. It was Wojnarowicz's last trip to the desert Southwest, a place he'd visited for over a decade on sojourns far from New York City. The wide-open vistas and the desert's denizens became vital to him after his diagnosis with AIDS in 1988. Gila monsters, mesas and saguaros wove themselves into his paintings and photography.

On that trip from Albuquerque to San Francisco and back again for the launch of his 1991 memoir Close to the Knives, he experienced debilitating symptoms. "I'm in a constant flux of anxieties about my body and its exhaustion and strange waves of illness," he wrote in his journal. "I know I need to adjust and accept my body and its levels of energy but it complicates everything."

According to his biographer, Cynthia Carr, the two friends talked about Badwater's playa being an

ideal location for Wojnarowicz's death. As I leaned back in my raft and felt the first rays of sun on my torso, I thought of the photos I'd seen of him on the trip, wrapped in a white sheet like a mummy, his mock funeral in the desert.

During our leisurely paddle to nowhere, "exhaustion and strange waves of illness" began hitting me, too. Six weeks before, I'd been reinfected a second time with COVID-19, and I felt like I was in a constant state of heat exhaustion, dizziness and delusion. Like many other people with long COVID, each reinfection had further whittled down my abilities, my quality of life and health. Most days, I feel a small gust away from death.

Ever since I became disabled with the disease at the beginning of the pandemic, the force of Wojnarowicz's art has hit me like amphetamine. His writing, painting and photography have laid bare the abandonment and stigmatization of another generation plagued with the long-term effects of a pathogen. Through a graphic and unblinking perspective, Wojnarowicz contrasted the quick disease progression of AIDS with the glacial response of the U.S. government.

Wojnarowicz's rage still screams in his pictures and paintings, and it has shown me that society's indifference to mass death and disability has only increased in the time that separates our crises. "WHEN I WAS DIAGNOSED WITH THIS VIRUS," Wojnarowicz wrote, "IT DIDN'T TAKE ME LONG TO REALIZE I CONTRACTED A DISEASED SOCIETY AS WELL."

Untitled (Face in Dirt) (1991) is one of Wojnarowicz's most well-known works, a photograph that depicts his face, buried alive in the desert. Some days, when I look at it, it appears as if he's emerging from the ground. On other days, the sand consumes him. After leaving Death Valley on that final trip, Wojnarowicz directed Scemama to take the photo outside Chaco Canyon, New Mexico. It is one of the last portraits ever taken of the artist, and it has haunted my COVID-induced dreams ever since I got sick.

COVID and long COVID are not HIV/AIDS, but our response to both viruses has been to bury them, to cover disabled and high-risk people with dirt. There is silence, skepticism and denial as many of us have become immunocompromised, as thousands have died of complications of long COVID, as millions have died of COVID.

Soon, we slipped out of our rafts and let the lake hold the three of us. I put my hands behind my head, closed my eyes, and felt the buoyancy. I let the water surround my face and mouth until I was just a floating oval of skin. I knew that in the coming weeks, the lake would shrink to a wet, muddy surface before disappearing as quickly as it had arrived. A great sorrow washed over me. The lake wasn't just a mirror of the sky; it reflected the ephemerality of life.

"Even a tiny charcoal scratching done as a gesture to mark a person's response to this epidemic means whole worlds to me if it is hung in public," Wojnarowicz wrote. "Each and every gesture carries a reverberation that is meaningful in its diversity."

Like Wojnarowicz, I write about and record my experiences with my disease, not just to process the denial and pain of this overlooked crisis, but to cast spells that will ricochet into the future. I

want my words to be resurrected for other people with this disease, or the diseases caused by pandemics in the future — a noisy spirit that weaves its way through time and moves objects that society has tried to bury to the forefront, where they can't be denied. I want to appear out of nowhere, like black ink on a blank white page. Like water on the desert floor.

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