

In Between Mourning-*with* and Mourning-*without*

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In response to the eventful year of 2020, Jessica Lussier, invites us to consider “mourning-*with*” as “a ‘response-ability,’ a practice of rendering one another capable of mourning.” Lussier notes that mourning “can mean both the *affect* of grief and its outward manifestation.” Lussier further frames “mourning as the struggle to relearn our relationship with those who have died.” Drawing from Sara Ahmed’s work on queer grief, Lussier points out that mourning as an educational practice must recognize both “the grief of others” and “the other as a griever.” To Lussier, grief is “a deeply relational experience.” And “mourning-*with* can be performed through the making of space and time for others to grieve, while resisting the impulse to sentimentalize loss and extend it to align with a universalized or national ‘we.’” Like Lussier, I have been besieged by profound sorrow surrounding the global pandemic, black lives lost at the hands of law enforcement, the immense displacement and forced homelessness, and massive loss of biodiversity. In response to Lussier’s invitation, I, in what follows, would like to share the critical lessons from relearning the world we are living in.

COUNTABLE AND UNCOUNTABLE

Because of the astounding number of lives lost to COVID-19, “pandemicide,” a relatively new word has entered into the common lexicon. Relatedly, it is also noted that the singular death of George Floyd was inexorably linked to countless losses of black lives killed by the police.¹ Likewise, the discourse on biodiversity loss also zooms on the mass extinction of diverse plants and animals within species, between species and of ecosystems. To a large extent, quantification of losses can serve as an “objective” metric for appraising the losses. At the same time, it might not be heartless to agree with Stalin that “If only one man dies of hunger, that is a tragedy. If millions die, that’s only statistics.” In the end, it is our subjective beliefs and values that determine the meaning of the objective data. Hence, Judith But-

ler remarks, “How do our cultural frames for thinking the human set limits on the kinds of losses we can avow as loss? After all, if someone is lost, and that person is not someone, then what and where is the loss, and how does mourning take place?”²

Among the cultural frames for thinking about global pandemic, modern governmentality plays a pivotal role in shaping the dominant discourse on health security at both national and global levels. Seen through a governmentality lens, the number of COVID-19 deaths matters. In China, Wuhan’s hidden death toll more or less can be attributed to a calculative and deliberate effort to mask governmental incompetence in preventing and containing pandemic.³ In the U.S., Laurie Garrett’s accusing Trump of pandemicide reflects the belief that pandemic control measures are the essential cruxes of modern governmentality.⁴ To make a radical departure from Donald Trump’s failed leadership in containing the pandemic, Joe Biden vowed “a robust and unified federal response” to the pandemic.⁵ In due course, he further ordered flags on federal property to be lowered at half-staff for five days when the U.S. COVID-19 death toll surpassed half a million.

Although modern governmentality has routinely engaged in mourning-*with* citizens whose loved ones have died in vast numbers, modern governmentality does not therefore command a collective mourning in unison. The deceased’s family members and friends are not necessarily the grievors, and the grievors might not find consolation in mourning-*with* “others,” including political leaders. Butler asked, “What makes for a grievable life?”⁶ Considerably, it is personal relationship with the diseased and/or personal values that count. To illustrate, many surviving family members in Wuhan, the epicenter of the early outbreak of COVID-19, were traumatized when they found that their loved one’s ashes were mixed with others’ ashes because of hurried cremation. Collecting the loved one’s ashes is the mourning rite that acknowledges one’s loss. As the surviving family members were unsure that they had collected their loved one’s remains, they more or less experienced melancholia, that is, “I have lost nothing,” that can inevitably entrap them in grief that never ends.⁷ Clearly, neither grievors nor the diseased

cease to exist as “individuals” in the masses. As noted by Lussier, grief is indeed “a deeply relational experience.” And, “mourning-*with*” hence can only be performed through recognizing the inimitable and irreplaceable relations between the diseased and the grievers.

RECLAIMING WHOLENESS

On the other hand, grief as “a deeply relational experience” need not be delimited to personal relationships with their loved ones. Notably, countless grievers without personal relationships with George Floyd mourn for the losses of black lives and racial justice. One’s mourning-*with* George Floyd and his loved ones “is not to be resigned to inaction, but it may be understood as the slow process by which we develop a point of identification with suffering itself.”⁸ To a large extent, suffering ensuing from sudden and violent losses acknowledges the difficult reality of living in a broken world. Mourning for the suffering hence encompasses a yearning to bring suffering to an end and to make one and the world whole again. In the same vein, ecologically minded citizens are deeply aware of how depletion of global and local biodiversity deprives them of the wholeness of human existence. Lamenting extinct animals and plants hence can coincide with collective efforts to restore ecological wholeness. In John A. Gronbeck-Tedesco’s words, “Mourning is a necessary step in the shift from partiality to wholeness, and through this transubstantiation emerges a politically viable anger that may be shepherded into public demonstrations of protest and refusal.”⁹

IN BETWEEN MOURNING-*WITH* AND MOURNING-*WITHOUT*

The ongoing cultural and political polarization easily overshadows the pursuit of wholeness and impedes “mourning-*with*” as an educational and ethical practice to claim common humanity. In order to address and redress polarization, it is critical to attend to the predicament of advocating “mourning-*with*” as a normative educational or ethical practice. More specifically, one’s grief might be another’s joy and one’s losses might be another’s gains in a polarized society. It is especially challenging to engage in mourning-*with* others who are committed to preserving their privileges

and power at all costs. Michael Ignatieff notes that “the problem is that the majority has genuine difficulty accepting the idea that present generations remain responsible for the harms committed by the past ones.”¹⁰ In a polarized postcolonial society, it is not surprising that “the victim minorities resent depending on the majority for redress. The majority resents depending on the minority for forgiveness. Since forgiveness would foreclose future claims, victims tend to withhold it; since redress implied culpability, it too is withheld. So the politics of argument is replaced by a politics of blackmail and stonewalling”¹¹ Yet healing postcolonial melancholia must fulfil “painful obligation to work through the grim details of imperial and colonial history and to transform paralyzing guilt into a more productive shame that would be conducive to the building of a multicultural nationality that is no longer phobic about the prospect of exposure to either strangers or otherness.”¹² Thus, in order to relearn the world, one must recognize the resistance to embracing “mourning-*with*” as an educational practice. Instead, one might need to consider “mourning-*without*” fellow grievers. In between “mourning-*with*” and “mourning-*without*,” one can engage in a deeply relational “mourning” while refraining the temptation to homogenize grievers, as cogently argued by Lussier.

1 Laura Bult, “A Timeline of 1,944 Black Americans Killed by Police,” *Vox*, June 30, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/6/30/21306843/black-police-killings>.

2 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* (London, Verso, 2004), 32.

3 Christina Zhao, “Wuhan COVID-19 Death Toll May Be in Tens of Thousands, Data on Cremations and Shipments of Urns Suggest,” *Newsweek*, March 29, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/wuhan-covid-19-death-toll-may-tens-thousands-data-cremations-shipments-urns-suggest-1494914>.

4 Laurie Garrett, “Trump Is Guilty of Pandemicide,” *Foreign Policy*, February 18, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/02/18/trump-is-guilty-of-pandemicide>.

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5 Jenna Johnson, Amy B. Wang, and Chelsea Janes, “Biden Criticizes Trump’s Coronavirus Efforts, Vows Extensive Federal Response” *The Washington Post*, December 29, 2020,

https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/biden-coronavirus--surge-speech/2020/12/29/47134920-49d3-11eb-a9f4-0e668b9772ba_story.html.

6 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, 20.

7 Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford

University Press, 1997), 183.

8 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, 30.

9 John A. Gronbeck-Tedesco, “Of Violence and Mourning: Sovereignty, Containment, and Modern Governmentality,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 50, no. 1 (2019), 115.

10 Michael Ignatieff, *The Rights Revolution* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2000), 115.

11 Ignatieff, *The Rights Revolution*, 115.

12 Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2005), 99.