

After the tragedy in Orlando, we shouldn't forget that it was an isolated incident, stunning because of its severity and the relative rarity of this kind of violence (though violence against transgender individuals remains common). We should celebrate the growing visibility of LGBT athletes, student body presidents, state Supreme Court justices, and members on boards of trustees. At the same time there is room to reflect on the work that remains. One need not exclude the other.

A Virtual Pulse: Cautionary Notes about Public Mourning in the Digital Age

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In the hours and days after Omar Mateen shot over one hundred Pulse patrons and workers and was himself shot down, Orlando residents, like everyone else following the tragedy, were glued to social media. We checked in as "safe" on Facebook to assure our loved ones that we had not been among the casualties and we checked in on others—friends, co-workers, students, lovers, and other family members—via phone calls, texts, e-mails, instant messaging, and other means to ensure their safety. We watched the news as the names of dead were released and the narrative details of the tragedy unfolded.

Orlando residents also turned to social media to figure out how to help (give blood, make donations, offer specialized skills, etc.) and to invite one another to a steady stream of vigils, fundraisers, and other memorial events. I was and am grateful for the rapid circulation of information that helped us to quickly locate loved ones and participate in processes of helping and healing so desperately needed in the aftermath of tragedy. What prompts these reflections, however, is my discomfort with common responses to the Pulse tragedy on social media. As it has been little more than a month since the Pulse tragedy at time of this writing, I have not yet worked through this discomfort. Hence, I share my concerns here in the hope that the questions I raise might provoke further thinking together about a queer politics of grief in the digital era. My concerns center on how to grieve queer losses while avoiding grief tourism¹ and conspicuous compassion.² My own answers to these questions are tentative at best.

GRIEF IN A DIGITAL AGE

Speaking of the proliferation of looped empathy ribbons, public weeping over tragedies, and the signing of web petitions to stop wars and other atrocities at the turn of the century, Patrick West critiqued the West's "culture of ostentatious caring" that, he argued, did little to help the needy, injured, or bereaved but instead showcased our own egos, informing others how deeply caring we were.³ Social media encourages performative displays of mourning at the same time as it allows wider audiences to pay their respects.⁴ Moreover it enables these public displays of grief to be instantaneously shared and seems

to demand an equally immediate response from those whose proximity to events may leave them less than ready to receive and respond to the sympathies sent.

As I and those around me checked Facebook for news, we were inundated with messages by those sharing their prayers, their heartbreak, and, very shortly thereafter, their moral and political outrage. While I recognize that both friends and strangers were making well-intentioned gestures of support, the admonitions to remember that "We are all Orlando" and to take various kinds of political action to demonstrate that "We all share one Pulse" seemed strangely out of place (and of questionable timing) to those of us living in a city where the losses and the grief over such losses were still palpable. Moreover, the royal "we" featured in these and other proclamations about "One world, one heart, and one Pulse" was often irritating (especially when uttered by straight cisgender white folk), as was the presumption of shared grief. Expressions of heartbreak by those who did not walk in the same—or even similar—shoes seemed somehow insincere, inauthentic, unseemly. Prayers often felt uninvited and trite. And the political outrage that quickly linked events in Orlando to the need to ban assault weapons (by some Democrats) or the need to combat "radical Islamic terrorism" (by some Republicans) seemed insensitive. As Enria notes, "keyboard warriors that latch onto tragedy to make it into a social media political campaign or to amplify their opinions" often forget the human aspect of a tragedy.⁵ Many of my LGBTQ friends and allies were among these keyboard warriors.

Accusing those who share and tweet their reactions to a tragedy of inappropriate behavior may seem ungenerous. And perhaps it is. Everyone reacts to tragedy in their own manner, and I do not wish to legislate how someone *ought* to feel in the aftermath of tragic events. Nor do I wish to suggest that those who are geographically, biologically, or socially closer to those whose lives were lost have a monopoly on either suffering or caring. We can be hurt at distance. We can be moved at a distance. And we can (and should) care about those who are different from us. Yet in the digital age where self-branding is ubiquitous, performative displays of mourning are expected, and the lines between personal suffering and political causes are often blurred, the personal, cultural, and political appropriation of others' grief is something to which we need to pay close attention. Many who would be reluctant to attend—much less speak at—the funeral of someone whom they did not know well do not hesitate to post a status indicating their profound sadness or outrage at the death of persons they have never met. To what extent do we claim for ourselves or for our own purposes grief that is not ours?

WHOSE TRAGEDY? WHOSE GRIEF?

I do think that social media facilitates a form of cultural appropriation that we might rightly term the appropriation of grief. As Ahmed notes, when we transform loss into "our" loss or convert loss into a political object, we take those losses away from others.⁶ Yet the suggestion that some folk may "appropriate" other people's grief is not unproblematic. In particular, it presumes that a tragedy is, in fact, someone's (or some group's) rightful property. So

who does the Pulse tragedy belong to? Can we, in fact, say it *belongs* to anyone?

There are no easy answers to these questions. On the one hand, it seems wrong to suggest that any one person or group of people has a monopoly on grief when tragedy occurs. There are several axes of loss and suffering occasioned by the shooting at Pulse. There is the suffering of those who were killed and those who miss them—including, although not often noted, the suffering of Omar Mateen and his family. There is the suffering of survivors who were physically injured and/or emotionally traumatized on June 12. The owners and employees of Pulse, whether present or not that night, have lost friends, co-workers, and livelihood in a tragedy that took place in an establishment many called home. First responders are haunted by what they saw and heard the night of the tragedy and by thoughts about what they could (or could not) have done differently. Many of the residents of Orlando—especially but not exclusively those who are LGBTQ and/or Latinx—suffer a sense of heightened vulnerability whether or not they lost people to whom they were close (as many did). Orlando itself suffers as it seeks to reestablish itself as “the city beautiful”—a home and tourist destination for heteronormative families and LGBTQ travelers alike. LGBTQ communities and Latinx communities extending far beyond Orlando itself are affected by a hate crime targeting members of their community. Given the number of young Puerto Ricans who were killed that night and given the vexed relation of Puerto Rico to the U.S., a unique suffering is occasioned there as well.

This list could go on indefinitely. Proximity to suffering is marked in many different ways—through geographical proximity; civic kinship ties; shared racial and ethnic, gender, and sexual and other identities; shared experiences of victimization, trauma, or vulnerability; and much more. Thus, it is no easy matter to determine the relative distance people bear to a tragedy.

Yet, as much as we may wish to refrain from imposing a strict hierarchy of suffering, it seems disingenuous to deny that some people *do* suffer more than others when tragedy occurs. I am brought closer to this particular tragedy by virtue of my geographical proximity to it, by being a member of the LGBTQ community in Orlando, and by virtue of regularly teaching queer young adults, including many young queers of color to whom I have grown close. On the other hand, I am a white Anglo, several decades older than most Pulse patrons and workers, and I am not among the bereaved: those killed or injured in the attack did not include my friends, my family, or my students. This tragedy is, thus, both mine and yet not mine at all. I volunteered to write this piece because I hoped I might have some insights due to my positioning as a queer philosopher who lives in Orlando. Yet writing is a struggle because, in many regards, the story of events here is not mine to tell, nor even, perhaps, to analyze. I find myself wanting to share the haunting stories and images that have been shared with me so that you too might get a glimpse of how things felt at “ground zero” during the Pulse tragedy. But I am suspicious of this desire—both yours and mine—to participate in an economy of grief tourism, an economy

that traffics in feelings as a commodity and, in the process, exploits and devalues the suffering of those living the immediacy of loss. Hence all I have to offer you are these misgivings.

I think these suspicions are legitimate. And yet . . . if the story of Pulse is not my story to tell, then whose story is it? It is tempting to say that the Pulse tragedy belongs first and foremost to the victims and their families who have suffered more directly and more intensely than others. And, indeed, when my daughter called me to see if I was safe (I was) and whether I had heard the news (I had not yet) on the morning of June 12, my first reaction was gratitude that my own young adult children were safe, followed quickly by imagining how awful this must be for the young adults who were at Pulse and for *their* families. This prioritizing of “victims and their families” is a normative response to tragedy about which we should also be suspicious. Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer, President Obama, and many others speaking on the occasion of the Pulse tragedy began their speeches with phrases such as “Our hearts go out to the victims and their families”; this was also a common response on social media. The “One Orlando” fund—established by the city and joined in its efforts by Equality Florida and the National Compassion fund—has raised millions of dollars to support “victims and their families.” But to say that those who have suffered the most and are thus most deserving of our compassion, support, and attention are “victims and their families” seems to privatize grief in a way that threatens to exclude the very forms of queer kinship and counter-publics historically central to LGBTQ life. How, then, do we refrain from appropriating stories and feelings that are not our own while simultaneously resisting heteronormative privatizations of loss and suffering?

A QUEER POLITICS OF GRIEF

As queer theorists have noted, “queer activism has . . . been bound up with the politics of grief, with the question of what losses are counted as grievable.”⁷⁷ The lives lost at Pulse—an LGBTQ nightclub itself dedicated to the memory of an AIDS victim—were queer lives. A queer politics of grief will remember these lives as *queer losses*. This means we do not permit the straightening of their narratives. We resist the reduction of the Pulse tragedy to a generic “terrorist attack”; we resist the narrowing of the circle of loss to bereaved parents who may or may not have known or accepted their children’s non-normative loves and lives.

At the same time, a queer politics of grief will recognize an ethical and political obligation to remember these queer lives as *queer losses of color*. Most of the victims at Pulse were Latinx; it was Latinx Night at Pulse when the shooting occurred. This means we cannot permit the whitewashing of victim narratives. Insisting that we remember the specificity of these lives, John Paul Brammer wrote a moving eulogy in *Slate* two days after the Pulse shooting:

Us. They killed us.

They killed us while we were holding our drinks and dancing bachata. They killed us while we were smiling, while we were slapping each other on the asses and calling each other “perra” and “guapa.”

They killed us where we meet each other, where we ask where our families are from, and where we crack playful jokes about Mexico or Puerto Rico or Venezuela. They killed us in our sanctuary, where we are at our most free. Not just free to be queer. Not just free to be Latino. But free to be both at the same time. That's where they killed us.⁸

As Brammer also notes, the lives lost at Pulse were especially precarious lives; Latinx subjects are seldom the focus of public mourning; moreover, Latinx subjects are frequently harassed, assaulted, raped, killed, deported, and "ripp[ed] from [their] homes and [their] families." White, Anglo LGBTQ folk must take care not to grieve these lives in ways that replicate this injury by disrespecting the importance of *la familia* to those whose lives were lost; we must not erase or belittle the grief of bereaved parents (and other biological kin), even when those parents did not know or accept the queer orientations of their children's lives. A queer politics of grief resists privatizing queer losses. At the same time, it must take seriously the need to give others—especially others whose grief in not often legitimated or supported—the time and space to grieve.⁹ These others who, as griever, require our support include both the friends and lovers whose losses are erased by heteronormative kinship narratives and the mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters whose losses are exacerbated by racialized narratives of belonging and citizenship.

Caring for others who grieve by making the time and space for them to grieve is often easier on the material ground. In Orlando, immigration lawyers provided pro bono services to expedite kin's entry into the U.S. and to facilitate the transfer of dead bodies back to their homelands. The arts community offered space for reflection in the form of music, dance, literature, and theater; they also created angels to protect funeral goers from anti-gay protestors. Grief counselors were deployed to hospitals and throughout the city. At public vigils, citizens affected by the tragedy in different ways were given time to reflect and the opportunity to embrace one another. Makeshift public memorials arose at the Pulse site, at various vigil sites, at hospitals, and elsewhere, creating public spaces to remember and to grieve. These memorials acknowledged the specificity of the lives lost. In addition to containing the names and photos of, and personalized notes to, those whose lives had been lost, the memorials took on the aesthetic qualities of Hispanic graveyards with an LGBTQ twist: crosses were laced with Mardi Gras beads, vigil candles were left behind in holders emblazoned with the Virgin of Guadalupe, Puerto Rican flags were interspersed with rainbow flags, and sea shells were arranged around Pulse signs. In all of these ways and many others, citizens on the ground worked toward what Sosa advocates as a "more inclusive idea of 'us,' one in which loss can become the condition and necessity for a new sense of community."¹⁰ This work is, to be certain, incomplete and imperfect. It is a work in progress and it remains to be seen whether the work will be sustained. But what it illustrates is the notion of "One Orlando" as an *aspiration* rather than a given. The "we" in "We are Orlando" does not precede the loss of fifty lives on June 12, but is instead a possibility created by that loss. In transforming abject (queer, brown, black, colonized,

and/or undocumented) bodies into grievable lives and in making room for other abject subjects to grieve those lives, we begin to move away from questionable presumptions of the shared ownership of grief and toward the generation of a public who engages the work of solidarity.

Whether we can do this solidarity work in virtual locales is an open question. Without foreclosing such a possibility, I am simply noting here that the virtual context presents special challenges to those who seek an ethical response to tragedy. These challenges include social media's demand for instantaneous response to tragedy; the scripting of grief through emoticons, profile filters, and hashtags; and the felt need to curate our own digital persona. Social media does enable the generation of publics and counter-publics that, at their best, can become organized networks of care that support griever and networks of solidarity that ensure queer losses of color are *not* excluded from public cultures of grief. In reflecting on the shortcomings of social media responses to Pulse, thus, I am not suggesting we never employ digital tools in responding to tragedy. I am simply suggesting that we use these tools differently than many of us have to date. Updating our status to "sad" or tweeting at #OneOrlando or #OnePulse does not comprise a queer politics of grief and may, in fact, compromise such an effort.

NOTES

1. Alice Marick and N. Elison, "There Isn't Wifi in Heaven! Negotiating Visibility on Facebook Memorial Pages," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 56, no. (2012): 378–400.
2. Patrick West, *Conspicuous Compassion: Why Sometimes It Really Is Cruel to Be Kind* (London: Civitas, 2004).
3. Ibid.
4. Marick and Elison, "There Isn't Wifi in Heaven! Negotiating Visibility on Facebook Memorial Pages."
5. Nicoletta Enria, "How to React to Tragedy," *Europe and Me Magazine*, No. 33. <http://www.europeandme.eu/1735-how-to-react-to-tragedy>. Accessed July 10, 2016.
6. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 161.
7. Ibid., 156. See also David Eng, "The Value of Silence," *Theatre Journal* 54, no. 1 (2002): 85–94; David Eng and D. Kazanjian, *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004).
8. John Paul Brammer, "Why It Matters That It Was Latin Night at Pulse," *Slate*, June 14, 2016, http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2016/06/14/it_was_latin_night_at_the_pulse_orlando_gay_bar_here_s_why_that_matters.html. Accessed July 4, 2016.
9. Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 161.
10. Cecilia Sosa, "Queering Acts of Mourning in the Aftermath of Argentina's Dictatorship: The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo and Los Rubios," in *The Memory of State Terrorism in the Southern Cone: Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay*, edited by V. Durliolle and F. Less (New York: Palgrave, 2011), 69.

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ANNOUNCEMENT

The APA Committee on LGBTQ People in the Profession is searching for a new editor for its biannual newsletter. Responsibilities include soliciting essays, reviews, and other contributions from members to be published online in the spring and fall issues for two years (four issues total). Editors do not have to be current or past members of the committee, but should be APA members in good standing. Please email the current editor, Kory P. Schaff, at kschaff@calstatela.edu for more information, and circulate this notice widely among potential applicants.

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DEADLINE

The deadline for submission of manuscripts for the spring edition is January 1, 2017.

FORMAT

Papers should be in the range of 5,000–7,500 words. Reviews and notes should not exceed 3,000 words. All submissions must use endnotes and should be prepared for anonymous review.

CONTACT

Submit all manuscripts electronically (in MS Word format), and direct questions to Kory Schaff, editor, *APA Newsletter on LGBTQ Issues in Philosophy*, at kschaff@calstatela.edu.