

## **What could it mean to mourn? Notes on and towards a radical politics of loss and grieving**

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### **Abstract**

*Against and beyond the atomistic and pathologizing representations of loss and modes of grieving which currently predominate in the United States, “What Could It Mean to Mourn? Notes on and towards a Radical Politics of Loss and Grieving” offers an understanding of loss as a polyvalent, eminently multiplicitous, prismatic refraction of a multitude of histories, both living and spectral. Drawing upon the work of “autobiographical” narrative, queer theory, critical race studies, and autonomist Marxism, among other theoretical traditions, I suggest that loss opens up the possibility of recognizing and embracing the inescapable entanglement of socio-ecological existence (the impetus and directive of radicality). Probing the vast (and vastly uneven) matrix of loss and dispossession which is constitutive of modernity, and bringing this haunted landscape into conversation with our present conjuncture of ecological catastrophe, temporal flattening, and the attenuation of radical imagination, I suggest that the appearance of generalizing melancholia must be understood in relation to the coming end of the world. Yet rather than treating melancholia and ontological implosion as cause for political despair, I suggest that a depathologized take on melancholia may point toward a radical politics of mourning, toward forms of survival which are always in excess of the dispossessions through which they are given, and which hold out the possibility of genuinely ethical and transformative coalition. I offer a vision or reading of survival in and through a generative dialectic of ritualistic and ruptural mourning, a radical politics of mourning which throws the multiplicitous violence of modernity into stark relief and which precipitates new forms of gathering in dispossession, fugitive socialities which prefigure and enact a world-in-becoming.*

**Keywords:** loss, politics of mourning, affect theory, autobiography, radical imagination, afro-pessimism, decolonization, black optimism, undercommons, fugitivity

*for my mother, in memory of all that has been lost*  
*for my sister, in praise of all that survives*

[L]oss is not merely an emptiness but something more dimensional, something that fills the vacated space that's left by what used to be there. Loss...may be a name for what survives.

- Lee Edelman<sup>1</sup>

For all of us  
this instant and this triumph  
We were never meant to survive.

- Audre Lorde<sup>2</sup>

Everything I love survives dispossession

- Fred Moten<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 47.

<sup>2</sup> Audre Lorde, "Litany for Survival," in *The Black Unicorn*, collected in *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (New York: Norton, 1997), 255.

<sup>3</sup> Fred Moten, "The Subprime and the Beautiful," *African Identities*, Number 11, Issue 2 (2013), 237-245, 242.

## I.

There is no such thing as a singular loss, even if every loss simultaneously constitutes an irreducible singularity.<sup>4</sup> In the imperial socio-cultural formation that is uneasily coextensive with the territorial boundaries of the US settler-colonial state, we are compelled to treat loss in isolation, to reflexively disavow any momentary lapses in self-possession this loss may have allowed us to indulge in. Especially over the last three and a half decades of neoliberalization, empire's relentless injunction to seek something called "happiness" has been advanced alongside discursive and material practices which have significantly eroded collective solidarities and imaginations, producing subjectivities which appear increasingly atomized, individualistic, and bereft of radical political consciousness.<sup>5</sup> Loss thereby becomes severed from history, from the seamless fabric of socio-ecological entanglement within which it is woven,<sup>6</sup> while

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<sup>4</sup> This essay was written sporadically, during those rare moments of leisure sandwiched in between waged work and unwaged political and reproductive labor, and without the scholarly resources, compulsory methodological rigor, or (putative and actually existing) intellectual community found in the academy. It was written by a committed radical organizer, who happens to believe that the production of emancipatory knowledge can, must, and has always existed beyond the walls of the capitalist university. No doubt these facts are reflected in both the essay's strengths and weaknesses. Intellectual labor and its products are, of course, eminently social processes, situated within a particular historical geography and building upon myriad forms of accumulated collective knowledge. This essay, as an overwhelmingly synthetic work, is especially indebted to far more original theoretical contributions within the "fields" and traditions of black studies, native studies, black feminism, affect theory, queer theory, Marxist feminism, autonomism, poststructuralism, and post-colonialism. The most potent of these insights, in turn, owe their intellectual harvests to the epistemological fecundity of communities in struggle. Thus, my greatest intellectual, affective, and spiritual debt – a debt which is unpayable, and ought to be – is to all those practicing survival in a thousand different ways. I would also like to extend my gratitude to: Lesley Wood, for her receptivity and support; Donna Willmott, who first planted the seed; Jeanne Hahn, for her ruthless critiques of everything existing; Maegan Willan and Paola Laird, my mentors in mourning; Seulghee Lee, who tells me that the generous reading is always the right one; my Sins Invalid family, for our shared experimentation in rituals of mourning that gesture beyond a landscape of absences; my sister, Rebecca, for holding me in love and survival, in loving survival; and, Megan Shaughnessy-Mogill, who helps me remember that there is so much more to life than mourning.

<sup>5</sup> For an introduction to the history and politics of neoliberalism, see, *inter alia*, David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) and Sasha Lilley (ed.), *Capital and its Discontents: Conversations with Radical Thinkers in a Time of Tumult* (Oakland: PM Press, 2011). For a critique of the hegemonic injunction towards happiness, see Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). On the contemporary crisis of radical imagination, see Max Haiven, *Crises of Imagination, Crises of Power: Capitalism, Creativity, and the Commons* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Karen Barad uses the concept of entanglement as a heuristic device for critiquing Cartesian dualisms and emphasizing the inextricable constitution of matter and meaning. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007). As Fred Moten notes in a recent talk, the concept of "relation may actually be an impediment to thinking entanglement." Moten, "The Blur and Breathe Books," First Annual José Esteban Muñoz Memorial Lecture, Department of Performance Studies, NYU (March 2016).

mourning is driven underground, figured as an almost shameful act, a private affair to be closeted out of common decency.



Image: Erik Ruin, “Survivors,” silkscreen (2007)

But our grief is profoundly restless, and, in spite of the reigning politics of containment, it refuses the social and epistemological cages to which we have tried to consign it. For loss is not, in fact, monadic, even if every loss is marked by its essential uniqueness. Rather loss is eminently and immanently multiplicitous – a complex, polyvalent, historically contingent amalgam of significations, inextricably woven into (and constitutive of) the shifting fabric of socio-ecological relations, a prism which refracts a multitude of histories, both living and spectral. Indeed, loss has the potential to illuminate the very depths of socio-ecological relationality. As Judith Butler formulates it, in the dispossessions of loss “something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties of bonds that compose us.”<sup>7</sup>

It is, in fact, precisely the fracturing, the disorganization, the undoing of our subjectivities and the very pretence of self-possession so often precipitated by loss that opens up the possibility of a radicalized cognizance of our relations with others – or, more honestly, of a kind of socio-ecological entanglement which gives lie to the pretence of discrete individuation altogether. Butler continues:

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<sup>7</sup>Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 22.

If I lose you...then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself. Who “am” I, without you? When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do. On one level, I think I have lost “you” only to discover that “I” have gone missing as well. At another level, perhaps what I have lost “in” you, that for which I have no ready vocabulary, is a relationality that is composed neither exclusively of myself nor you, but is to be conceived of as *the tie* by which those terms are differentiated and related.<sup>8</sup>

In the loss of another, we suddenly come to awareness of the fact that our lives are not, and never have been, our own. This recognition of the irreducible entanglement of socio-ecological existence is, in our time, the beginning of radicality, its impetus and directive, its means and its end.

## II.

The horizon of our social imagination with respect to the politics of mourning follows directly from the narrow conceptions of loss which currently predominate. Loss is understood as singular, discrete, neatly bounded in space and time. The nature of the loss which accompanies, say, the death of a loved one is treated as self-evident – nothing more, nothing less. Moreover, in keeping with the reigning cultural imperative to treat individual productivity and sovereignty as the quintessential metrics of moral virtue – a conflation effected as much through the racial/colonial production of “humanity” as an ontological position as through capitalism’s material transformation of labor-power into a commodity to be bought and sold<sup>9</sup> – loss is construed as an obstacle to be overcome, a potential source of inertia, blockage, or fissure in the otherwise ceaseless churning of material life and the epistemological contiguity which underpins it.<sup>10</sup> Grieving is thus seen as an instrumental process facilitating a

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. Emphasis in original.

<sup>9</sup> Marx powerfully analyzes the commodification of labor-power in *Capital Vol. 1* (London: Penguin Books, 1976). For the racialized production of the human, see, *inter alia*, Sylvia Wynter, “No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to My Colleagues,” *Knowledge on Trial*, Volume 1, Number 1 (Fall 1994), 42-73; Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); and Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). For a critique of the racialized character of individual sovereignty, see Lindon Barrett, *Racial Blackness and the Discontinuity of Western Modernity* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> As Silvia Federici points out, the violent production of the worker by the European ruling classes during capitalism’s formative period “was not confined to the repression of transgressors. It also aimed at a radical transformation of the person, intended to eradicate in the proletariat any form of behaviour not conducive to the imposition of stricter work-discipline...For the same relation that capitalism introduced between land and work was also beginning to command the relation between the body and labor. While labor was beginning to appear as a dynamic force infinitely capable of development, the body was seen as inert, sterile

return to normalcy, one which is to be completed in a timely fashion. Indeed, according to the most recent iteration of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM V), grief becomes pathological (i.e. "complicated grief" or "prolonged grief") if "severe and disabling grief reactions...do not abate in the 12 months after the death of a close other."<sup>11</sup>

In order to move beyond these impoverished understandings of loss and grieving, I sporadically return to one of the foundational texts from which these conceptions draw their intellectual lineage. Sigmund Freud's 1917 essay, "Mourning and Melancholia," articulates a conception of loss and grieving that has figured prominently in subsequent theorizations in disciplines ranging from psychoanalysis to philosophy to critical theory.<sup>12</sup> In the time which has lapsed since the writing of Freud's classic essay, his conceptions of mourning and melancholia have been advanced, critiqued, rejected, and built upon in myriad ways, yet his short text remains enormously influential in contemporary theorizations of loss and grieving.

For Freud, loss was more than a mere descriptor for the affective states which often accompany having an intimate relation torn asunder through death, separation, or abandonment; his conception extended to "the loss of some abstraction...such as fatherland, liberty, an ideal, and so on."<sup>13</sup> Loss, thusly conceived, is an affective phenomenon that potentially encompasses far more than the intermittent, rare, or even exceptional mortal events with which loss is typically associated. Indeed, viewed in this light, we might extend the conception of loss to a whole host of social dislocations, from the loss of a cohesive identity to the loss of a homeland.

As this special issue of *Interface* centres on social movement auto/biographies, my exploration of the politics of loss and mourning draws in part on what would

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matter that only the will could move, in a condition similar to that which Newton's physics established between mass and motion, where the mass tends to inertia unless a force is applied to it." Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2004), 136, 140. For more on the modern subjective investment in work, see Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011). For a concise critique of predominant conceptions of loss from a relational psychoanalytic perspective, see Marilyn McCabe, *The Paradox of Loss: Toward a Relational Theory of Grief* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2002). On depression as a kind of inertia, see Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012). On the ceaseless character of daily life under modernity, see Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 1982). The threat loss potentially poses to epistemological coherence is examined in further detail throughout this essay.

<sup>11</sup> Richard A. Bryant, "Prolonged Grief: Where to After Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition?" *Current Opinion Psychiatry*, Volume 27, Issue 1 (2014), 21-26. See also, McCabe (2003).

<sup>12</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *General Psychological Theory* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1963), 164-180.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 164-180, 164.

appear to be my own autobiographical narrative (an appearance which, however, I believe this exploration reveals as deception). After all, the writing of this essay is, in some sense, a kind of ritual to mark the decade that has elapsed since my mother's death, a span of time which imparts a strangely ceremonious character to the anniversary of a distinctly unceremonious event: that chance of history which dispassionately brought my mother's lifetime of struggle around her physical and mental health – her struggle, that is, to find some way to live in this world – abruptly to an end. Over the years, I've often told those close to me that I lost my mother twice: once in life, and once again in death. When she was alive, Nina not only had to cope with severe degenerative physical illnesses,<sup>14</sup> she also wrestled with histories of violence, trauma, and disempowerment, together comprising practical, corporeal, and affective struggles which increasingly expressed themselves through and were compounded by drug addiction<sup>15</sup> and spiralling mental health.<sup>16</sup>



Image: Photo of my mother taken by “nursing home” staff for identification purposes, c. 2005

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<sup>14</sup> Specifically, lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, and a whole host of secondary conditions, from osteoporosis to cataracts to diverticulitis.

<sup>15</sup> Primarily to nominally licit opiates and other prescription drugs, but also, for a time, to crack cocaine.

<sup>16</sup> Concretely, cycles of severe depression and unrestrained mania, financial irresponsibility, habitual rages, selective memory, episodic psychosis, suicidal tendencies, etc.

One of the consequences of these material and psychic expressions of struggle was the creation of a household that was chronically unstable, abusive, and traumatic for her children, namely my sister and myself. Thus, when I lost my mother in the corporeal sense, that loss inevitably conjured up a host of other losses with which it was and remains inextricably entwined: the loss of a certain idealized (raced/gendered/classed/etc.) representation of childhood, parentage, family, and self, the loss of various intangible psychosomatic characteristics, desires, and so on. I became a case study in the multifaceted affective entanglements the *DSM V* pathologizes as “complex bereavement.” One loss slipped into another, and the world was irrevocably changed.

By thirteen my mother’s screams  
have become ritual, though not yet  
comfortable, in that peculiar sense  
of the word – that comfort which derives  
from the assurance of returns,  
the repetition  
of violence and the violence  
of repetition.  
Thirteen, and she screams  
smashing her face against a butcher block table  
again and again and again and again.<sup>17</sup>

With the slippage of these dispossessions across time and space as a backdrop, there are several observations I want to make regarding the loss of my mother. To begin with, just as Freud suggested, the concept of loss can be usefully applied not only to the corporeal loss of my mother through death, but to myriad losses of psychically potent abstractions (e.g. childhood) that were effected in the context of our entangled lives. What is more, these losses cannot be treated as entirely distinct, and most certainly cannot be meaningfully accounted for separately. To the contrary, these losses overlap and spill into one another – their very essences are mutually constituted. In other words, I cannot understand my mother’s death outside of the losses I suffered through her life, just as I cannot understand the injuries she effected in life outside of the loss brought about by her death. Loss is always multiplicitious, a polyvalent signifier which acquires meaning only through the particular set of relations by which it is constituted, and within the specific historical moment in which it is produced.

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<sup>17</sup> David K. Langstaff, “Ritual,” Unpublished Poem (30 October 2013).

Because loss is historically constituted, its meanings are not static or stable; they are dynamic, mutable, subject to the rhythms and vicissitudes of history. How I understand and feel about the loss of my mother, and the tapestry of losses with which her death is interwoven, has changed dramatically over time. Where once this tangle of dispossessions worked only at the periphery of my consciousness, with the passing of time they have come to constitute a driving force behind my revolutionary convictions and radical praxis. These changes have, in turn, not taken place in isolation, but rather in relation to historical events big and small, to friends, lovers, and communities, to political visions and struggles. If the meanings of loss are historically constituted, and we believe, as those working within radical left political traditions do, that we are collectively the authors of our histories (if not just as we please), then it follows that grief too forms a terrain of struggle, that the meanings of loss are open to contestation, and that a radical politics of mourning has the potential to be a transformative force in its own right. Placing loss within the movement of history can help us to discover something else in what survives: the radical potency of histories hitherto obscured by empire's elisions and distortions, the radical potentialities of futures prefigured in survival.

Unmoved by the banality  
of my falsehood,  
    I dream  
a time or place before  
                the world,  
    pristine exteriority.

Then or there  
    my mother plays  
freckled joy, sun-soaked skin  
    a child  
unsullied by violence,  
    outside  
the relentless encroachment  
of history or its absence.

I dream this lie  
for survival,  
knowing: even mapless

lovers need something  
to hold onto.

Knowing, too,  
secreted  
in my deceit:  
the seed  
of an()other past,  
an()other future.<sup>18</sup>



Image: Photograph of 1994 ACT UP march down Fifth Avenue on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Stonewall Rebellion, from James Wentzy's documentary film, *Fight Back, Fight AIDS: 15 Years of ACT UP* (2002)

### III.

There was a time when I could only articulate my mother's life and death as a singular tragedy, a loss which somehow stood outside the broader currents of history, and which was perhaps all the more grievable for this exceptionalism. In time, however, my understanding and narrative underwent a qualitative shift. I began to see that the violence which had ravaged my mother's heart, body, and mind was something more than a tragedy, that, to borrow the searing words of Adrienne Rich, this

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<sup>18</sup> David K. Langstaff, "Antehistorical Fantasy," Unpublished Poem (1 November 2015).

way of grief

is shared, unnecessary  
and *political*<sup>19</sup>

Whatever agency she may have exercised rightly or wrongly, my mother's struggles around mental health and drug addiction were not aberrant individual failings, but rather entirely comprehensible survivalist responses to sexual violence, domestic abuse, and compulsory dependencies upon men and the heteropatriarchal household. Nor were these instances of violence and disempowerment isolated or random, but rather the everyday face of heteropatriarchal domination.<sup>20</sup> Just as the endless obstacles to receiving essential, dignified medical care and access support<sup>21</sup> – from the bureaucratic hurdles she had to clear to receive Medicaid, to the daily condescension and arrogant liberties taken by privileged doctors, to the ways in which her basic physical needs were pitted against the interests of her attendants (overwhelmingly working class women of color, whose racialized/feminized labor was itself a site of degradation, alienation, and exploitation) – were the everyday face of capitalism and ableism, of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy.<sup>22</sup> Even her physical illnesses might have been in part or wholly the product of the capitalist organization of nature, as both lupus and rheumatoid arthritis have been linked to environmental toxification,<sup>23</sup> while the “treatments” deemed necessary by the medical industrial complex were

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<sup>19</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1971-1972* (Toronto: W.W. Norton Inc., 1973), 41. Emphasis added.

<sup>20</sup> For an introduction to the everyday face of heteropatriarchal violence, and liberatory resistance to it, see INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (eds.), *The Color of Violence: The INCITE! Anthology* (Boston: South End Press, 2006) and Ching-in Chen, Jai Dulani, and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (eds.), *The Revolution Starts at Home: Confronting Intimate Violence Within Activist Communities* (Boston: South End Press, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Access support is a term coined by activists within the nascent disability justice movement, referring to the specific forms of collective support needed for the flourishing of individual bodyminds, understanding that humanity is comprised of a great diversity of bodies and minds, with a range of physical, cognitive, and emotional abilities to match.

<sup>22</sup> Ableism, simply put, is a system of oppression which hierarchically orders a great diversity of human bodyminds, with the “able body” and “healthy mind” constructed as normative and all other bodyminds marked as deviant. Non-normative bodyminds are then dis-abled by social architecture and practices of exploitation and marginalization, violence and control, and even attempts at outright elimination, as evidenced by historic episodes from eugenics programs to the Nazi genocide. For an introduction to the politics of ableism and disability justice from the perspective of queer and gender non-conforming people of color with disabilities actively engaged in the struggle against able-bodied supremacy, see the forthcoming self-published, presently untitled, disability justice booklet by Sins Invalid.

<sup>23</sup> E.g. Jennifer F. Nyland and Wendy Hessler, “Recent exposure to fine particle pollution linked to lupus disease activity,” *Environmental Health News* (25 October 2010), available from: <http://www.environmentalhealthnews.org/ehs/news/science/pm2.5-pollution-linked-with-lupus-activity>.

themselves agents which worked to destroy her body (for instance, decades of high doses of prednisone that ultimately led to osteoporosis). In short, my mother's long downward spiral was not simply a consequence of poor choices or bad luck; she was ground down by systems of violence, crushed under the weight of domination, exploitation, and exclusion.

Thus, in "my own" life, when I look to what "I" have lost, I don't see a litany of tragedies worthy of sympathy, I see the brutalizations and perversions of systems of domination. When I think of the loss of my friend Kirsten who was murdered, or the loss of a feeling of safety after being jumped and beaten or after being robbed by a friend at gun point, I don't see senseless acts of violence, but rather the logic of heteropatriarchy, the degradations of white supremacy, and the barbarity of capitalist immiseration. Even the creative psychosomatic patterns I developed in order to cope with these and other forms of violence bear the long shadow of white male socialization under racial heteropatriarchy (amongst other shadows cast), and the attendant losses of tenderness, of connection, of vulnerability, of playfulness cannot possibly be grasped without taking stock of these larger relations of domination.



Image: Unknown artist, mural titled "In Memory of Kirsten Brydum,"  
Clarion Alley, San Francisco

The radical recognition of the impossibility of extricating loss from the broader socio-ecological fabric not only subverts the reigning isolationist imperative with respect to grief and posits mourning itself as a terrain of struggle, it also throws the entire concept of auto/biography – of discrete, internally coherent, individuated narration – into crisis. In recent years, critical race scholars have demonstrated the cultural centrality of autobiography as a genre in the modern development of the individuated and self-possessed liberal subject, which is also

to say the purported subjectivity of the white/settler.<sup>24</sup> On the one hand, these scholars have shown how autobiography as a genre has been both product and productive of modernity's material processes of marketization and atomization, as well as modernity's discursive construction and reification of the individual as epistemological category and political actor. The late giant of black studies, Lindon Barrett, put it thusly:

The "individual presence" groomed textually [by autobiography] in European modernity is the key feature naturalizing the epistemological and social protocols of capital accumulation, the diachronic episode and synchronic formation marking as fully the break between classical and medieval Europe and modern Europe and its permutations. The limited, modern notion of "individual presence" extrapolated into the universal certainty effectively twins human experience – in the complex feint – with the relays of property, mobile forms of ownership, and the contractual, remunerative, and exploitative arrangements of the cash nexus, and ideally the proposition of the individual figure, the modern civic agent, the subject of autobiography, appears to precede and exceed the modern episode and formation from which that individual emerges[.]<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, these scholars point to the role of autobiography in elaborating the modern racialized/colonial hierarchical structure of subjecthood – in other words, one's capacity to confidently and coherently narrate one's life as one's own signals and consolidates one's position within what Lisa Lowe has aptly termed the "colonial division of humanity."<sup>26</sup> Autobiography thereby "reiterate[s] a colonial division of humanity...even as the autobiographical genre develops the self-authoring individual out of the transatlantic conditions" of slavery, imperialism, and settler-colonialism.<sup>27</sup>

Yet, as Butler has been quoted above, loss throws such pretensions to self-possession into chaos, exposing a fundamental "inscrutability" at the heart of interiority which leads us back to relationality, or perhaps more accurately to irreducible socio-ecological entanglement. In short, loss, in all of its disruptive force, has the potential to unsettle the very coordinates by which we gauge self, other, and world, to reveal their historicity, and thereby lay bare the complex of violence upon which modernity is founded.

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<sup>24</sup> Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 43-72; Barrett (2014), 44-71.

<sup>25</sup> Barrett (2014), 66.

<sup>26</sup> Lowe (2015), *passim*.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 70

#### IV.

What, then, is the scope of what has been lost? How do we construct an affective and political accounting of the multitudinous dispossessions and appropriations which mark the history of our modern world? Is such an accounting even possible, or, more to the point, desirable?

It is tempting to speak of the cataclysms of settler-colonial usurpation and genocide, the tens of millions of Native American lives swallowed up by European capitalism's hunger for land and resources, the "clearing" of indigenous peoples to make way for settler states, economies, and subjectivities.<sup>28</sup> Or to speak of the tens of millions of Native African lives stamped out or subjugated in the attempt to transform people into so much cargo to be bought and sold, mere instruments to be employed in lucrative production and in service of white desire, the attempt to engage in a "hieroglyphics of the flesh" that enabled whites to take Africans "into 'account' as quantities."<sup>29</sup>

The desperate fumbling for an accounting of modern dispossession could lead us to veritably endless enumeration: the colonial violence which, as Aimé Césaire observed, "oozes, seeps, and trickles from every crack" of Western civilization;<sup>30</sup> the life-worlds extinguished in the fires of global coloniality, the eradication of whole systems of knowledge – ways of thinking, feeling, and being in the world – violence that Boaventura de Sousa Santos rightly names as "epistemicide[;]"<sup>31</sup> the brutal advent of heteropatriarchy, signaled by the witch hunts in Europe and the gendered violence of empire, by the women and gender non-conforming peoples who were tortured, raped, and murdered so that a male supremacist capitalism could build a reliable waged workforce upon a foundation of unwaged reproductive labor, followed by centuries of daily violence and the relentless policing of sexuality and gender;<sup>32</sup> the modern loss of

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<sup>28</sup> For a succinct review of the demographic literature, see Amiya Kumar Bagchi, *Perilous Passage: Mankind and the Global Ascendancy of Capital* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 195-207. For an introduction to the global operations of settler-colonialism as structure, see Patrick Wolfe, *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race* (London: Verso, 2016). On the concept of clearing, see Nicolás Juárez, "To Kill an Indian to Save a (Hu)Man: Native Life through the Lens of Genocide," *Wreck Park*, Volume 1, Issue 1 (2014).

<sup>29</sup> Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics*, Volume 17, Number 2 (Summer 1987), 64-81, 72. Emphasis in original. For a review of the relevant demography, see, again, Bagchi (2005), 195-207.

<sup>30</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York, Monthly Review Press, 1972), 3. For a horrifying window into this colonial violence, see Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London: Verso, 2001).

<sup>31</sup> Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the Global South: Justice against Epistemicide* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2014).

<sup>32</sup> *Inter alia*, Federici (2004); INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (2006); Andrea Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (Boston: South End Press, 2005); Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* (London: Zed Books, 1986).

corporeality, sensuality, poetry, magic – the erotic, in Audre Lorde’s sense of the term<sup>33</sup> – through modernity’s cynical or paranoid subordination of the “low instincts of the Body” (and insurgent passions of the heart) before the orderly and productive “forces of Reason[;]”<sup>34</sup> the ruinous material and epistemological externalization and subordination of (extra-human) nature...<sup>35</sup> The ghosts of modernity seem to haunt us at every turn.<sup>36</sup>

Yet, while the impulse to construct a definitive accounting of modern calamity is an understandable response to empire’s endemic elisions, disavowals, and forgettings, there is a sense in which even the presumption of being *able* to take stock of these multitudinous losses, to draw up a ledger of the extent and depth of modernity’s brutalities, is to engage in an act of epistemic violence and analytic hubris. Taking “the massive violence that preceded what has been called the [1992] rebellion or riots in the streets of Los Angeles” as an instantiation of the historic complex of (foundationally anti-black) violence he refers to simply as “the *disaster*,” Black Studies scholar Nahum Chandler asks, “how can we even hope to fathom the insidious pain, the psychic destruction...the torture, the physical and sexual convulsion, the horrendous unending repetition of violence upon violence that was, and remains, the violence of the [California v. Powell] verdict itself?” His answer: “We cannot pretend to *speak* of such things. We reach a limit; our limit. We cannot know, we cannot (only) name, here, in this domain. We, must be, responsible; only.”<sup>37</sup> Here Chandler echoes and is echoed by M. NourbeSe Philip when she speaks of “a story that cannot but must be told.” Her “not-telling” can only proceed by way of the edges and recesses of grammar and epistemology, “[t]hrough oath and through moan, through mutter, chant and babble, through babble and curse, through chortle and ululation[.]”<sup>38</sup> Philip and Chandler’s echoes, in turn, resonate in the insurgent black poet-theorist Fred Moten’s exhortation and lament:

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<sup>33</sup> Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The erotic as power,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom: 1984, 53-59).

<sup>34</sup> Federici (2004), 134, 137, *passim*.

<sup>35</sup> Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015).

<sup>36</sup> As Avery Gordon compellingly suggests, “[h]aunting is a constituent element of modern life...haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities...Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as transformative recognition.” Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 8, 9.

<sup>37</sup> Nahum Chandler, *X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* (Bronx: Fordham University Press, 2013), 1.

<sup>38</sup> M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 196.

they  
can't even come close to

saying how fucked up it is,  
with their anempathic  
numbers, but they can say  
that. they so attached

to it but they can say that.  
o, say what they cannot can!<sup>39</sup>



Image: Dungeon in Elmina Castle, Ghana, an infamous depot for the warehousing and sale of enslaved Africans during the transatlantic slave trade.

Perhaps it was the very impossibility of cataloguing such loss that led Walter Benjamin to summon an “angel of history”:

His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed: But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This

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<sup>39</sup> Fred Moten, *The Feel Trio* (Tucson: Letter Machine Editions, 2014), 63.

storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.<sup>40</sup>



Image: Paul Klee, “Angelus Novus” (1920)

Yet even Benjamin’s anguished angel of history was cast towards a seemingly redemptive futurity, his wings caught in a maelstrom “we call progress.”<sup>41</sup> All that had been lost promised to be redeemed by the perseverant march of history, and this promise has been the historical inheritance of the left. As the Guatemalan revolutionary poet Otto René Castillo once wrote,

it's beautiful to love the world  
with eyes  
that have not yet  
been born.

And splendid  
to know yourself victorious  
when all around you  
it's all still so cold,  
so dark.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 253-264, 257-258.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

<sup>42</sup> Otto René Castillo, “Before the Scales, Tomorrow,” in Martín Espada (ed.), *Poetry Like Bread: Poetry of the Political Imagination* (Chicago: Curbstone Press, 1994).

For many of us today, however, futurity can often feel like a horizon on which the sun is setting, Utopia like a hope which is being exhausted by the political, ecological, and temporal transformations which mark our epoch. Politically, the radical imagination is reeling not only from three and a half decades of relentless counter-revolutionary attack, but also (and inseparably) from the dizzying social transformations produced by neoliberal globalization. While our times are far from placid or predictable, as evidenced by everything from the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street to the Idle No More movement, there has been a growing sense, especially in the Global North, of political malaise – what the critical theorist Wendy Brown refers to as “left melancholia.”<sup>43</sup> Whereas half a century ago large swaths of society felt that they were on the cusp of revolution, today it seems that many feel, as Fredric Jameson is often quoted, that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.”<sup>44</sup>

There is more substance to this apocalyptic quip than many of us would care to admit. Even bracketing a variety of mounting political dilemmas and systemic contradictions one could enumerate – widening and deepening material inequalities, huge swaths of the global population deemed “supernumeraries” from the vantage point of capital, endless militarization and the ubiquity and banality of state violence, burgeoning neo-fascistic movements, ever more sophisticated geographical surveillance and control, the biopolitical domination that appears to run seamlessly through the fabric of daily life, and so on – we are faced with an unprecedented form of ecological crisis, in which capitalism threatens to destabilize the very climatic, biological, and geophysical basis for much of the life on this planet. How do we grasp the significance, in Naomi Klein’s words, of “the unbearable reality that we are living in a dying world, a world that a great many of us are helping to kill”?<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Wendy Brown, “Resisting Left Melancholia,” in Eng and Kazanjian (2003), 258-265.

<sup>44</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Future City,” *New Left Review*, Number 21 (May-June 2003), 65-79, 76.

<sup>45</sup> Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014), 28.



Image: Edward Burtynsky, “Nickel Tailings No. 31, Sudbury, Ontario” (1996)

Timothy Morton coined the term “hyperobjects” to refer to things such as climate change, objects with such colossal geographies and temporalities relative to humans that they produce “a fundamental shaking of being, a *being-quake*.” According to Morton, humanity has entered a new phase of history “characterized by a traumatic loss of coordinates, ‘the end of the world.’”<sup>46</sup> Little wonder, then, that so many are struggling to find language for the enormity of the material and affective losses unfolding before us, but which some are only just now beginning to sense – like hairs standing in anticipation of the storm darkening upon the horizon.

Zadie Smith sees this struggle at work in the common recourse to positivist articulations of climate change at the expense of a more sensual register, one which might try to comprehend the dispossessions of the ecological climacteric through the affective dimensions of daily life, which might even have the courage to be honest about our ultimate inability to do so:

There is the scientific and ideological language for what is happening to the weather, but there are hardly any intimate words...In the end, the only thing that could create the necessary traction in our minds was the intimate loss of the things we loved...the day I went into an Italian garden in early July, with its owner, a woman in her eighties, and upon seeing the scorched yellow earth and

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<sup>46</sup> Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 19, 22.

withered roses, and hearing what only the really old people will confess—in all my years I've never seen anything like it—<sup>47</sup>

The poet Ed Roberson speaks to this creeping recognition of unthinkable loss, to the desperate fumbling, the tragic groping towards the impossible which it predictably effects:

People are grabbing at the chance to see  
the earth before the end of the world,  
the world's death piece by piece each longer than we.<sup>48</sup>



Image: David Walsh, “Blue Melt River, Petermann Glacier” (2009)

If ever there was an historical moment for which Butler’s notion of “precarious life” was an appropriate summation of our existential condition (if unevenly so), it is the one in which we find ourselves.

As if the unravelling of the world-ecological conditions for the reproduction of life were not enough, some have claimed that futural politics is itself threatened by the emergence of an historically unprecedented temporality, what Jonathan Crary calls the time of “24/7.” In this new 24/7 world, the boundaries between production and consumption, between work and play, even between sleep and wakefulness, become more and more porous, as labor and sociality become

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<sup>47</sup> Zadie Smith, “Elegy for a Country’s Seasons,” *New York Review of Books* (3 April 2014). Emphasis in original.

<sup>48</sup> Ed Roberson, *To See the Earth Before the End of the World* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2010), 3.

increasingly subsumed within the fluid circulation and relentless logic of capital:

24/7 steadily undermines distinctions between day and night, between light and dark, and between action and repose. It is a zone of insensibility, of amnesia, of what defeats the possibility of experience...*it is both of and after the disaster, characterized by the empty sky, in which no star or sign is visible, in which one's bearings are lost and orientation is impossible...24/7 announces a time without time, a time extracted from any material or identifiable demarcations, a time without sequence or recurrence. In its peremptory reductiveness, it celebrates a hallucination of presence, of an unalterable permanence composed of incessant, frictionless operations...the implacability of 24/7 is its impossible temporality.*<sup>49</sup>

Similarly, Fredric Jameson contends that, while “[i]t is obvious that the deconstruction of postmodernity in terms of a dominant of space over time cannot ever, for the temporal beings we are, mean the utter abolition of temporality...[we are nonetheless witnessing something akin] to the abolition, or at least the repression, of historicity.” That is to say, what is dying is our “capacity to energize collective action,” to imagine and realize alternative futures. The absence of “a genuine historicity...is betrayed by apathy and cynicism, paralysis and depression.”<sup>50</sup>

Some will counter that there is nothing truly new in the geographic and temporal disintegrations that constitute our age. To live within modernity, after all, is “to live a life of paradox and contradiction[,]” to know the terrible grip “of disorientation and disintegration, of life falling apart...[to] know the thrill and the dread of a world in which ‘all that is solid melts into air’.”<sup>51</sup> And yet, when grappling with the reality of losses which operate at geographies and temporalities which absolutely exceed our historical imaginations, one cannot help but ask: could this be an instance in which the scale, depth, and completeness of catastrophe overwhelms the very possibility of mourning? Are we approaching some kind of asymptotic ruination, “the experience of pure destruction, of an infinite loss, without mourning, without dialectic”?<sup>52</sup>

At the end of the world, what could it mean to mourn?

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<sup>49</sup> Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2013), 17, 29. Much of Crary's argument is anticipated in Debord's conception of “spectacular time”: “The spectacle, as the present social organization of the paralysis of history and memory, of the abandonment of history built on the foundation of historical time, is the *false consciousness of time*.” Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1970), 158. Emphasis in original.

<sup>50</sup> Fredric Jameson, “The Aesthetics of Singularity,” *New Left Review*, Number 92 (March-April 2015), 101-132, 120.

<sup>51</sup> Berman (1982), 13.

<sup>52</sup> Marc Nichanian, “Catastrophic Mourning,” in Eng and Kazanjian (2003), 99-124, 120.



Image: Still from Lars von Trier's film *Melancholia* (2011)

## V.

For Freud, there were two basic psychological responses to the losses which all of us inevitably experience at various points in our lives: “the normal emotion of grief, and its expression in mourning,” and the pathological condition of melancholia.<sup>53</sup> At the risk of oversimplifying his theory, Freud seems to understand melancholia principally as the inability to grieve, an inability to “complete” the “work of mourning[,]” which consists of gradually withdrawing the libidinal energies cathected in the lost object such that the ego can become “free and uninhibited again.”<sup>54</sup> The melancholic, however, seems to be unable to detach their libidinal energies from the lost object, and thereby comes to identify with what has been lost. “In this way the loss of the object...[becomes] transformed into a loss of the ego” itself.<sup>55</sup> Melancholia is like an “open wound.”<sup>56</sup>

Freud's formulation requires the lost object to be firmly relegated to the past. Yet what if the wound remains open because the originary psychic violence has yet to reach its conclusion? Saidiya Hartman has posed this question with respect to transatlantic racial slavery, which empire would like very much to consign to the past and passive category of tragic yet redemptive history, a dark but ultimately triumphant chapter in the progressive teleology of Western modernity. Against this historical instrumentalization and disavowal, this mythical tale of common strife and redemption, Hartman reveals the shaky

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<sup>53</sup> Freud (1963), 164.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

foundations of modernity's story of progress and raises the most terrible and necessary of questions:

the distinction between the past and the present founders on the interminable grief engendered by slavery and its aftermath. How might we understand mourning, when the event has yet to end? When the injuries not only endure, but are inflicted anew? Can one mourn what has yet ceased happening?<sup>57</sup>

Hartman's question points to the urgency of a deeper interrogation of the radically uneven and incommensurable character of the colossal, multitudinous, ongoing losses which are constitutive of the modern world, and, further, of the apparently universal nature of the epochal spatio-temporal crisis signified by the shorthand, "the end of the world." Hartman is one the central interlocutors for several critical strands of thought within contemporary Black Studies that have unflinchingly critiqued the assumption that everyone can claim membership within "the world," or the "ontological totality" which posits humanity as a universal category, in the first place.<sup>58</sup> Their substantial differences notwithstanding, schools of thought such as Afro-pessimism, Afrarealism, and black optimism agree that anti-blackness is a fundamental antagonism – for some, *the* fundamental antagonism, non-analogous to all other violent dispensations – through which the modern world has *come into being*, and which structures *being in* the modern world.<sup>59</sup>

Frank B. Wilderson III, perhaps the most well-known proponent of Afro-pessimist thought, argues that

[t]he ruse of analogy *erroneously locates Blacks in the world* – a place where they have not been since the dawning of Blackness. This attempt to position the Black in the world by way of analogy is not only a mystification, and often erasure, of Blackness's grammar of suffering (accumulation and

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<sup>57</sup> Saidiya Hartman, "The Time of Slavery," *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Number 104, Volume 4 (Fall 2002), 757-777, 758.

<sup>58</sup> The concept of "ontological totality" comes from Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

<sup>59</sup> The tradition of Afro-pessimism is most prominently associated with the work of Frank B. Wilderson III and Jared Sexton, with thinkers such as Franz Fanon, Orlando Patterson, Saidiya Hartman, and Hortense Spillers as central interlocutors, and with thinkers such as Christina Sharpe and Ronald Judy often located within its milieu. Afrarealism is associated with the work of Joy James. Black optimism is associated with the work of Fred Moten. For surveys of these overlapping schools of thought, see P. Khalil Saucier and Tryon P. Woods, *On Marronage: Ethical Confrontations with Antiblackness* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2015); Jared Sexton, "Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word," *Rhizomes*, Issue 29 (2016), available at: <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue29/sexton.html>; Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness," *Criticism*, Volume 50, Number 2 (Spring 2008), 177-218; and, Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Volume 112, Number 4 (2013), 737-780.

fungibility or the status of being non-Human) but simultaneously also a provision for civil society, promising an enabling modality for Human ethical dilemmas...[In fact,] modernity marks the emergence of a new ontology because it is an era in which an entire race [black people]...stand as socially dead in relation to the rest of the world.<sup>60</sup>

For Wilderson, modern racial slavery never ended, precisely because slavery is better understood as a form of social death – defined as being the object of natal alienation, general dishonour, and gratuitous (as opposed to instrumental) violence – and it is this ontological death which gives life to the world. In other words, blackness is a kind of anti-Humanity, “a position against which Humanity establishes, maintains, and renews its coherence, its corporeal integrity[.]” Blacks stand outside the world, even as they bring it into being. “No slave, no world. And...no slave is *in* the world.”<sup>61</sup>

Grappling with their own set of erasures, disavowals, and fallacious analogies, critical currents within Native Studies have sought to elucidate the centrality of indigenous positionality in the making of the modern world, in its violent incorporations and foundational exclusions. Just as critical theorists in Black Studies have worked to push analyses of slavery and modernity beyond narrowly economic materialisms and towards the study of ontological totality, indigenous scholars have sought to extend and deepen analyses of the logics of settler-colonialism that have tended to represent dispossession and genocide strictly in terms of the settler’s drive for land and material resources.<sup>62</sup>

Building on the work of Afro-pessimists, Nicolás Juárez argues that “the violence of genocidal clearing...has come to define what it means to be Indian.” Settler-colonialism constructs indigenous territory as *terra nullius*, as a space which must be cleared by way of dispossession and genocide not only to facilitate the conquest of land and material resources, but more broadly to bring civilization and intra-settler subjective life into being.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, Jodi Byrd examines “how ideas of Indians and Indianness have served as the ontological ground through which...settler colonialism enacts itself...indigenous peoples in the new world...are the transit through which the dialectic of subject and object occurs.”<sup>64</sup> In each of these instances, indigeneity also comes to approximate a form of social death, insofar as the only mode of indigenous entry *into* the

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<sup>60</sup> Wilderson (2010), 37, 18.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 11. My emphasis.

<sup>62</sup> For an introduction to some of the relevant contemporary scholarship, see Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith (eds.), *Theorizing Native Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014) and Jodi Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

<sup>63</sup> Juárez (2014), 6.

<sup>64</sup> Byrd (2011), xix, xxv.

world, into civil society proper, is by way of a civilizing deracination, which is to say a kind of auto-genocide.<sup>65</sup>

These critical traditions within Black and Native Studies throw into sharp relief the radically uneven character of the dispossessive violence which constitutes the modern world across time and space, and thus the impossibility of any radical politics of mourning which takes as its point of departure some *a priori* unity of historical subjects. This uneven geographical and temporal production, circulation, and distribution of loss is marked not only by massive quantitative inequalities but also by often incommensurable qualitative differences. In other words, not only are the burdens of loss and culpability for violence structured unequally along lines of (dis/)ability, race, gender, sexuality, citizenship, class, and other social geographies, but the very nature of these losses across space and time is often without analog. It is not simply that empire renders only some lives as “grievable,” as Butler has famously suggested,<sup>66</sup> but also that modernity structures the very (im)possibility of mourning, in Freud’s sense of a process which reaches conclusion and resolution.



Image: The names of murdered black women. Illustration by Tara Jacoby (2015)

In this vein, U.S. President Barack Obama’s designation of the November 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015 bombing of Paris as “an attack on all of humanity and the universal values we share”<sup>67</sup> foregrounded the cruellest of ironies, even as it was, in the same instant, the most banal rehearsal of a fictitious universalism intended to obscure

<sup>65</sup> Juárez (2014).

<sup>66</sup> Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009).

<sup>67</sup> As quoted in Karl de Vries, “Barack Obama calls Paris massacre ‘outrageous,’” *CNN* (14 November 2015).

the radical unevenness of modern violence and dispossession (“*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins”).<sup>68</sup>

Yesterday the fragility of power  
was laid bare, momentarily  
stripped of its shadowless pretence.  
Today Humanity trembles, haunted  
by the trace of its own  
monstrous figuration.

Meanwhile Beirut is silently  
burning  
and Indonesia is  
burning  
and even these words are  
complicit in the quotidian violence  
which is sometimes  
tragic  
but always bearable.

*Je suis Paris.* Michael Brown  
is not  
my name, was never  
the name I was given.  
My name rests upon an edifice  
of namelessness, of loveless naming.

For those who believe they possess  
a home in Humanity’s conciliatory  
embrace, who pronounce their names  
*true, rightful*

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<sup>68</sup> Benjamin (1968), 255. Emphasis in original.

for these hapless travellers, betrayal  
is love's foremost condition of possibility.<sup>69</sup>

If we take seriously the unspeakable depth and extent of violence which the aforementioned critical traditions in Black and Native Studies have worked to uncover, the inescapable brutality which is the condition of possibility for modernity, for the historical ontology we call “the world,” we cannot help but ask the questions: if it is true that we are approaching the end of the world, need we mourn its passing? What does the end of the world mean for those who have never been able to attain standing in it in the first place (had they sought it), whose ontological condition has been that of “radical homelessness?”<sup>70</sup>

These are some of the questions which animate Moten's beautiful “black optimistic” appreciation and critique of Afro-pessimism, in which, “by way of the slightest, most immeasurable reversal of emphasis[,]” he turns the world upside down. While Moten is “in total agreement with the Afro-pessimistic understanding of blackness as exterior to civil society and, moreover, as unmappable within the cosmological grid of the transcendental subject[,]” for Moten, it is not blackness that is the site of social death, but rather *the world*, or “civil society and the coordinates of the transcendental aesthetic – cognate as they are not with the failed but rather the successful state and its abstract, equivalent citizens – to be the fundamentally and essentially antisocial nursery for a necessarily necropolitical imitation of life.”<sup>71</sup> Or, put more simply, “fuck a home in this world, if you think you have one.”<sup>72</sup>

Blackness, in Moten's analysis and poetics, ought to be understood not so much as a site of abjection (even as its anoriginal emergence is given by way of modernity's most brutal violence), but rather as the very essence of social life, as fugitive being, “a movement of escape, the stealth of the stolen that can be said, since it inheres in every closed circle, to break every enclosure.”<sup>73</sup> Blackness is the mode of operation “that will produce the absolute overturning, the absolute turning of this motherfucker out...[that which] bears or is the potential to end the world.”<sup>74</sup> This radical movement in and towards the “generative dispersion

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<sup>69</sup> David K. Langstaff, “Je suis Paris,” Unpublished Poem (14 November 2015).

<sup>70</sup> This turn of phrase is drawn from Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, “Michael Brown,” *boundary 2*, Volume 42, Number 4 (November 2015), 81-87.

<sup>71</sup> Moten (2013), 740.

<sup>72</sup> Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Brooklyn: Minor Compositions, 2013), 140.

<sup>73</sup> Moten (2008), 179.

<sup>74</sup> Moten (2013), 742, 739.

of a general antagonism that blackness holds and protects,”<sup>75</sup> is, as Césaire suggested, the (dis)order with which we are tasked:

What can I do?

One must begin somewhere.

Begin what?

The only thing in the world worth beginning:

The End of the world of course.<sup>76</sup>

But allow me to return for a moment to the beginning. Earlier I noted that I’ve often experienced the loss of my mother through a kind of doubling – once in life, once in death. The world has told me that I should understand the first of these losses in terms of failure: my mother, in other words, failed to care for my sister and I in the ways each of us were made to expect of her – the maternity the world at once demanded of and robbed from her. But if we are to speak of her life in terms of failure, let us speak also of her magnificent failure to seek standing in and for the world that refused her. Let us speak of her queer, criminal, fugitive failures.<sup>77</sup> Her failure to hide her body from the surveillance of common decency, failure to recognize herself as invalid, as corporeality past due on its payment, failure to accept the solemnity of bad debt.<sup>78</sup> Her failure to properly sort the bodies from the no-bodies,<sup>79</sup> the crackheads and vagrants, white trash and fat ones from the self-evidently self-possessed, self-contained and self-determined. Failure to disavow the pleasures of her undercommon sociality,<sup>80</sup> passing cigarettes and raucous laughter at the edges of the hospital, clouds of bittersweet smoke in abandoned buildings, eroticisms of flesh that didn’t know its place. Her failure to contain her furies out of respect for the

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 742.

<sup>76</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (Middletown: Wesleyan Press, 2001), 22.

<sup>77</sup> The notion of queer failure comes from Jack [then Judith] Halberstam, *The Art of Queer Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>78</sup> On bad debt, see Harney and Moten (2013), 58-69.

<sup>79</sup> I borrow this term from Denise Ferreira da Silva, “No-Bodies: Law, Raciality, and Violence,” *Griffith Law Review*, Volume 18, Issue 2 (2009), 212-236.

<sup>80</sup> On the undercommons, see Harney and Moten (2013).

necrophiles, failure to pretend that the world is a viable project, her failure to aspire toward what that world had refused her.

My mother failed to make a home in this world. And, by way of that failure, she taught me that this world was never ours to begin with. This willingness to depart from the world, to refuse standing in and for the world, is the condition of possibility for a radical politics of mourning.

## VI.

To call for the end of the world, of course, is not to turn one's back on the terrible unfolding of socio-ecological catastrophe and the unpredictable death throes of a world coming apart under the weight of its own contradictions, for neither the earth nor social life, in all their irreducible beauty and irrepressible generativity, have ever been contained by the world. It is, rather, a radical recognition of the socio-ecological entanglement that the world must deny even as its existence depends upon it, and which the destabilizing force of loss can so readily reveal. It is the fullest embrace of the insurgent knowledge that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."<sup>81</sup>

Nevertheless, as the onset of the end of the world becomes more and more discernible, especially by way of an epochal world-ecological crisis<sup>82</sup> which is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore, a gnawing anxiety is taking hold in civil society, or among those subjects who have hitherto laid claim, however incompletely or uneasily, to standing in the world. In some respects, these subjects are experiencing a loss they are unable to name, let alone reckon with, and have thereby stumbled upon a narrow stretch of common ground with those who have been the objects of modernity's most violent inclusions and foundational exclusions, insofar as each approaches mourning as a structural impossibility. Herein lies the possibility of coalition, albeit a possibility which has historically proven elusive. For we are all implicated (however unequally) in this vast matrix of loss produced by the modern world, this incalculable abyss from which the waxing tide of melancholia rises. As Moten sums it up in his passing address to the settler, "[t]he coalition emerges out of your recognition that it's fucked up for you, in the same way that we've already recognized that it's fucked up for us. I don't need your help. I just need you to recognize that this shit is killing you, too, however much more softly, you stupid motherfucker, you know?"<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in Lorde (1984), 110-113.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. Moore (2015).

<sup>83</sup> Harney and Moten (2013), 140-141.

If it is true, to play off of Milton Friedman’s tired quip, that we are all (becoming) melancholics now,<sup>84</sup> am I suggesting that our fate is simply and ineluctably one of political morass, of damaged life, of sunken dreams? Must we resign ourselves to Freud’s pathology, that of humans marked by “painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, [and] loss of the capacity to love”?<sup>85</sup>

Against such pessimistic diagnostics, queer theorists and critical race scholars have sought to move beyond representations of the melancholic as inherently pathological, instead positing melancholia as a site of socio-analytical fecundity and political generativity. David Eng and David Kazanjian, in the introduction to their scholarly compilation, *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, suggest that melancholia in fact “offers a capaciousness of meaning in relation to losses encompassing the individual and the collective, the spiritual and the material, the psychic and the social, the aesthetic and the political.” Whereas Freud’s conception of “normal mourning” treats the past as “resolved, finished, and dead, in melancholia the past remains steadfastly alive in the present.”<sup>86</sup> Recalling Benjamin’s image of seizing “memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger[,]”<sup>87</sup> Eng and Kazanjian suggest that melancholia offers “an ongoing and open relationship with the past — bringing its ghosts and spectres, its flaring and fleeting images, into the present.”<sup>88</sup>



Image: 2015 black-led protest against white supremacy and racist state violence

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<sup>84</sup> The original quip – “we are all Keynesians now” – was attributed to the famous neoliberal intellectual in the December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1965 issue of *Time* magazine.

<sup>85</sup> Freud (1963), 165.

<sup>86</sup> David Eng and David Kazanjian, “Introduction: Mourning Remains,” in Eng and Kazanjian (2003), 1-25. I should qualify my oppositional placement of their perspective in relation to Freud’s by noting that Eng and Kazanjian see the seeds of their orientation within Freud’s own contradictions, doubts, and hesitations. *Ibid.*, 3, 3-4.

<sup>87</sup> Benjamin (1968), 255.

<sup>88</sup> Eng and Kazanjian (2003), 4.

In North America, the radical potentiality of unfinished mourning has been powerfully expressed by the historic upsurges in black and indigenous resistance of the past several years. The recent black rebellions, activism, and organizing often associated with, but hardly reducible to, the rallying cry, “Black Lives Matter,” have challenged the ubiquitous assault on black life with a potency not seen in decades.<sup>89</sup> As the poet Claudia Rankine puts it, “Black Lives Matter aligns with the dead, continues the mourning and refuses the forgetting in front of all of us.”<sup>90</sup> Closely connected in time and space, the wellspring of recent Native American resistance that has been most prominently associated with the Idle No More movement,<sup>91</sup> but which continues in a variety of forms,<sup>92</sup> evinces a radical mourning within and against genocide. The explosion of indigenous resistance everywhere bears the trace of unfinished and impossible mourning, or, as Tara Williamson (Gaabishkigamaag and Opaskwayak Cree Nation) intones, “[m]y heart’s been on fire a hundred times before[.]”<sup>93</sup>



Image: Idle No More protesters demonstrate outside the British Consulate at College Park in Toronto, 2013.

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<sup>89</sup> For background on this rallying cry, see Alicia Garza, “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement,” *The Feminist Wire* (6 December 2014). For an analysis of the more general black upsurge within which this rallying ought to be situated, see Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016).

<sup>90</sup> Claudia Rankine, “The Condition of Black Life is one of Mourning,” *The New York Times Magazine* (22 June 2015).

<sup>91</sup> See The Kinq-nda-niimi Collective, *The Winter We Danced: Voices from the Past, the Future, and the Idle No More Movement* (Winnipeg: Arbiter Ring Publishing, 2014).

<sup>92</sup> For instance, in the widespread indigenous resistance to pipeline construction in the U.S. and Canada, most recently in the powerful inter-tribal coalition that developed in solidarity with the Standing Rock Sioux struggle against the Dakota Access Pipeline. Julian Brave NoiseCat and Annie Spice, “A History and Future of Resistance,” *Jacobin* (8 September 2016), available at: <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/09/standing-rock-dakota-access-pipeline-protest/>.

<sup>93</sup> Tara Williamson, “Come My Way,” in The Kinq-nda-niimi Collective (2014), 31.

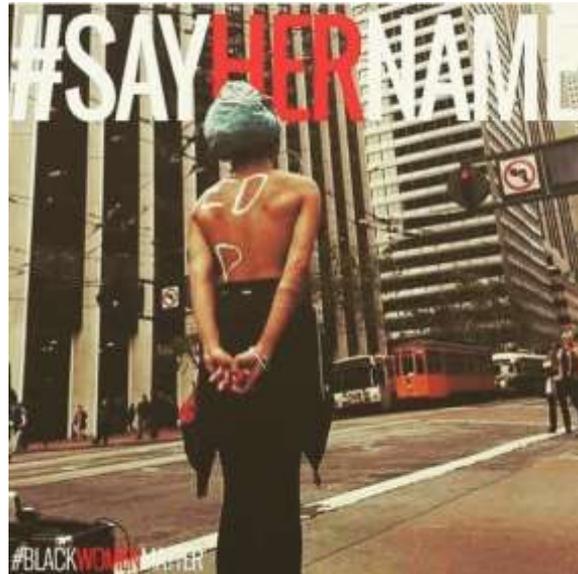


Image: Photograph from #sayhername #blacklivesmatter action in San Francisco, 2015

With its potential to animate histories of loss which are not yet past, to directly summon the spirits already haunting our worlds with their ghostly presence, melancholia might prove a powerful impetus for a radical politics of mourning capable of throwing the relations of violence which produce modernity's massively uneven geographies of loss into stark relief. Yet a radical politics of mourning must be more than a mere negation of the violence constitutive of loss; it must also find its power in the faith that often what survives *exceeds* what was lost. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney speak to this excess as it has been felt by those who “remain in the hold [of the slave ship], in the break, as if entering again and again the broken world, to trace the visionary company and join it.”<sup>94</sup> In the depths of unspeakable dispossessions (which must yet be spoken), they see a fugitive sociality, both a prefiguration of another world and a return to a world which was always there:

in the hold, in the undercommons of a new feel, another kind of feeling became common. This form of feeling was not collective, not given to decision, not adhering or reattaching to settlement, nation, state, territory or historical story; nor was it repossessed by the group, which could not now feel as one, reunified in time and space...This is modernity's insurgent feel, its inherited caress, its skin talk, tongue touch, breath speech, hand laugh. *This is the feel that no individual can stand, and no state abide.*

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<sup>94</sup> Harney and Moten (2013), 94. Harney and Moten's black optimistic notion of “fantasy in the hold” is in dialogue with Wilderson's Afro-pessimist ethico-analytical aspiration “to stay in the hold of the ship, despite...[his] fantasies of flight.” Wilderson (2010), xi.

This is the feel we might call hapticality...

Hapticality, the touch of the undercommons, the interiority of sentiment, the feel that what is to come is here. *Hapticality, the capacity to feel through others, for others to feel through you, for you to feel them feeling you*, this feel of the shipped is not regulated, at least not successfully, by a state, a religion, a people, an empire, a piece of land, a totem. Or perhaps we could say these are now recomposed in the wake of the shipped. To feel others is unmediated, immediately social, amongst us, our thing...This is our hapticality, our love. This is love for the shipped, as the shipped.<sup>95</sup>

In other words, returning to Butler once more, loss not only “delineates the ties we have to others...shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties of bonds that compose us[,]” it holds out the possibility of a liberatory (loving, desirous, uncontainable) sociality, an insurgent drive that runs beneath and beyond the depredations and dehumanizations of the modern world. Thus, in its most imaginative and generous incarnation, a radical politics of mourning offers us an opportunity to gather in and through dispossessions in hopes of (re)discovering what it might mean, to borrow a beautiful turn of phrase from the Martinican poet and theorist Édouard Glissant, “to consent not to be a single being.”<sup>96</sup>



Image: Ancient artwork in Cueva de las Manos (Cave of Hands), Río Pinturas, Argentina

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 98, 99. Emphasis mine.

<sup>96</sup> Édouard Glissant, “One World in Relation: Édouard Glissant in Conversation with Manthia Diawara,” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, Number 28 (2011), 4-19, 5, quoted in Moten (2013), 737-780, 745.

## VII.

In a short exegesis on the politics of love, the autonomist Marxist theorist Michael Hardt distinguishes between “two faces of love,” two moments bound together in dialectical unity. On the one hand, there is the moment of the event, of the encounter, or, in more familiar terms, of “*falling in love*.” In a political reading, this is the love which “must be a revolutionary force that radically breaks with the structures of social life we know, overthrowing its norms and institutions.” On the other hand, there is the moment of the ceremonial, the lasting bond within a sequence of encounters, or, in more familiar terms, of “*being in love*.” In a political reading, this is the love which “must provide mechanisms of lasting association and stable social bonds and thus create enduring institutions...[a ceremony] that facilitates and organizes the return of joyful, beneficial social encounters.”<sup>97</sup> Drawing from Hardt, I’d like to suggest differentiating between two somewhat parallel moments within a broader radical politics of mourning: the mourning in ritual and the mourning in rupture.

The ritual of mourning is a procedure which has some legitimacy under our current regime – evidenced by the ubiquity of the funeral and other ceremonies intended to mark an individual’s passing from this life – even if this regime works diligently to deprive these rituals of the potentially transformative power of gathering in and through loss. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines ritual as a “religious or solemn ceremony consisting of a series of actions performed according to a prescribed order.”<sup>98</sup> In contradistinction to this understanding of ritual as the performance of preordained solemnity, a radical politics of mourning would emphasize ritual as a form of loving ceremony, transformative assembly, wellspring of resilience. As the French philosopher Marc Augé would have it, ritual ought to be a practice which moves against the repetition of sameness which plagues “the eternal present in which we now live[,]” that it is precisely our collective desire to depart from these relations that animates the widespread hunger for ritual characteristic of our present historical moment. For Augé, ritual is, on the one hand, “rooted in the past...at the same time it is focused on the future, and the emotion attached to its celebration is born of the feeling that it has succeeded in bringing something into being, that it has produced a *beginning*.”<sup>99</sup>

However, whereas Augé seems to believe that transformative ritual has been progressively degraded, theorists whose production of knowledge is more meaningfully embedded within and sustained by communities in struggle –

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<sup>97</sup> Michael Hardt, “The Procedures of Love / Die Verfahren der Liebe” 100 Notes – 100 Thoughts / 100 Notizen – 100 Gedanken, *DOCUMENTA* (13) (Kassel: documenta und Museum Fridericianum, 2012), 4, 6, 11-12.

<sup>98</sup> “Ritual,” *Oxford English Dictionary* website (accessed 28 September 2015). Available from: [www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american\\_english/ritual](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/ritual)

<sup>99</sup> Marc Augé, *The Future* (London: Verso, 2015), 21.

from black feminists to indigenous scholars – have long recognized that radical rituals of mourning are multitudinous across the historical geographies of modernity. The transnational feminist scholar M. Jacqui Alexander, for example, probes the losses generated by transatlantic racial slavery, of the “overcrowded passageways...still packed centuries later with the scent of jostled grief so thick that no passage of human time could absorb it[,]” and the ways in which African cosmologies have “housed memories...necessary to distil the psychic traumas produced under the grotesque conditions of slavery.” For Alexander, it is to the sacred that we ought to turn for this variegated “healing work, that is, spiritual labor,” for this liberatory reconstruction of “a terrain that is both exterior and interior.”<sup>100</sup>

Yet whether one turns to the secular or the sacred, or troubles these distinctions altogether, we have no shortage of radical rituals of mourning to which we might turn for insight and inspiration, or in which we have already found ourselves rehearsing sometimes improvisatory songs of different worlds. From days of remembrance for transgendered lives lost to (racialized) heteropatriarchy to candlelight vigils for black lives lost to (heteropatriarchal) white supremacy, there can be no question that radical ceremonies of mourning are already with us. Moreover, often these rituals are implicit and quotidian, open secrets moving beneath and against the surface of everyday life. For, as Harney and Moten observe, given “the state’s monopolization of ceremony, ceremonies are small and profligate; if they weren’t everywhere and all the time we’d be dead. The ruins, which are small rituals, aren’t absent but surreptitious, a range of songful scarring, when people give a sign, shake a hand.”<sup>101</sup> Our task is to continue to uncover, protect, and (re)invent these rituals, to expand the space for their flourishing, to inflect ceremonies that seem to have forgotten what or why they have lost with a transformative invocation of ghosts, to gather in dispossession to sing praises of all that survives.

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<sup>100</sup> M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 288, 293, 312, 287-332.

<sup>101</sup> Harney and Moten (2015), 83.

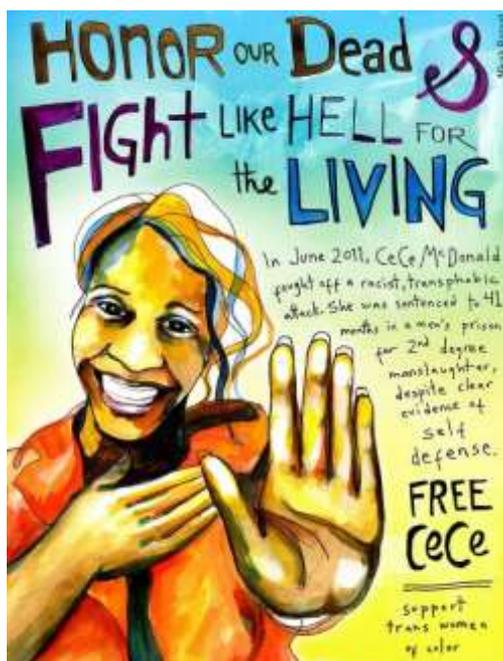


Image: Micah Bazant, “Free CeCe and Support Trans Women of Color” (2013)

This past year, while working with the disability justice-based performance project, Sins Invalid, I had the fortune of joining this brilliant and fiercely tender group of artists and activists in the construction of precisely this kind of transformative ritual of mourning.<sup>102</sup> Part performance, part ceremony, “Disability Liberated” brought together scholars, students, activists, and broader community to give voice to a conspicuous silence one encounters even in otherwise radical critiques of the prison industrial complex – namely the virtual absence of analyses or practices exposing and challenging the intersections of policing, imprisonment, and ableism, in spite of the glaringly disproportionate number of people with disabilities subjected to police violence or locked up within prisons and other sites of incarceration.<sup>103</sup> To quote from our description of the event’s origin, purpose, and ethos:

*Disability Liberated* is not a passive grieving, but a furious mourning, an elegy to all that we have lost, and a promise to fight like hell for all that survives.

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<sup>102</sup> Sins Invalid is a disability justice-based performance project, and has been at the forefront of developing disability justice as an analysis and framework for movement building. For more on the analysis, practices, and principles of disability justice, see [www.sinsinvalid.org](http://www.sinsinvalid.org).

<sup>103</sup> The most notable scholarly exception to this tendency is the important book which inspired our convening: L. Ben-Moshe, C. Chapman, A. Carey (Eds.) *Disability Incarcerated: Imprisonment and Disability in the United States and Canada* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

*Disability Liberated* was born out of collective struggle. We sought first and foremost to pay homage to the countless disabled lives that have been lost to the violence of able-bodied supremacy, whether that loss be corporeal – souls robbed of their very embodiment by state, vigilante, or, too often, intimate violence – or the loss of freedoms through incarceration in prisons or other disciplinary institutions. Our understanding of able-bodied supremacy has been formed in relation to intersecting systems of domination and exploitation...

*Disability Liberated* keeps these connections front and center, drawing upon the legacies of cultural and spiritual resistance within *vodou* that confronted and subverted colonial powers along a thousand underground paths, igniting small persistent fires of rebellion in everyday life...We know that there has always been resistance to all forms of oppression, as we know through our bones that there have simultaneously been disabled people visioning a world where we flourish, that values and celebrates us all in our diverse beauty.

*Disability Liberated* is an intervention into a landscape of absences. For if the ruthless violence of able-bodied supremacy were not bad enough, we also find ourselves confronted with the myriad ways in which ableism renders this violence invisible...Just as we can trace the origins of the police to slave patrols, the coercive warehousing of people with disabilities and the rampant violence visited upon us today is rooted in eugenics, forced sterilization, and outright genocide...

While we grieve what has been lost, we also celebrate we who remain, and struggle towards what is yet-to-be. Disability justice is a vision and practice of this yet-to-be, a map that we create with our ancestors and our great grandchildren onward, in the width and depth of our multiplicities and histories, a movement towards a world in which every body and mind is seen as valuable and beautiful.

*We unwrap our tongues, we bind our stories, we choose to be naked  
we show our markings, we lick our fingers, we stroke our bellies  
we laugh at midnight, we change the ending  
we begin, and begin again.<sup>104</sup>*

In an effort to ground our ceremony in place, to anchor the sensuousness of bodyminds gathered together to grieve, we constructed a physical altar to honor those countless disabled lives claimed by ableism, the carceral state, and their gatekeepers. As we placed keys as symbols of the forced confinement these lives were subjected to, I thought of my mother, whose last days were spent in a so-

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<sup>104</sup> “Disability Liberated: Mourn the Dead and Fight like Hell for the Living,” *Disability Liberated* at the Disability Incarcerated Conference and Symposium, UC Berkeley (8-9 March 2015). The last italicized section of the text was excerpted with permission from Aurora Levins Morales, *Kindling: Writings on the Body* (Cambridge: Palabrera Press, 2013).

called nursing home, because a world which deemed her life unworthy left her no other choice. And I felt myself swept into the river of sorrows, the blood that winds unevenly through the historical geography of modernity, here in rivulets and there in cascades. Yet I also felt, if only for a moment, a deep sense of love and gratitude for the fact and manner of our gathering, a passing glimpse into a world beneath and beyond, a world-in-becoming.



Image: "Disability Liberated" altar to lives claimed by ableist/carceral violence

"Disability Liberated" is just one example amidst an expansive and variegated landscape of transformative mourning ritual, even if this landscape often feels distant or obscure. And, just as volcanic eruptions and seismic shifts form and re-form the geophysical landscape, so too is the landscape of ceremonial mourning (re)constituted by moments of rupture and upheaval. The activist-scholars Marina Sitrin and Dario Azzellini conceptualize rupture as "[a] break, actual or in the imaginary, with previous ways of being, seeing and relating change," "a shift in people's imaginations from which new social relationships emerge."<sup>105</sup> If it is true, as Marx suggested, that the sedimented "tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living[.]"<sup>106</sup> then ruptures are the quakes which create fissures in this sediment. History is

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<sup>105</sup> Marina Sitrin and Dario Azzellini, *Occupying Language: The Secret Rendezvous with History and the Present* (Brooklyn: Zuccotti Park Press, 2012), 29; Marina Sitrin, *Everyday Revolutions: Horizontalism and Autonomy in Argentina* (London: Zed Books, 2012), 40.

<sup>106</sup> Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" (1852), quoted from [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm) (accessed 3 August 2015).

cracked open, and the apparent dead weight of geological time comes alive with historicity and potentiality.

In moments of ruptural mourning, ghosts which have been consigned to the world of the dead and forgotten come alive in fundamentally unpredictable and uncontrollable ways; history “flashes up,” and, in this flash, relations of violence that have hidden themselves in the shadows are laid bare; a kinetic improvisation animates bodies and spirits; and, in its most beautiful manifestations, this mournful social poesis is the (re)discovery of hapticality, “the touch of the undercommons...the feel that what is to come is here...the capacity to feel through others, for others to feel through you, for you to feel them feeling you.”<sup>107</sup>

In the United States, we are living through a time in which ruptural mourning has returned as a powerful social force. In the wake of the non-indictment of Michael Brown’s killer, followed shortly by the murder of Freddie Gray, black communities from Ferguson to Oakland to Baltimore rose up in defense of and with love for black life, against the machine which makes “the condition of black life...one of mourning,” against the daily indignities and the “random manglings, the gashing of heads and brains blown out over the river as the body seeks to escape.”<sup>108</sup> The watchdogs of white supremacy, of course, were quick to denounce these rebellions as “senseless violence,”<sup>109</sup> but if there was any kernel of truth to such statements, it was that black communities had gathered in refusal of the “common sense” that treats the destruction of black flesh as “tradition,” as “heritage.”<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> The notions here of improvisation and social poesis are inspired by, though not necessarily equivalent to, those found throughout Fred Moten’s body of work.

<sup>108</sup> Rankine (2015); Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 67.

<sup>109</sup> E.g. Brendan Bordelon, “Missouri Gov. Warns Against ‘Senseless Violence’ in Anticipation of Ferguson Grand Jury Verdict,” *The Corner* (11 November 2014).

<sup>110</sup> Coates (2015), 67.



Image: Iconic photograph of participant in Ferguson Rebellion returning police tear gas<sup>111</sup>

Giving ourselves over to moments of ruptural mourning, however, is far easier said than done. The reflexive reenactment of hegemonic socialities, even for the most avowedly “militant” among us, is perhaps power’s greatest asset. It was, I believe, precisely this fact that Benjamin had in mind when he declared that, “[i]n every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.”<sup>112</sup> Moreover, for many communities (for whom hegemony has never been a tenable bargain) the impediments to generalized rupture have less to do with the lure of acquiescence than with the more immediate threat of, and incessant subjection to, material violence and repression. In other words, in many communities, insurgent drives are regulated not so much through the dull enticements of conformism as through the state’s menacing reminders of all that yet stands to be lost (stolen).<sup>113</sup> These dual recognitions trouble any simple assumption of a necessarily generative dialectic between ruptural and ritualistic mourning.

I think back, for instance, to an experience I had while working with the International Solidarity Movement (ISM) in the occupied West Bank of Palestine.<sup>114</sup> My comrades and I had been participating in weekly demonstrations in Nabi Saleh, a village known for its history of resistance to

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<sup>111</sup> Notwithstanding the fact that this was clearly an act of self-defense, this participant has since been charged with assaulting a police officer. See Kim Bell, “Ferguson protestor who threw back tear gas cannister [sic] in iconic photo is charged,” *St. Louis Post Dispatch* (26 August 2015).

<sup>112</sup> Benjamin (1968), 255.

<sup>113</sup> For an examination of the latter mechanism of social control as it manifested specifically under the Nazi regime, but which draws out more general historical implications, see Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989). For the violent regulation of black agency in the antebellum and postbellum U.S., see Saidiya Hartman’s masterful *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>114</sup> For a chronicle of these experiences, see the blog I maintained at the time: <https://memoryagainstforgetfulness.wordpress.com/>

Israeli settler-colonialism since at least the 1967 *Naksa* (setback/calamity).<sup>115</sup> These regular protests were most immediately in resistance to the relentless encroachment of Zionist settlement, but of course were grounded in a more general refusal of settler-colonial dispossession, military occupation, and incremental genocide. The day after one of these demonstrations, when the various stripes of international solidarity activists were absent and media documentation was minimal, Israeli soldiers murdered Rushdi Tamimi, a 31 year old Palestinian man from the Nabi Saleh community. The soldiers shot him in the stomach and the leg, then prevented him from receiving timely medical treatment while his sister and other villagers watched helplessly.<sup>116</sup> He died later in a hospital in Ramallah, the latest in a long line of martyrs Nabi Saleh was forced to claim.

As Israeli bombs rained down on the Gaza strip – at the time, the latest in Israel’s string of assaults on Gaza, euphemistically named “Operation Pillar of Defense” – we joined the throngs of friends, family, neighbours, and other Palestinians who recognized Rushdi’s face as their own for a mourning ritual that stretched from Ramallah all the way back to Nabi Saleh. With the number of dead mounting in Gaza, and the seemingly unbearable character of Palestinian daily life, there was talk of being on the cusp of a third *Intifada* (shaking off). Feeling the depth of sorrow and rage coursing in and through the streets of Ramallah, it seemed that ruptural mourning could not help but split the earth and let loose the righteous spirits of dead and dispossessed.

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<sup>115</sup> The *Naksa* is generally understood in relation to, and as an extension of, the *Nakba* (catastrophe), the Palestinian description of the 1948 Zionist ethnic cleansing of some 800,000 Palestinians through and upon which the State of Israel was founded. On the latter, see Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006).

<sup>116</sup> An edited video taken by his sister can be watched here:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zTmPach1Yjg>



Image: Photograph of Rushdi Tamimi's mourning procession, taken by author (2012)

And yet, though Palestinian demonstrations and skirmishes waxed and Israeli military forces flexed their muscles, the dream of rupture failed to materialize. Why, one cannot help but ask, does one moment of grief thrust open the floodgates of history, while another settles into a mournful ritual of resilience and survival? What complex historical valences transformed the deaths of Michael Brown, or Emmett Till, or Mohamed Bouazizi into catalysts of ruptural mourning when countless other deaths were not?

These are not questions I have answers to – perhaps they have no definitive answers, or perhaps to seek them is itself an injustice – but as I write these words, as I reflect on the uncountable, un-accountable life and lives presently being devoured by our necrophilic regime, the ecological cataclysm which is unfolding before our eyes and through the narrow scope of our vision, I hear the song of the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, who knew that “survival is the beginning of resistance.”<sup>117</sup> He harmonizes with Audre Lorde, who recognized black survival as “triumph,” as obdurate dance tracing an unmappable journey “between nightmare and the possible.”<sup>118</sup> At the same time, I remember and hold onto the prophetic wisdom of Moten and Harney: “That we survive is beauty and testament. It is neither to be dismissed, nor overlooked, nor devalued by or within whatever ascription of value. That we survive is invaluable. It is at the same time insufficient.”<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Mahmoud Darwish, *In the Presence of Absence* (New York: Archipelago, 2011), 67.

<sup>118</sup> Audre Lorde, “On My Way Out I Passed over You and the Verrazano Bridge,” in *Our Dead Behind Us*, collected in Lorde (1997), 403-406, 403.

<sup>119</sup> Moten and Harney (2015).



Image: Widely circulated photograph of Michael Brown

If it is true that we must survive, our survival must also be something more, is and has always been something more: a survival which dreams, dreams which unsettle the sleep of the waking world, worlds awakened in and through survival.

At the end of the world, what could it mean to mourn?

### VIII.

*the flights of this journey*  
*mapless uncertain*  
*and necessary as water.*<sup>120</sup>

The violence of modernity and the spectres of loss linger and loom large – within us, among us, and between us. In and through each seemingly singular dispossession, a prismatic window into an incalculably vast, eminently multiplicitous, inescapably uneven landscape of grief, in which we are all differentially, unequally caught and implicated. A fiery red moves across its peaks and valleys like a stain, for this is a world upon which the sun is setting. Beneath and beyond its necrophilic terrains, we gather in and through dispossession – subterranean holding, ceremonies of and for life, another world that wells up and breaks through in eruptions of rage and hapticality.

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<sup>120</sup> Lorde (1997), 406.

Envisioning or remembering a radical politics of mourning presents us with no easy answers. How do we approach collective relations of loss, violence, and grief without collapsing its stark inequalities and irreducible multiplicities? While moving through a world in which some lives are deemed grievable while others are not, a world in which the wail of grief becomes language colored “[b]y who pays what for speaking?”<sup>121</sup> Can we forge a multitude<sup>122</sup> in mourning without recourse to the violence of false analogues or universalisms, a multitude which is constituted by singularities, but which is a formation entirely in excess of their aggregation? Could such a multitude create and sustain mournful rituals which are at once returns and beginnings, which make possible a survival which is always something more? Could this multitude give itself to ruptural mourning? Could it take its multiplicitous grief to the streets while remembering that it’s not simply, as Moten and Harney point out, “about taking the streets; it’s about how, and what, we should take to the streets.” Could it ask itself “[w]hat would it be, and what would it mean, for us to jurisgeneratively take to the streets, to live in the streets, to gather together another city right here, right now?”<sup>123</sup> If these questions have answers, we will find them together in movement. *Caminando preguntamos* (walking, we ask questions), as the Zapatistas are fond of saying.

Staring unflinchingly into the crucible of slavery and colonialism, into the multiplicitous dispossessions wrought by modernity’s twin evils, Édouard Glissant sang praises of a new form of “errantry” that might animate a “poetics of Relation.” Though this errantry moves in and towards the horizon, they are not driven by a hunger for mastery, appropriation, or domination:

one who is errant (who is no longer traveller, discoverer, or conqueror) strives to know the totality of the world yet already knows he will never accomplish this – and knows that is precisely where the threatened beauty of the world resides.

Errant, he challenges and discards the universal – this generalizing edict that summarized the world as something obvious and transparent, claiming for it one presupposed sense and one destiny...The thinking of errantry conceives of totality but willingly renounces any claims to sum it up or possess it...

This is why we stay with poetry...at the bow there is still something to share: this murmur, cloud or rain or peaceful smoke. We know ourselves as part and as crowd, in an unknown that does not terrify. We cry our cry of poetry. Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Audre Lorde, “Coal,” in *Coal*, collected in Lorde (1997), 6.

<sup>122</sup> On the notion of the multitude, see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (London: Penguin Books, 2004).

<sup>123</sup> Moten and Harney (2015), 86.

<sup>124</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 20, 9.

Perhaps Glissant glimpsed something of the spirit of our mournful multitude, a manner of finding each other, of holding one another in and through dispossession, a perpetual casting off towards a utopian horizon or decolonial home.

At the end of the world, what could it mean to mourn?



Image: Fernando Martí, “Frontera”

A gnarled question  
    pressing, searing  
the possibility  
  of  
    gathering      anew

    gathering  
        wits, flesh,  
seeds, spirit life

such that we might  
sow  
(something more)  
tender, heretical  
than a harvest      yet-to-come  
No exorcism  
convened to vanquish  
ghost songs  
lives lost, life  
stolen  
Instead:      celebration  
spectral harbingers, patient  
embers sporadically      lighting history  
aflame  
No militia  
shouldering duty  
like vessels  
heavy with rain  
(even if a storm must shake  
the very firmament of our being  
must cast our sails    adrift,    must  
lay our hearts  
and flesh  
down with skeletons  
tracing the irreducible history  
of water and iron)  
Ours must be a genuine act of creation  
not waters plied  
by wood and metal

but waters gathered  
tentatively  
held openly as sacred  
waters  
weaving the disparate  
(ephemeral formation)  
waters gently reminding  
our tired bones  
that they too  
shall return;<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> David K. Langstaff, "Falling Together," Unpublished Poem (July 2015).

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