

2008

# The Contours of Loss

Naomi Mandel  
*University of Rhode Island*

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## Recommended Citation

Mandel, Naomi (2008) "The Contours of Loss," *Criticism*: Vol. 50: Iss. 4, Article 7.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol50/iss4/7>

## THE CONTOURS OF LOSS

Naomi Mandel

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*Lost Bodies: Inhabiting the Borders of Life and Death* by Laura E. Tanner. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006. Pp. 264. \$21.00 paper.

In *Lost Bodies*, Laura Tanner examines the philosophical, epistemological, and conceptual challenges that personal loss poses to prevailing discourses of grief. Taking as its focus photographic images, literary and nonliterary texts, and commemorative objects like the AIDS Memorial Quilt, *Lost Bodies* explores “how cultural constructions of death and grief are inextricably bound with specific assumptions about the body” (4). What, asks Tanner, can the *lost* body—the wasting body of the terminally ill, the absent body of the deceased—tell us about our own bodies and our embodied experience of the world? Contemporary U.S. culture, she argues, disavows the absent body by narrativizing grief as recovery, by aligning bereavement with survival, or by depicting the deceased as present in another, better place. This dynamic of disavowal is informed by a fiction of disembodiment—a psyche unfettered by materiality and corporeality and a body that is autonomous, healthy, and invulnerable. Disavowing the absent body precludes examining how our bodies are intertwined with the bodies of others and prohibits acknowledging that loss is a physical phenomenon, as well as a psychological one.

“Cultural constructions of death and grief” is a very broad topic, and Tanner draws on an array of disciplines to approach it. She references recent work in disability studies and studies of aging to trouble the

distinction between the healthy and the dying; she relies on work in psychoanalysis and phenomenology to highlight the role of the body (or the implications of its absence) in perception and experience; she employs the methodologies of cultural studies and of sociology to expand the scope of her discussion beyond the literary; and she pays special attention to photography. Throughout, Tanner mobilizes her considerable talents in literary analysis to explore “the way in which the body of illness or grief is absent from critical discourse and lost to cultural view” (2). As this formulation indicates, hers is a conceptually tricky project—demonstrating the presence of the body’s absence—and Tanner treats its challenges as an opportunity for close, careful, eloquent, and sometimes downright brilliant readings of images, texts, spaces, and objects. *Lost Bodies* alternates between brief discussions—some only a few pages long—of novels, short stories, condolence cards, the AIDS Memorial Quilt, the medical waiting room, and the HBO series *Six Feet Under* (2001–5)—and more extensive engagements with poetry by Sharon Olds and Mark Doty; novels by Marilynne Robinson, Carolyn Parkhurst, and Don DeLillo; Roland Barthes’s autobiographical meditations in *Camera Lucida* (1980); and the photography of Billy Howard, Nicholas Nixon, and Shellburne Thurber. Throughout, Tanner argues that the body and

its loss, like embodiment and perception, are fundamentally intertwined. Given that we experience through our interactions with the tactile world, the body we can no longer touch calls into question both experience and world; focusing on representations of and approaches to the lost body throws both prevailing discourses of the body and the stakes of these discourses into high relief.

Tanner has an eye for nuance; her writing is rigorous but accessible, and her analysis illuminates each text she discusses. In the course of this book these discussions do become somewhat repetitive—one gets the sense that Tanner is enjoining us, again and again, to “see what is not there” (173). More problematic is the book’s conceptual trajectory, which moves too quickly from illness to death and from loss to grief; and its theoretical scaffolding, which relies on Merleau-Ponty and Freud at the expense of more recent work and advances, without explicitly saying so, a quite vehement critique of the image and of the power dynamics of vision. Finally, though Tanner describes *Lost Bodies* as a critical engagement with “assumptions about embodiment and mortality in contemporary American culture” (3), she never explains what is uniquely American about the assumptions she explores. Most of the artists and authors she discusses are U.S. nationals (an obvious exception is Roland Barthes, whose *Camera*

*Lucida* is treated as a primary text), but this fact does not suffice to anchor references to “[c]ontemporary American culture’s insistence on isolating and disavowing the bodily dimensions of illness and grief” (3) and fails to explain just how, or why, “American culture touts the consolation of memory and image as an answer to loss” (89). The lack of such self-reflexivity becomes sadly clear when Tanner turns, in the “Postscript,” to the events of 11 September 2001.

Readers familiar with Tanner’s previous work (her first book, *Intimate Violence*, focused on the dynamics of reading fictional representations of violence) will recognize in *Lost Bodies* Tanner’s privileging of experience over and above its representation and discursive mediation, and her investment in an embodied reading practice by which the reader realizes the extent to which she is complicit with the discursive regime that the text reproduces and enforces, a realization that, in itself, grounds an ethical response. *Intimate Violence* aimed to “subvert the disembodied tendencies of the reading process in order to . . . remind the reader of his or her own violability.”<sup>1</sup> *Lost Bodies*, which expands the reading process from fiction to images, objects, and institutional spaces, has a similar goal: to dissolve the distinction between the ill or absent body and the self in order to redefine that self as embodied, subject to fragmentation and mortality.

This work has clear social, institutional, and ethical stakes. “Critical attention to the construction of embodied subjectivity in illness and in grief,” writes Tanner, is “a form of caring for the vulnerable body” (10), and invites a kind of resistance to cultural forces that render that body invisible: “thinking about the way we know . . . in and through the body allows us to resist the pressure of immaterialization that would exclude palpable, multisensory experience not only from the realm of knowledge in general but from our understanding of grief in particular” (209). The formulation of these objectives (critical attention is a form of caring; thinking allows us to resist) sits uneasily with Tanner’s commitment to materialism and avowed pragmatism; given the compelling nature of this material and the urgency and passion with which she approaches it, her reluctance to move from describing a problem to proposing a solution is frustrating. Ultimately, Tanner remains content to do what she does well: “revealing the strategies through which we have attempted to relegate the body to the position of subject or object—extension of thought or mere thing—rather than recognizing the way its very existence blurs and complicates those categories” (5).

The arc of the book follows Tanner’s own experience of her father’s death, moving from a focus on the critically ill body in part 1 (“The Dying Body”) to an examination of

the processes of mourning in part 2 ("The Body of Grief"). This structure is designed to perform the trajectory of her argument: the dying subject becomes the object of mourning's discourse, and Tanner's focus on the dying body in the first part of the book lays the groundwork for the longer second part, which is an approach to grief that is predicated not on the grieving subject's survival but on the fact of the lost body's absence, "at once the most obvious fact of grief and at the same time the most unspeakable" (84). The structure of the book mirrors its topic: the body's presence, its absence, and "the dynamics of absent presence" (95), through which Tanner examines the phenomenon of loss. Unlike absence (with which it is too easily conflated), loss presupposes a specific object, stressing that object's presence *as absence*. Furthermore, given that the object is perceived by the body, its absence is experienced in corporeal terms as well. Rather than attempting to resolve this paradox (the palpable presence of the corporeal body's absence), Tanner dwells on—or within—it, holding tenaciously to the material quality of loss, refusing "the cultural force that pulls us out of our bodies and pushes us to reconstitute ourselves through language, metaphor, and image as continuously whole," and choosing rather to inhabit the uneasy space between the two (92).

This is a daunting prospect, as it requires maintaining the tension

between lived experience and its inevitable appropriation by mediating discourses, but Tanner treats this challenge as an opportunity to generate elegant and insightful readings of texts, objects, and images. Her discussion of Shellburne Thurber's images of empty or abandoned spaces, for example, maintains "the tension between absence and presence" in order to show how Thurber's photographs "evoke absent bodies that never existed as presences for the viewer" (116), and she reads individual panels on the AIDS Memorial Quilt with an eye to how the objects on the quilt, present precisely because of the body's absence, evoke the body that wore, used, played with, or cherished them.

The most effective moments of *Lost Bodies* are when Tanner extends loss's intertwining of absence and presence to the imagery and language that dominate prevailing discourses of grief. Reading Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* (1980) with an eye to the incontrovertible fact that Ruth cannot touch her dead mother or be touched by her, for example, Tanner uncovers the radical implications of being *literally* "out of touch": "the experience of grief locks [Ruth] away from the tactile world and questions the presence not only of her mother's body and her own but of those around her" (102). In the case of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, "the spatial and material dimensions of objects on the quilt complicate the process of

their signification by continually returning us from the realm of the symbolic to an understanding of the way in which things mark and are marked by an embodied use" (202). Her brief but compelling discussion of Alice Sebold's immensely popular novel *The Lovely Bones* (2002) reveals the pernicious quality of "a logic that invokes embodiment only to metaphorize it" (202): through its reliance on symbols and images that compensate for physical violation ("the lovely bones" of the title is a metaphor for the social connections that form in the wake of a child's rape and murder), the novel evokes and authorizes discourses that, by disavowing both the body's experience and the experience of its absence, relocate experience to the immaterial.

Tanner is at her best in such close readings, dwelling on each nuance of the text—be it a photograph, literature, literary theory and philosophy, or her own experiences of illness and grief—and offering analyses that are luminous, eloquent, and often exquisite. And yet, I could not but be troubled by Tanner's conflation of loss with death in her treatment of illness, which is represented exclusively by terminal cancer and terminal AIDS. Attending only to terminal illness—as if a diagnosis of cancer or of HIV + were a death sentence—misses the myriad ways people live with illness and its losses outside the dominating narrative of grief. Representations of the disabled as

grieving for health is one of the most consistent targets of critique in the field of disability studies, and *Lost Bodies*, which draws on disability studies in its emphasis on the corporeal dimensions of experience and in its challenge to paradigms of selfhood defined by autonomy and agency (3), moves too quickly to assume that illness results in grief (for health or for life). The book thus risks perpetuating fundamental cultural assumptions about the disabled that scholars like Lennard Davis and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson have urgently worked to undo.

The book's theoretical parameters lie at the intersection of discourses about the subject and subjectivity on the one hand and theories of the body on the other. Taking her cue from Elizabeth Grosz's and Gail Weiss's work on corporeality and embodiment, but primarily referencing Merleau-Ponty's revision of Cartesian dualism and his identification of the body as the subject, not the object, of perception, Tanner focuses on "the way that the sensory particularity of our lived existence shapes and defines our relationships to one another and our experience of the world" (8). She usefully extends the scope of Merleau-Ponty's investigation by pointing out that, for Merleau-Ponty, the body in question is a living, healthy, present body. What, asks Tanner, can we learn about experience, subjectivity, and the body when the body is or will

be *absent*? If the very self-evidence of sentience challenges critical discourse about self-evidence and about sentience, the dead and dying body catapults sentience, corporeality, materiality, and the body itself into radical uncertainty.

Against Merleau-Ponty's paradigm of embodiment, Tanner posits Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), which stands for "definitions of mourning which disavow the embodied dynamics of grief" (4). Tanner aligns herself with Kathleen Woodward and Michael Moon, who have expressed reservations about Freud's treatment of grief as something to be quickly overcome and disposed of rather than explored. She situates her own discussion of Freud as an answer to Woodward's call to supplement Freud's theory of mourning with a theory of grief (92–93), pointing out that the psychic work Freud describes neglects the embodied aspects of experience: "At no point does Freud address the way in which the subject's relationship to the lost object is constituted *through the body* as well as through the psyche" (94, original emphasis).

As Tanner mobilizes her phenomenological approach to lay bare how grief troubles Freud's distinction between the lost object's presence (in memory) and its absence (in reality), the dynamics of presence and absence emerge as the conceptual foundation for Tanner's underlying distrust of the image: "If we understand presence as

*embodied* presence," writes Tanner, "... Freud's model is complicated by memory's limited ability to capture the multisensory experience of a lost body" (95, original emphasis). Memory's ability is limited because, as Tanner puts it, "memory's images have no bodies" (95), and it is this conceptualization of the image in terms of the body's absence that will emerge, in the course of *Lost Bodies*, as the book's unstated agenda: a critique of the dynamics of vision and "contemporary image culture" (174), which, Tanner insists, play a special role in causing the lost body to "disappear[] from cultural view . . . along with the sensory traces of its corporeal presence" (2).

By opposing an epistemology of the body (represented primarily by Merleau-Ponty's work in the 1960s) to psychoanalytic theories that disavow it (represented primarily by Freud's 1917 essay), Tanner misses some important opportunities to situate her discussion within more contemporary work. Her emphasis on the experiential quality of psychic states ignores recent work on affect by Sara Ahmed, Brian Massumi, Lauren Berlant, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, each of whom traces the inextricability of corporeal experience from representational dynamics. Her privileging of Freud's work on mourning also raises the question of the potential relevance of melancholia to this study. In "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud opposes mourning,

which he associates with the reality principle, to melancholia, which he dismisses as a pathology, because the melancholiac, unlike the mourner, holds tenaciously to the lost object. Tanner's attention to "the grieving subject's refusal to move past the fact of the absent body" (134) seems to evoke Freud's definition of melancholia. And yet, she pays no attention to the term or to work on melancholia by Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva, and especially David Eng and David Kazanjian, whose edited collection *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* appropriates Freud's concept of melancholia to focus on "embodied losses" and to ask "how the productive constraints of melancholia materialize bodies."<sup>2</sup>

If the book's structure enacts Tanner's argument about the body and its loss, it also reflects her distrust of the power dynamics of vision, a distrust that extends to the image as such. Part I approaches the dying body as the object of an empowered, disembodied, "healthy," or "medical" gaze that reduces the patient to the bearer of a disease (a paradigm that Tanner borrows from Foucault's *Birth of the Clinic* [1963]). Tanner asks whether looking at a person with terminal illness may complicate these power dynamics: "Because the object of the gaze announces not only difference but sameness, the subject's recognition of a shared mortality lends power to the very threat that the healthy gaze would dispel" (24). Against the healthy gaze, Tanner

posits an "embodied gaze" that eschews omniscience and "dissolves the subject/object dynamics of the gaze until the healthy subject is forced to acknowledge its own mortality" (39). She reads Sharon Olds's account of her father's death from terminal cancer as the articulation of such a gaze: a deathwatch in which, as Tanner poetically puts it, "the watcher becomes the watched" (39). In her discussion of medical waiting rooms, Tanner draws on her own experience and on representations of medical waiting rooms in literature and memoir to demonstrate that the panoptic quality of this liminal space "disrupts the motion of even the healthy subject's gaze by turning it back onto the self" (78), so that "the gaze that might otherwise maintain the illusion of absolute distance between the subject and object of the look reveals itself as originating in a body" (79). Her discussion of Billy Howard's 1989 *Epitaphs for the Living* and Nicholas Nixon's 1991 *People with AIDS* traces how photography's representational conventions negotiate an impossible economy of physical form on the one hand and embodied subjectivity on the other—this economy is impossible because the photographs either reduce the person with AIDS to a suffering body or disavow the physical manifestations of the disease. "As long as the gaze sees as its object a diseased body but not the diseased person's experience of embodiment, the look only



perpetuates the experience of dislocation,” writes Tanner (60); “photographic representations [of subjects who suffer from AIDS] must continually invent ways of subverting visual conventions, not only those that code the unmarked body as ‘healthy’ but those which would transcend the embodied dynamics of subjectivity or reduce the representational subject to an unfamiliar object” (63).

While part I performs an explicit critique of the subject/object dynamics that underlie these visual conventions, the second half of the book expands this critique to what Tanner calls, perhaps too hastily, “contemporary image culture” (174). Referencing Sartre’s definition of the image as that “which is absent from perception,” “an unreality,” and “a mirage” (quoted in Tanner, 89), Tanner locates within the image “cultural assumptions about grief that deny the role of the body in loss” (87). In a powerful reading of James Agee’s *A Death in the Family* (1957), Tanner convincingly demonstrates how the dead body’s object status demands that it be accessed only visually; touch (with its connotations of intimacy and care) is profoundly inappropriate in this context. The experience of grief, then, demands that sight replace touch, rendering the absent body (physically) inaccessible and the desire for it (socially) unspeakable. The subsequent discussion identifies images as the site wherein the body is granted an illusion of

presence that only underscores its absence: images “fail, of necessity, to hold onto the lost body in all its texture and specificity,” writes Tanner (116); “understanding grief as an embodied experience demands acknowledgement not just of the failure of . . . images to render the body present, but of their sustaining contribution to the taunting rhythms of grief” (89). She reads Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida* as an account of the grieving narrator’s “poignant but unsuccessful attempts to offset the failures of the visual image” (115); in Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*, “images gesture toward a lost body that the image cannot hold and the mourner cannot touch” (103); Shellburne Thurber’s photographs of empty and abandoned domestic spaces testify, again and again, to “the limitations of the image” (116, 127).

Clearly, then, *Lost Bodies* offers a resolute, if implicit, critique of the power dynamics of the gaze and of the visual image’s illusion of presence. This critique extends from the image in particular to representation as such: the image is aligned with representation against the body and its experience. “Given the image’s primarily visual quality, its failure to hold onto the textured experience of the lived body exaggerates its already mediated representational status,” writes Tanner (95); “depictions of grief,” she states elsewhere, “often become entangled with explorations of the act of representation” as they confront

“the failure of both the promise of representation and the culture of simulation to speak to the embodied dynamics of loss” (134). This opposition of the image and representation to the body and its experience testifies to the moral and ethical stakes of Tanner’s project: “to rescue the materiality of the body from those who would situate it entirely within the realms of discourse” (7). But the efficacy of such a project is limited, and not only because Tanner relies on Sartre at the expense of recent work by Vivian Sobchack and Brian Massumi, each of whom has treated vision in corporeal and experiential terms (Sobchack’s book *The Address of the Eye* [1992] employs Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology to highlight the material quality of spectatorship; Massumi’s *Parables for the Virtual* [2002] models an approach to the body and its sensations that eludes the structural account of subject formation that opposes the subject to discourse) but because, as the book progresses, what Tanner means by “image” becomes increasingly unclear. In her discussion of Barthes’s *Camera Lucida* and Robinson’s *Housekeeping*—both of which “document the failure of the image to hold onto the specificity of a missing body” (116)—“image” refers to a memory, a photograph, and a literary device, all within the space of two sentences: Ruth is left with “with a head full of images,” Barthes with “a handful of glossy paper,” and the reader of *Camera Lucida*

with the “image of Barthes . . . turning not to embrace another body but to dance with the beloved image” (114–15). As Tanner’s discussion moves to Carolyn Parkhurst’s *The Dogs of Babel* (2003), Don DeLillo’s *The Body Artist* (2001), and Mark Doty’s long poem “The Wings” (1993), “image” comes to mean anything and everything that might pose a challenge to embodied experience in “an age of images” (227).

Perhaps because the conceptual blurriness of “image” causes *Lost Bodies* to lose focus, I was especially disappointed by Tanner’s engagement, in the “Postscript,” with the events of 11 September 2001, which she reads as an attack on “America’s image culture” (223). Tanner’s main objective here is to explore “how we, as a culture, name and understand a loss the ‘lived experience’ of which most of us can claim but cannot embody” (226). Given *Lost Bodies*’ self-proclaimed U.S. context, her approach to 9/11 seems to be motivated by a mandate to extend the claims of the body’s experience to (but not beyond) the body politic. She focuses on attempts, by Americans, to create proximity or intimacy with the dead, and concludes by suggesting that “our experience of September 11 . . . creates the possibility of experiencing as absence something we as a culture naturalize as presence: the force of embodiment and, consequently, the power of its loss” (236).

The “Postscript” is prefaced with a statement to the effect that a book

entitled *Lost Bodies* must perforce address 9/11 (222). This may be so, but this fact alone does not justify so sudden an extension of “the force of embodiment” from person to culture, nor does it justify limiting “culture” to U.S. culture. A more effective approach might have referenced related meditations on how loss navigates the relation of the body to the body politic. Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life* suggests that “each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies . . . Loss and vulnerability,” writes Butler, in a move that Tanner might have found useful, “seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of exposing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure.”<sup>3</sup> In her quest for “a language that addresses the significance of September 11 without abstracting the materiality and specificity of overwhelming loss” (222), Tanner might also have had recourse to Ahmed, whose *Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) explores the interpenetration of individual bodies and social bodies, especially in the aftermath of 9/11, or Eng and Kazanjian, whose collection examines “not only how bodies see and hear losses but also how specific sociohistorical losses see and hear bodies.”<sup>4</sup> Neither Ahmed nor Eng and Kazanjian limit their purview to the United States.

Alternately, Tanner might have used these concluding pages to revise and expand her narrow definition of loss as the loss of a body, and the body as the body of a beloved. *Lost Bodies* is about a very specific kind of loss: “the kind of loss that tears a loved one away from a parent, child, or lover” (101); its scope is limited to what happens in the wake of “the unfolding of two bodies once intertwined” (88). But need “a corporeal theory of grief,” one that would “acknowledge and respond to the way the loss of . . . feeling shapes the feeling of loss” (84), be confined solely to the loss of “a living, breathing child, husband, mother, or friend” (104)? After all, in “Mourning and Melancholia” Freud defines mourning as “the reaction to the loss of a loved person, *or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one* [emphasis mine], such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on.”<sup>5</sup> I’m sympathetic to Tanner’s distrust of abstraction in the face of personal loss, but the loss of a home to flooding, the loss of a homeland to war, loss of language to exile, loss of faith, loss of solvency, loss of health, loss of hope—each is manifested in and through the chiasmic intertwining of body and world that Merleau-Ponty delineates and on which Tanner’s project of “theorizing embodiment through the category of the experiential” (222) relies.

—University of Rhode Island

## NOTES

1. Laura E. Tanner, *Intimate Violence: Reading Rape and Torture in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 12–13.
2. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, "Introduction: Mourning Remains," in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 8.
3. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), 20.
4. Eng and Kazanjian, "Introduction," 8.
5. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1957), 14: 243.