

PLATE 5.



MOOSTIG



MUTSAI



BURAHAKA



SINGHA KRANTEE



MOODGUR



PULLA



BISTAR THUNG

Day & Son Litho to the Queen

## Grief, Denial, and Racial Violence in the COVID-19 Pandemic (Part I)

This article in three parts is adapted from a critical theory essay that I wrote in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder on May 25, 2020. It is clear to me now that in many ways this essay was my attempt to grieve, to mourn not only the deaths I was witnessing daily at the hospital, but also the deaths I was feeling in me, of so many familiar strangers – George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud

Arbery, the list goes on. I found myself trying to say something about what loss and grief felt like in the pandemic, only to discover in the writing process that, in the pandemic, loss and grief seemed nowhere to be found. This disturbed and angered me. Why was it important for us to grieve? What was stopping us from feeling? What would it take to feel again? As I wrote, I lost what it was that I was actually trying to say.

My attempts to revise the essay have spanned the last two years. It seems a document stuck in time. I return to it, with the hopes of writing a new introduction, or clarifying my argument in one part or another, but like an obstinate child it refuses to be moved.

I present the essay here in hopes that it will be appreciated not only for its arguments and its engagement with theory, but also for what else it is: a record of my grief and my attempts to put my grief into words and so share it with others. These days, looking back, I am aware of another, related interpretation, which is of the essay as a beginning, as much about the pandemic and race as about writing, feeling, and the possibility of being together even when alone.

**For Part II: No sacrifice is excessive**

**For Part III: Finding a relational home**

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## **Introduction**

In her essay, “Capitalism Has Its Limits,” published on March 30, 2020, two months before Derek Chauvin killed George Floyd, Judith Butler writes about the COVID-19 pandemic:

*It seems likely that we will come to see in the next year a painful scenario in which some human creatures assert their rights to live at the expense of others, re-inscribing the spurious distinction between grievable and ungrievable lives, that is, those who should be protected against death at all costs and those whose lives are considered not worth safeguarding against illness and death. (Butler, 2020)*

In retrospect, at least in the United States where racial inequality and police brutality are urgent and ongoing issues, it will be impossible to talk about the COVID-19 pandemic without in some way invoking the Black Lives Matter protests that erupted in the aftermath of George Floyd’s death. What Butler reminds us of is how, independent of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests, the pandemic was already being played out according to inequitable racial and class



dynamics, disproportionately affecting certain communities and individuals, “those whose lives are considered not worth safeguarding,” at the expense of others, “those who should be protected against death at all costs” (see also Yancy, 2020). At the same time, we cannot ignore Butler’s intentional and prophetic word choice: “not worth safeguarding.” On May 25, 2020, George Floyd joined a long list of Black individuals killed by police for no reason other than that they were Black. That we should think of the two together – our experience of COVID-19 in America and George Floyd’s death – should not only be because of their proximity in time but also because they seem in some way to have been caused by one another, reciprocally and inevitably.

This essay began as a way for me to describe what I was observing in society during the pandemic and how I myself was experiencing it, a way therefore to articulate an opportunity for psychoanalytic theory and psychodynamically informed practice to be of use during the pandemic, specifically to preempt the thickening of our experience of the pandemic into collective trauma. It took on new purpose and urgency in the aftermath of George Floyd’s death. Why should we mourn? Why is it important that we feel the deaths (which deaths?), the magnitude of deaths, and our relationship to those who have died and those who are mourning? In what ways are we prevented from mourning, from feeling? These were some of the questions that concerned me initially, which continue to concern me, albeit for different reasons. At first, I had wanted to look at the role of mourning as a way to feel our interconnectedness, and to use this not only to heal from the losses we have suffered as a global society as a result of COVID-19 but also to reimagine that society. In the aftermath of George Floyd’s death, I am aware of another, more pressing purpose: to show how mourning and grief can lead to an antiracist orientation to the Other, how, if we are going to align ourselves with loss, we must also align ourselves with the inequitable ways in which loss affects us. Here is an opportunity for theory and practice to serve as vehicles of social justice. It could be said that new conflicts are arising, new ways to help our patients, and new ways to help our patients help others. To make my argument, I rely on Butler’s writing on loss and mourning, Susan Sontag’s condemnation of the war metaphor in *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1988), and Robert Stolorow’s phenomenological psychoanalytic account of emotional trauma and trauma’s context-embeddedness. I turn first to mourning and Butler’s book, *Precarious Lives: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, written in 2003 in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001.

## **I. I become inscrutable to myself**

I invoke Butler at the outset primarily for what she writes about the nature of loss, the differential assignment of “grievability,” and how we ought to think about community and international relations in the aftermath of collective loss. When we mourn, Butler writes, we experience our fundamental “being *for* another or *by virtue of* another” (2003, p. 13). It is a relationality that precludes violence against the Other, since my relation to the Other is that by which “I” am constituted, and instead leads us to “an ethics of nonviolence and a politics of a more radical redistribution of humanizing effects” (2003, p. 9). What we have seen during the pandemic is a concretization of our interconnectedness – on both the local level and the national and

international levels. We share space, we share the world. How should this, the recognition of our being held in relation to the Other, lead us to decry inequity in its myriad forms?

I begin with an analysis of what loss is and what we experience in loss:

*Each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies—as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of a publicity at once assertive and exposed. Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure. (2003, p. 10)*

Here, loss follows, is a consequence of, our basic ontology, “our being socially constituted bodies.” That we are always already embodied and that our bodies are “at once assertive and exposed” means that we are always at risk of losing. We cannot choose not to lose any more than we can choose not to be born into a body and a world already populated by others and things. We are from the beginning given over, beyond ourselves.

What happens to me, therefore, when I lose you, is that I lose not only you but also my relation to you, and it is this implication in loss that reveals how we are constituted by the Other, dependent on the Other for the very formation of our selves. I quote:

*[W]hen we undergo what we do undergo, is something about who we are revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are... If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself... perhaps what I have lost “in” you, that for which I have no ready vocabulary, is a relationality that is neither merely myself nor you, but the tie by which those terms are differentiated and related. (2003, p. 12)*

When we mourn, we learn not only that we “had” the Other (this being what conditioned our loss), but also that we were created by the Other, possessed by them, and now, in their absence, dispossessed by them — “I become inscrutable to myself.”

It is a short distance from here to Butler’s ethical argument for nonviolence. If I am because of you, if I lose myself in you, I cannot condone violence against you without denying first a fundamental aspect of who I am and how I came to be this way. Butler writes:

*Many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticizing. But I think it furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility. (2003, p. 12)*

In the wake of loss, “we” ceases to refer to an arbitrary collection of monads, begins instead to refer to a relationality that cannot be easily severed, one in which each is “from the start and by virtue of

being a bodily being, already given over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own” (2003, p. 17). It is this dependency on the Other, read vulnerability to the Other, that results in an ethical orientation that precludes violence. Violence, which is possible only if we deny the ways in which we are constituted in relation to the Other, turns out always to be violence against oneself, for one cannot deny one’s basic and constitutive relationality without denying the very conditions that formed the self. One thinks both of the increase in acts of altruism seen in some communities during the pandemic (Ropeik, 2020), as well as the size and strength of the antiracism movement, which erupted in response to a lethal act of violence (Buchanan et al., 2020). Both could be said to be instances in which we recognized our “fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility.”

This is what is possible when we align ourselves with loss. What is possible, also, is a complicity and a complacency if we fail to recognize the radically inequitable conditions by which we arrived here. How, if it is the case that violence is precluded, do we explain its obstinacy, its seemingly endless revolutions in the world? I argue that to answer this question, we must first answer the following two: By what means are differential conditions of vulnerability produced and perpetuated? And by what means do we fall into the self-defeating mode that violence requires? What we realize when we align ourselves with loss is not only the way in which we are held in relation to the Other but also the great distance we have yet to travel to arrive at a socially just, equitable society.

Regarding the first question, on differential vulnerability, Butler writes:

*Lives are supported and maintained differently, and there are radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability is distributed across the globe. Certain lives will be highly protected, and the abrogation of their claims to sanctity will be sufficient to mobilize the forces of war. Other lives will not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as “grievable.” (2003, p. 20)*

While it is true that I am dependent on the Other for the formation of myself, I am vulnerable to violence, to the address of the Other, according to the social and political conditions by which my life is “supported and maintained.” All lives matter but some lives matter more. In this way, Butler locates a potential for political change and power in the conditions that produce and perpetuate the tension between the equality afforded by our ontology and the inequality we experience in society. It is a power tied inextricably to the concept of nation (“sufficient to mobilize the forces of war”) and to grief and grievability. To be exact, grievability, defined as the differential extent to which one qualifies as grievable, or worthy of being grieved, confers power, is power.

Regarding the second question, on the self-defeating mode, Butler writes:

*If violence is done against those who are unreal, then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated. But they have a strange way of remaining animated and so must be negated again (and again). They cannot be mourned because they are always already lost or, rather, never “were,” and they must be killed, since they seem to live on, stubbornly, in this state of deadness. Violence renews itself in the*

*face of the apparent inexhaustibility of its object. The derealization of the “other” means that it is neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral. (2003, p. 22)*

If the Other can be made to be no longer human, no longer “real” in the sense of being real like me, vulnerable like me, I am no longer held in relation to the Other. I am free to kill at no loss to myself. To be sure, this is a contradictory position and truly a self-defeating one, as one never succeeds in negating the Other, and so the Other “must be negated again (and again).” Here, violence begets violence through two parallel operations. First, through the way it seems not to affect me; second, through its ineffectiveness. On the first, it is worth pointing out that the severing of the relation between self and other is achieved through a denial of the Other’s grievability through a mis-historicization – “[t]hey cannot be mourned because they are always already lost or, rather, never ‘were.’” On the second, there is an irony in the way derealization confers an invulnerability to the Other, a “state of deadness,” which is both that against which I am set apart from the Other and that which prevents me from fulfilling my fantasy of a scot-free violence. In the face of the Other whom I cannot kill, I am confronted by both my vulnerability and my ineptitude.

At this point, it is worth revisiting my purpose in writing this paper. Who among us has not felt in some small way the losses we have suffered as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic? Who has not realized that we are all vulnerable, if not to falling ill from the virus, at least to losing someone that we know? We are faced with an opportunity “to grieve, and to make grief itself into a resource for politics” (2003, p. 19). Only it is not an opportunity in the sense of something we can choose. We must demand it. It seems to me that there is a role that psychoanalytic theory and dynamically informed practice could play in forwarding this discourse and enacting change in society. As has been established, the recognition of our fundamental relationality and differential vulnerability is not simply a possibility of our experience of loss; it is the inevitable result. That this recognition will not be universal, and that we are already seeing the birth of new forms of violence (I include here also the proliferation of xenophobic attacks on Asian people), is less an indication of a defect in Butler’s argument than a testament, I argue, to the power and persuasiveness of the ways in which we are kept from recognizing our collective loss and the effects of this loss. The psychological implications of such a failure to recognize the terms of our basic formation, or in other words the denial of that which we are, are already proving to be significant.

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**In Part 2 of this article,** I turn to what has been called the war metaphor and how during the pandemic it has operated to deny us our loss.

## References

Butler, J. (2003). Violence, Mourning, Politics. *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 4(1), 9-37.

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**Credit:** Different signs used during the pooja ceremonies and mourning devotions. Lithograph. Wellcome Collection.