



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

For Part I: I become inscrutable to myself

For Part III: Finding a relational home

II. No sacrifice is excessive

If we are to demand that grief be made into a resource for politics, we must demand to be allowed to feel grief, to feel the way in which when I lose you, I become dispossessed. My interest in the war metaphor (I use this term over “the military metaphor” to emphasize the way in which war is waged *against* an Other) and its ubiquitous use during the COVID-19 pandemic lies in the way it engenders a derealizing self and other relation that disavows grief, or at the very least reifies a radically unequal differential grievability. It could be said that the war is won when independence and invulnerability triumph over interdependency and vulnerability, those terms which have already been introduced. What happens when we are kept from feeling grief? At whose expense? My purpose in this section is first to provide a reading of the war metaphor in terms of its self and other implications, then to demonstrate from a psychoanalytic point of view how the war metaphor can be read as a defensive retaliation against the experience of loss. This will take us from Sontag back to Butler.

There is a tendency to imagine, when faced with something supposedly novel, that what is happening to us now has never happened before. Sontag wrote *AIDS and Its Metaphors* in 1988. She describes the fear and panic that the AIDS epidemic inspired:

*Talk in the United States, and not only in the United States, is of a national emergency, “possibly our nation’s survival.” ... This sort of rhetoric has a life of its own: it serves some purpose if it simply keeps in circulation an ideal of unifying communal practice that is precisely contradicted by the pursuit of accumulation and isolating entertainments enjoined on the citizens of a modern mass society. (1988, p. 173)*

We have already seen during the COVID-19 pandemic a state of national emergency be declared and “drastic measures” to halt the spread of infection implemented (Proclamation 9994, 2020). The differences between the AIDS epidemic and the COVID-19 pandemic are vast and cannot be ignored (see Chee, 2020, and Valdiserri and Holtgrave, 2020). I look to Sontag more for her explication of the operation of the war metaphor and end-of-the-world or apocalyptic rhetoric. Sontag confirms what we already suspected: the apocalyptic rhetoric is hyperbolic, “has a life of its own.” It becomes necessary because what is actually necessary during a public health crisis – the reconfiguration of personal freedoms in favor of population and community health and the protection of those most at risk – “is precisely contradicted by the pursuit of accumulation and isolating entertainments enjoined on the citizens of a modern mass society,” i.e. a market society. “[T]he world itself is said to be at stake”: it turns out the only thing more convincing than capitalism is the end of the world. Finally, under threat of the loss of everything, anything goes, even “repression.”

In this light, the war metaphor comes into view. Sontag writes:

*Abuse of the military metaphor may be inevitable in a capitalist society, a society that increasingly restricts the scope and credibility of appeals to ethical principle, in which it is thought foolish not to subject one’s actions to the calculus of self-interest and profitability. War-making is one of the few activities that people are not supposed to view “realistically”;*

*that is, with an eye to expense and practical outcome. In all-out war, expenditure is all-out, unprudent – war being defined as an emergency in which no sacrifice is excessive. (1988, p. 99)*

It is not just war that is invoked in the war metaphor but war at the end of the world, “all-out war.” Truly, it is unbelievable; still, we “are not supposed to view [it] ‘realistically.’” Social distancing policies are mandated that place Black and Latinx people at increased risk of infection and death without addressing the underlying problem of structural racism (Gray, 2020). Healthcare workers are valorized while limits on working hours are removed (see, e.g., Executive Order No. 202.10, 2020) and hospitals and community health centers fail to be provided with sufficient personal protective equipment (see Cox, 2020). Trump attempts to buy exclusive rights to a vaccine and restrict its use to American citizens only (Butler, 2020). “[N]o sacrifice,” even moral sacrifice, “is excessive.”

Ultimately, war is not made alone. For all the war metaphor is able to accomplish in terms of appealing to ethical principle, it fails to disguise the fact that it is predicated on a fantasized oppression of the Other. The war metaphor is in every instance an articulation of violence against the Other:

*The [war] metaphor implements the way particularly dreaded diseases are envisaged as an alien “other,” as enemies are in modern war; and the move from the demonization of the illness to the attribution of fault to the patient is an inevitable one, no matter if patients are thought of as victims. (1988, p. 99)*

Never mind that it is the virus that is first “envisaged as an alien ‘other,’” the war metaphor inaugurates a self and other relation seeped in paranoia and fear, a relation that quickly and inevitably comes to substitute my real relation to the Other, she who is ill and suffering. Indeed, the Other ceases to be a suffering subject at all, becomes derealized, reduced to an object of my fear. One thinks of how Asian people in general and the people of Wuhan specifically are being blamed for the pandemic, which is seen as the result of our “disgusting” eating habits, and as a result are being attacked for it (Hong, 2020). The question of the value of using the war metaphor during times of pandemic is thus an ethical one: can a society truly be effective at caring for its sick and securing the safety of all its citizens (can we really say that all lives matter) if that society is built upon a derealizing, violent relation to the Other?

Taken all together, a disturbing truth begins to be appreciated: a political incentive exists for states to promote the use of the war metaphor during times of pandemic as it displaces public outrage towards one’s government, which is forced to implement restrictive measures to curb the spread of infection, onto a convenient scapegoat, the foreign Other. Whichever foreign people the disease supposedly came from becomes the “sinful... dirty... intemperate... degraded” (Sontag, 1988, p. 143) people who deprived one of one’s freedoms, specifically defined as one’s right to capitalism. It is easier to blame the Other for what I have lost than those who are meant to look after me, and look like me.

The war metaphor could thus be said to rely on and sustain a racist, nationalist political agenda. Sontag writes:

*The AIDS epidemic serves as an ideal projection for First World political paranoia... Predictably, the public voices in this country most committed to drawing moral lessons from the AIDS epidemic... are those whose main theme is worry about America's will to maintain its bellicosity, its expenditures on armaments, its firm anti-communist stance, and who find everywhere evidence of the decline of American political and imperial authority. (1988, pp. 150-151)*

No surprise then that Trump used the pandemic as an opportunity to institute policies that limit the entry of immigrants into the United States (Proclamation 10052, 2020). Or that Trump renamed COVID-19 the “Chinese virus” (Viala-Gaufrey and Lindaman, 2020). The reality is that when we use the war metaphor, we are not at all oriented towards loss (in fact, we sacrifice the Other for our own gain), only towards ensuring our own survival.

Of course, in a way, the apocalyptic rhetoric and the war metaphor are not the problem. As Sontag writes, “[n]ot only does AIDS [and COVID-19] have the unhappy effect of reinforcing American moralism... it further strengthens the culture of self-interest, which is much of what is usually praised as ‘individualism.’ Self-interest now receives an added boost as simple medical prudence” (1988, p. 161). If loss opens us to the world, the war metaphor closes us to it. It does this in part by preempting the realization of our constitutive relationality, which we experience in loss, by derealizing the Other and thus denying loss in the first place. In the fictitious world created by the war metaphor, the desire for a solipsistic invincibility and security of the self, the appetite for which long preceded the current pandemic, trumps all. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the rhetoric surrounding the quest for a vaccine, that magic elixir that will guard against future invasions and ensure the security of the self-border. That Trump really sought to purchase the rights to a vaccine and restrict its use to Americans only serves to prove this point (Butler, 2020). This brings us back to Butler.

Read in terms of the war metaphor, the COVID-19 pandemic could be said to be won when the invading virus, the Other, is successfully repelled and the nation's borders again secured. A psychoanalytic interpretation of the necessity of the war metaphor becomes possible in light of the notions of collective loss and corporeal vulnerability. As has been discussed, the COVID-19 pandemic must be viewed as an experience of collective loss. We must demand this in order to reveal in what ways we are fundamentally dependent on the Other, vulnerable to the Other, and in what ways vulnerability is distributed unequally around the world. Might the war metaphor, which claims the exact opposite – a refusal of interdependency, a view of the Other as not only deserving of violence, but also deserving of *my* violence, the continued superiority and invulnerability of the First World, worthy of all-out expense – not be seen as a kind of defensive retaliation against the experience of loss? Butler writes:

*We now see that the national border was more permeable than we thought. Our general response is anxiety, rage; a radical desire for security, a shoring up of the borders against what is perceived as alien... The result is that an amorphous racism abounds, rationalized by the claim of “self-defense”; a generalized panic works in tandem with the shoring up of the sovereign state and the suspension of civil liberties. Indeed, when the alert goes out, every member of the population is asked to become a “foot soldier” in [Trump’s] army. The loss of First World presumption is the loss of a certain horizon of experience, a certain sense of the world itself as an entitlement. (2003, p. 27)*

Similar to what we experienced after 9/11, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to consider the possibility that we who live in the First World are no less vulnerable to calamity than those living in the Third World – “that the national border was more permeable than we thought.” It is the entry of this possibility into public discourse, Butler suggests, that gives rise to the “radical desire for security, a shoring up of the borders against what is perceived as alien,” manifest during the COVID-19 pandemic as the war metaphor. Indeed, we have seen examples of such an “amorphous racism, rationalized by the claim of ‘self-defense,’” in the proliferation of anti-Asian xenophobia as well as the federal government’s attempts to limit the entry of immigrants.

Is it not possible to see George Floyd’s death in the middle of the pandemic as yet another example? Different but related, just as inevitable, an acting out of that “radical desire for security,” the consequence of preexisting racist police practices (see Alang et al., 2017; Obasogie and Newman, 2017; and Laurencin and Walker, 2020) combined with “the suspension of civil liberties.” Whereas Asian people come to stand for the threat from abroad, insofar as Black people have always been felt to threaten the safety of American, read white, sovereignty from within, the killing of a Black man at home is simply a variation on the theme, another (futile) attempt to restore that “sense of the world itself as an entitlement.”

The rejoinder to the war metaphor will always be that we are always already for the Other, by virtue of the Other. To imagine that one can drive out the Other and thus re-secure that horizon of First Worldism is to indulge in a violent fantasy. It is not a refusal but a denial of the transformation that loss engenders, a failure to see how one has already been moved, given over, undone by the Other.

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**In Part III of this article,** I turn to the work of Robert Stolorow to argue that there is another way in which we are kept from feeling our collective loss and grief, which I call a misrecognition or misattribution of our feelings of loss.

## References

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