

The Politics of Mourning in the Neoliberal State

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ABSTRACT: Recently American scholars have examined the politics of mourning in relation to anti-black racism in the United States. Drawing on the work of queer theorist Maggie Nelson, I will illustrate that a political sense of mourning is also relevant to queer theory and life as a way to bear witness to the violence of the sex-gender system even as we find ways of navigating through it. Lastly, I will defend the claim that a sense of mourning-without-end is political for any marginalized population that suffers from social death and from the disavowal of its suffering through the normalization of violence against them.

RÉSUMÉ : Récemment, des chercheurs américains ont examiné la politique du deuil dans le contexte du racisme contre les noirs aux États-Unis. En utilisant le travail de la théoricienne d'études «queer» Maggie Nelson, j'illustrerai qu'un sentiment politique de deuil est aussi pertinent pour la manière de vivre et la théorie «queer», comme moyen de témoigner de la violence du système basé sur le sexe et le genre. Enfin, je défendrai l'affirmation selon laquelle un sentiment de deuil sans fin est politique pour n'importe quelle population marginalisée qui souffre de la mort sociale et du désaveu de sa souffrance par la normalisation de la violence à son égard.

Keywords: anti-black racism, mourning, queer theory, heterosexism, resistance, prison, post-racial discourse

You do feel grief-stricken now, but only that you waited so long, that you had to suffer so acutely for three decades before finally finding some relief.

—*The Argonauts*, Maggie Nelson

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A political sense of mourning is not an outcome, a development, or an attainment, but a position one can take up relative to the shifting frameworks of violence we live out. It is one that is *not for the sake of* any outcome, but intervenes in our productive activities to take up lines of questioning anew.

—*The Post-Racial Limits of Memorialization: Toward a Political Sense of Mourning*, Alfred Frankowski

Introduction

Recently, scholars such as Claudia Rankine and Alfred Frankowski have examined the politics of mourning in relation to anti-black racism in the United States. In her article for *The New Times Magazine* titled “The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning,” Rankine poignantly describes mourning in terms of the emotional terrain that attends the social death suffered by African Americans as a result of their criminalization:

Anti-black racism is in the culture. It’s in our laws, in our advertisements, in our friendships, in our segregated cities, in our schools, in our Congress, in our scientific experiments, in our language, on the Internet, in our bodies no matter our race, in our communities and, perhaps most devastatingly, in our justice system. The unarmed, slain black bodies in public spaces turn grief into our everyday feeling that something is wrong everywhere and all the time, even if locally things appear normal. Having coffee, walking the dog, reading the paper, taking the elevator to the office, dropping the kids off at school: All of this good life is surrounded by the ambient feeling that at any given moment, a black person is being killed in the street or in his home by the armed hatred of a fellow American. The Black Lives Matter movement can be read as an attempt to keep mourning an open dynamic in our culture because black lives exist in a state of precariousness. Mourning then bears both the vulnerability inherent in black lives and the instability regarding a future for those lives.¹

Rankine describes mourning both as the expression of an unnatural vulnerability to state sanctioned violence and as an “open dynamic” able to bear witness to the *loss* that is suffered and the wounds that can never be healed. It acts as the emotional register of that fact that “something is wrong everywhere and all the time, even if locally things appear normal.” The politics of mourning becomes acute when entire communities must *preemptively mourn* for the inevitable loss of more family and friends to violence, targeted on the basis of their association with communities marked by race, gender, ethnicity, class, ability, and sex. Here a *sense of mourning* is necessary to register and recognize the fact of social death and the severity of its harm, a *sense of mourning*

¹ Claudia Rankine, “The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning.” *The New York Times Magazine*.

that cannot be overcome by mourning the loss of individuals subject to state violence and social death.

In his new book, *The Post-Racial Limits of Memorialization: Toward a Political Sense of Mourning*, Frankowski claims that a sense of mourning can exert political resistance against post-racial representations of violence that treat racial oppression as a problem of the past. As he explains:

The violence of *post-racial discourse* and *post-racial memory* employs memory and representation to such a great extent that our responses lose all meaning—and yet this makes a political sense of mourning all the more important and dangerous because it is that ability to reconnect with our living experience of a past and of deaths that I have become aware of at a distance ... When we *mourn* a friend's death, that death lives on with us and it is our task to keep the sense of that life alive. The task of mourning is the process of *living with* the death within our context ... mourning requires a recasting of what it means to respond to violence now, but also a shattering of both this question and our answers. To *respond to* is first and foremost to be a *taking in*. Taking, in a particular sense, allows for that which is shattered to be navigated-through as opposed to being settled, reconciled, or simply represented.²

Post-racial discourse reinforces a liberatory narrative of the civil rights struggle in the United States that allows us to represent every police murder of an unarmed black man or woman as an 'exception' to the norm of a legal system that is *no longer* informed by the racist distribution of power and capital. In this way, as Frankowski explains, *post-racial discourse* transforms acts of remembrance into acts of forgetting at the same time. During the recent vice-presidential debate, Mike Pence chided Tim Kaine for Hillary Clinton's use of the terms 'implicit bias' and 'institutional racism' that—he asserted—distort and politicize a 'tragedy,' as well as demean our police officers. Against the refusal of our politicians to recognize the predictable and systematic and senseless state violence inflicted on African Americans as a matter of policy and judicial procedure, the collective act of mourning for Black Lives registers the traumatic violation of useless violence and our unreconciled relation to the past and present. In Frankowski's words, this mourning forces "a recasting of what it means to respond to violence now and a shattering of both this question and our answers" (viz. Q: Why do police continue to shoot unarmed black citizens? A: it was just an isolated 'tragedy' and we need new legal reforms). In this way, the political sense of mourning interrupts the narratives that normalize state violence and exposes the failure of discursive practices to represent or arrest the systemic state violence against marginalized communities.

² Alfred Frankowski, *The Post-Racial Limits of Memorialization: Toward a Political Sense of Mourning*, p. 96.

The political sense of mourning interrupts our tragic narratives about the 'exceptional' and 'accidental' nature of police brutality, in order to expose that which cannot be represented in our post-racial discourse, or the state's systematic destruction of black lives for the sake of white supremacy. Tragic narratives represent difficult truths about the human condition, whereas trauma violates every expectation we have and can represent about what should or could happen to human beings. In this sense, victims of trauma suffer from 'useless' violence insofar as it is entirely preventable and the product of one or more systems of domination that empower certain individuals to inflict violence on others with impunity.

In her new book, *The Argonauts*, queer theorist Maggie Nelson reserves space for grieving and lamentation in her account of her marriage with her husband Harry, specifically in her reflections on the year Harry transitioned to his new gender while she was pregnant with their child. At times, the text itself becomes elegiac, and it is felt as a right that Nelson claims, *the right to mourn*—for others, for oneself, for all others. Drawing on Frankowski's work, I will illustrate that a political sense of mourning is also relevant to queer theory and life, as a way to bear witness to the violence of the sex-gender system even as we (queer folk) find ways of navigating through it. I will also claim that mourning has a political power in the carceral environment that disrupts the logic of representations that justify and perpetuate penal violence. Lastly, a political sense of mourning is already operative in counter-cultural aesthetic responses to state violence, such as in recent, independent films and underground hip hop. In accord with the argument of the recent text, *Political Philosophy and Political Action: Imperatives of Resistance* (2016) by Adam Burgos, political theory should take its cue from already existing political practices of popular resistance rather than consider the abstract possibility of agency 'as such.' I will illustrate that a sense of mourning-without-end is political for any marginalized population that suffers from social death and from the disavowal of its suffering through the normalization of violence against them.

The pervasiveness of the sense of mourning in texts and testimonies about American racism, heterosexism, and the penal colony is significant for the sake of solidarity and coalition building between marginalized groups, even as we pay attention to the differences between those harms inflicted on groups marked by race, gender, and sex. The sense of preemptive mourning as a response to state violence by populations that suffer from this violence in different ways, draws attention to the larger genocidal structure that inflicts social death *through different practices, policies, and institutions* on targeted groups in order to sustain a white, heterosexist supremacy. Marginalized populations suffer from distinct forms of vulnerability and social death, though they share the need to preemptively mourn for the inevitable loss of more lives and the loss of decent deaths to systemic genocidal assaults on the social vitality of their communities that are excluded from the full protection of the law and moral consideration. I believe that in the age of Donald Trump the political sense of collective mourning can

serve to disrupt discursive practices that will aim to perpetuate and justify state sanctioned violence against ethnic and racial minorities, women, and the LGBTQ community.

Post-gender Discourse and the Politics of Mourning

The American feminist philosopher Claudia Card adopted the term ‘social death’ from Orlando Patterson’s work on American slavery to name the distinct harm of genocide, its specific brand of evil. In her essay, “Genocide and Social Death,” first published in *Hypatia* in 2003, Card explained her definition of ‘genocide’ in terms of a *feminist* perspective more concerned with the experience of victims and the concrete harms inflicted by state structures than with the psychology of perpetrators.³

‘Social death’ describes the effect of genocide or how it *affects* its victims; it refers to the collective loss of the rituals, symbols, songs, stories, and generational ties that once served to make life meaningful. Under certain conditions of social death, in which victims are bereft of elegiac rituals, death itself becomes indecent. This was the distinct sort of harm suffered by Jews during the Nazi genocide, both those who died by being shot and buried alive and those who died in gas chambers. This harm of their profane deaths is irreducible to the simple, isolated harm of their murder; the process of degradation to which these individuals were subject, which operated to make both life and death indecent, is distinct from death-in-itself as it sought to not only destroy a life, but to render both that life and its termination unbearable, unremembered, and devoid of meaning. When one is a member of a population that has been targeted for destruction and so always already excluded from moral consideration and the protection of the law, then one is subject to social and civic death, which creates the structure for the production of tortured and broken bodies. In this way, the evil of social death is not somehow opposed to the evil of mass death but instead generates the structural possibility for the sovereign infliction of mass death on targeted populations. In Auschwitz, Jewish prisoners said the Mourner’s Kaddish for themselves on their way into the gas chambers, knowing that there would be no one left behind to mourn them after they were killed. This is another example of the *preemptive mourning* that victims of structural oppression rely on in order to carve out some meaning for their lives amidst its destruction. Here the sovereign attack on the right to *mourn* produces a form of social death. The need to preemptively mourn and retain a sense of mourning-without-end is a moral scandal that exposes the genocidal logic to which marginalized groups are subject, for they mourn the inevitable though entirely preventable loss of more family and friends to state violence.

The political sense of mourning or *preemptive mourning* amidst conditions of social death serves to interrupt consoling narratives about the racist and

³ Claudia Card. *Genocide and Social Death*.

heterosexual structures that coerce certain choices, produce certain desires, and preclude the possibility of entire forms-of-life. Nelson makes use of the elegiac to mark the existential compromises that still inform the politics of queer life, and so to mark a certain social death rendered invisible by liberal narratives about the ‘progress’ of gay rights. In her text she struggles against the only terms available to describe her lover’s gendered position, terms that inevitably distort and narrow its meaning:

How to explain—“trans” may work well enough as shorthand, but the quickly developing mainstream narrative it evokes (“born in the wrong body,” necessitating an orthopedic pilgrimage between two fixed destinations) is useless for some—but partially, or even profoundly, useful for others? That for some, “transitioning” may mean leaving one gender entirely behind, while for others—like Harry, who is happy to identify as a butch on T—it doesn’t? *I’m not on my way anywhere*, Harry sometimes tells inquirers. How to explain, in a culture frantic for resolution, that sometimes the shit stays messy?⁴

The history of the civil rights movement in the United States has taught us that seeking resolution for structural oppression through piecemeal legal reforms allows us to disavow the continuity of racist oppression in different forms. There is a similar danger in seeking relief from heterosexual oppression in legal reforms that allow queer citizens to marry and use the bathroom of their choice. For the structure of heterosexual oppression is normalized through language that reifies grammatical categories as ontological truths, thus alienating those who do not recognize themselves in such terms. The heterosexual logic that informs the reigning *episteme* forces us to alienate ourselves in the effort to name and describe our suffering and its “resolution.”

Nelson illustrates this discursive alienation in her description of her argument with Harry about the movie *X-Men: First Class*, and specifically about the morality of the two political positions taken by the mutant community in relation to their oppression (assimilation vs. revolution):

Afterward we debated: assimilation vs. revolution. I’m no cheerleader for assimilation per se, but in the movie the assimilationists were advocating nonviolence and identification with the Other in that bastardized Buddhist way that gets me every time. You expressed sympathy for the revolutionaries, who argued, *Stay freaky and blow ‘em up before they come for you, because no matter what they say, the truth is they want you dead, and you’re fooling yourself if you think otherwise.*

We bantered good-naturedly, yet somehow allowed ourselves to get polarized into a needless binary. That’s what we both hate about fiction, or at least crappy fiction—it purports to provide occasions for thinking through complex issues, but really it has

⁴ Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*, pp. 52-53.

predetermined the positions, stuffed a narrative full of false choices, and hooked you on them, rendering you less able to see out, to *get out*.

While we talked we said words like *nonviolence*, *assimilation*, *threats to survival*, *preserving the radical*. But when I think about it now I hear only the background buzz of our trying to explain something to each other, to ourselves, about our lived experiences thus far on this peeled, endangered planet. As is so often the case, the intensity of our need to be understood distorted our positions, backed us further into the cage.⁵

The discursive domain is informed by a racist and heterosexist *episteme* that provides terms for communication that reinforce its logic; we have no discursive escape from the existential alienation produced by our use of a language that disciplines and coerces us into certain practices even as it fails to adequately represent or ‘capture’ the fecundity and complexity of being-in-the-world. In this sense, discourse offers the promise of a tool “for thinking through complex issues,” but in reality “has predetermined the positions, stuffed a narrative full of false choices, and hooked you on them,” so that one is less able to *see* outside of it and as a consequence one is less able to *get out* of the alienation forced by these narratives. The political sense of mourning draws attention to the larger structures that still distort and destroy lives and exclude entire populations from moral consideration and the protection of the law. It exposes the impotence of the discursive domain for the representation and redress of injuries suffered from useless, state sanctioned violence. The move to *a sense of mourning* as political practice is made necessary to *act out* the failure of the discursive to represent systemic oppression, which forces us to question the complicity of the discursive domain itself in the perpetuation of racist and heterosexist oppression.

In his book, Frankowski cautions against the liberatory or teleological narrative that informs so much memorialization about past forms of racial oppression in the United States, as this narrative reinforces the *post-racial discourse* that leads us to dismiss every present incident of police brutality or murder against an African American citizen as an ‘exception’ to the rule of an equal and just society. In other words, such narratives lead us into moral blindness to the extremity of state violence in the present. Frankowski suggests that we adopt a racial realism (of the kind introduced by Derrick Bell)⁶ in order to counter our tendency to represent a liberatory account of social justice struggles. He also suggests that we adopt a healthy philosophical pessimism in order to counter the teleological reading of history.

The liberatory and teleological narratives about social progress also work to (mis)represent the conditions of queer life, and so reinforce the distorted options

⁵ Nelson, *The Argonauts*, p. 82.

⁶ Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*.

for agency that are misrepresented as progressive and redemptive in what I will call ‘post- gender discourse’—or the view that, when states legalize gay marriage and recognize women’s rights, they have effectively overcome heterosexism and gender oppression. Harry resists this narrative when he insists that, by transitioning, he is not “on my way anywhere” to attain his liberation or realize his ‘true’ self; he is not transitioning as a way to reconcile himself with reality or feel ‘complete.’ It is simply a means of navigating through or coping with a system of meaning in which every mode of social appearance is a sort of distortion and every ‘choice’ elicits a form of alienation. In her thoughts about Harry’s transition, Nelson beautifully describes the nature of the compromise that never disappears for those who suffer from the binary system of sex/gender:

You like the changes, but also feel them as a sort of compromise, a wager for visibility, as in your drawing of a ghost who proclaims, *Without this sheet, I would be invisible.* (Visibility makes possible, but it also disciplines: disciplines gender, disciplines genre.)⁷

The horror of being trapped in a system that guarantees our alienation and social death is often lost on those who do not feel this horror. In Nelson’s work, elegiac prose becomes political to the extent it is an expression of the horror and lament that follows from this alienation that ensures the loss of the many lives we could lead or the premature death of lives that cannot be represented in this system, that cannot *be given meaning*. The sense of mourning that exposes the failure of representation does not lend itself to a politics of recognition but instead a politics of disruption and interruption of narratives that foreclose the possibility of testimony about—and bearing witness to—the genocidal brutality of anti-black racism and heterosexism.

As Nelson makes clear in *The Argonauts*, we should not view those who transition from one gender to another as ‘solving’ a ‘problem’ or attaining ‘freedom’ from oppression. Similarly, as applied to the penal system, we should not view prisoners broken by the system as a mark of the system’s success, of its ability to ‘reform’ dangerous individuals into passive, obedient subjects. Following Frankowski’s lead, I think we need a healthy dose of philosophical pessimism with regard to emancipatory narratives about gender and prison. For these narratives do more than simply distort the experiences of those who suffer from structural oppression; they also produce and re-produce epistemic injustices that reinforce the invisibility of their suffering and thus perpetuate their marginalization. Thus the term ‘transition’ implies the successful process of changing from one state or condition to another, and thus renders invisible the violence suffered that necessitated this ‘transition’ as well as the violence one becomes vulnerable to as a *result* of this transition. Similarly, the term

⁷ Nelson, *The Argonauts*, p. 86.

‘criminal justice system’ to describe the penal colony implies that we arrest ‘criminals’ in order to restore ‘justice’ in our community, thus obfuscating the racist and classist oppression that leaves entire communities unnaturally vulnerable to arrest and incarceration; further, this term obfuscates the extra-legal violence inflicted on our prisoner population that suffer from a variety of everyday tortures such as sexual and physical assault, degradation, poor nutrition, sub-standard medical care, hard restraints, solitary confinement, ‘psychiatric observation,’ and unhygienic living conditions.

At the end of her life, Card told me that she felt grateful that she could have a decent death. We had been talking about the women who I visit in prison, and it made us both feel grateful *for the right to mourn*. In this prison in Pennsylvania—as in a Nazi camp—there is no space to mourn for those who die ‘on the outside,’ for who one was, for who one could have been, for who one will never be. I learned this after my visiting privileges were suspended for four months because I hugged a prisoner and we cried together for the impending loss of her daughter, and her inability to see her before her death. I was placed under investigation by the Department of Corrections for possible violation of the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) and she was punished for creating a space to preemptively mourn the death of her daughter. One way to gauge the perversity of the United States is by the fact that mourning—poetic lament—is a right that can be taken away. But, to what end? What is the political power of elegiac practices such that they pose a threat to the penal colony?

Similar to the political significance of the *sense of mourning* in the struggle against anti-black racism and heterosexism, (preemptive) mourning in the carceral system interrupts those narratives that normalize and justify every premature death of an inmate as the death of a ‘criminal’ who did not deserve to live. Here the sense of mourning is political because it is a *response to the violence* that is disavowed in the representations of penal life and the ‘criminal’ that support and justify our gulag archipelago. This sense of mourning—evident in spontaneous and illicit acts of mourning that arise when a prisoner commits suicide—does not represent the violence that belies our system of ‘justice,’ but instead disrupts the force of those narratives that cannot explain the *need* for mourning in the penal colony. Thus the collective sense of mourning is a *response to the violence* that cannot be named or represented in our narratives or laws or forms of memorialization. As a response, it acts as the emotional register of the horror that ought to be felt by the fact that penal violence happens at all. The penal colony cannot tolerate spontaneous mourning because the system aims to strip the prisoners of their claim *to* human community or their claim to be meaningful to others at all, able to mourn and worthy of being mourned. When prisoners mourn, they reject the logic of penal violence that justifies all violence done against them as preemptive self-defence against one-dimensional ‘criminals’ who ‘deserve’ to suffer.

Prison creates a space that produces forms of unlivable life excluded from traditional sources of meaning or joy. To preserve this space, the prison regulations include a ban on masturbation (criminalized as ‘tampering with state property’) and a ban on any intimacy between prisoners, now justified with reference to PREA. When prisoners mourn, they mourn for the loss of their meaning as beings who love and deserve love in return, forced to live through a violent environment that produces endless versions of unlivable life, often justified with reference to ‘progressive’ policies cited to mark improvements in prison ‘reform’ (PREA). When we think about the fact that the legislation passed to arrest the ubiquitous amount of sexual assault in prison is used instead to criminalize any and all intimacy and symbolic bonds between prisoners, we can better understand how the penal system is organized in accord with the logic of social death, inflicted on prisoners through policies and regulations that aim to strip the social and symbolic bonds from their interactions with each other. The prison inflicts social death on populations already marginalized by the classist and racist organization of power relations. I have spoken to many women sentenced to die in prison, who regularly mourn to mark the loss suffered from carceral violence that is misrepresented as ‘justice.’

The Sense of Mourning as Political Praxis

Frankowski explains that, “Like the Sublime, mourning makes the context in which we live appear now as a problem.”⁸ When we cultivate a political sense of preemptive mourning, we aim to carve out meaning for a life that has already been denied meaning, and to expose this as a *problem* that is disavowed and normalized in our narratives about the moral and legal progress of our nation. In his comments on this essay for the Society for Existential and Phenomenological Theory and Culture (EPTC) at the 2017 meeting of the annual Congress of the Canadian Federation for the Social Sciences and Humanities, Mark Rozahegy explained the distinct character of the *political* sense of mourning by identifying it as a temporally complex act that 1) testifies to lives lost to state violence *in the past* 2) gives expression to the unnatural vulnerability of those subject to this violence *in the present*, and 3) allows communities to preemptively mourn for the inevitable—though preventable—loss of more lives to this violence *in the future*.

I am grateful for Rozahegy’s insight, which illustrates that the temporality of mourning distinguishes the political, collective sense of mourning from the individual act of grieving for the loss of an individual. As Rozahegy explains:

Typically, the process of mourning is understood as a way of coming to terms with loss and getting on with one’s life. The danger with experiences of great loss is that one can become stuck in the past and [become] unable to move on; if undertaken

⁸ Frankowski, *The Post-Racial Limits of Memorialization*, p. 98.

properly, mourning is traditionally seen as a process through which the past and future are subdued to the concerns of the present, ensuring that the past does not come to overshadow the everyday and allowing those who have suffered loss to continue on living their present-day lives into an awaiting future full of possibilities. Against this conventional understanding ... [we can understand political] mourning as a way of being temporal, a mode of being in which the past, present, and future are woven together outside of the dominance of the present, thereby giving the act of mourning its all-important disruptive potential.

Because of its disruptive or interruptive potential, mourning can be read as a powerful way to unhinge the time of the present and to resist or interrupt the relentless forward movement of everyday life in which the past is a present that is no longer and the future is a present that is not yet. By testifying to the past lives of those lost to anti-black state violence, mourning is a mode of being temporal that opens up the future that approaches as a time of inevitable loss and so reveals the present state of vulnerability and instability in which those who mourn find themselves.⁹

By drawing attention to the distinct temporality of the political (preemptive) sense of mourning in which the unmastered past invades and overdetermines both the present and the future, Rozahegy illustrates what Frankowski refers to as the ‘generational trauma’ inflicted by social death that provokes the need and the sense of mourning. As he explains: “this question [of preemptive mourning] speaks to the generational trauma that not only exceeds the acts of violence performed by police, but also the way that the present is saturated in the historical. Each police shooting, whether or not it happens in your neck of the woods is the anti-black violence that contextualizes you, your kids, and your future relatives. The violence that contextualizes us also binds us—and in this way, anti-black violence is also the possibility of violence against transgendered people—it is not their violence but the possibility of this violence that frames their existence as precarious, as being already structured by vulnerability and violation.”¹⁰

Following from Rozahegy and Frankowski’s insights, it also appears that the political sense of mourning runs counter to the psychological interpretation of mourning insofar as here the sense is that the past invades the present and thereby exposes the horror of the immediate future. The political sense of mourning cannot overcome loss to restore hope in the future, but rather serves to

⁹ Mark Rozahegy, “Commentary on ‘The Politics of Mourning in the Neoliberal State’ by Lissa Skitolsky,” delivered on May 30, 2017 at Ryerson University for the annual meeting of the Society for Existential and Phenomenological Theory and Culture (EPTC) at the 2017 meeting of the annual Congress of the Canadian Federation for the Social Sciences and Humanities.

¹⁰ Alfred Frankowski, in his review of this paper as a referee for *Dialogue*, received in an email on May 15, 2017.

problematize the present and so expose the complicity of all efforts to overcome the past *in the very perpetuation* of the present iterations and modalities of state violence against marginalized groups. Thus the political sense of mourning disrupts any form of hope based on post-racial or post-gender representations of state violence.

At the same time, the political, public sense of mourning resists nihilistic resignation about the perpetual amount of state violence that produces endless amounts of useless suffering. As Frankowski explains: “A political sense of mourning does more than make room for a reflective stance in which we rethink our lives. It requires that our passivity be turned into an activity, and our philosophical questioning leads to a reformulation of our political agency.”¹¹ In the transition from private grief to a communal sense of mourning, sorrow becomes the mode for the political rejection of narratives that continue to obfuscate and disavow the violence produced by our structurally racist and heterosexist distribution of power relations. These narratives also coerce certain forms of agency and preclude others that threaten the status quo, especially those practices that appear harmless but which cannot be given ‘meaning’ in any way—such as the sense of and need for *preemptive* mourning in a nation that prides itself as the global leader in human rights.

An example of such a political, communal rite of mourning is the recent activity of the ‘die-in,’ organized by chapters of the group Black Lives Matter all over the United States. In one such instance, several dozen clergy members lay down on the floor in front of the cash registers in The Longworth Building cafeteria, a heavily trafficked lunch spot on Capitol Hill. They let out a cry of ‘Black Lives Matter’ as they lay still on the floor. The article about the incident in *The Washington Post* by Wesley Lowery titled “‘Black Lives Matter’ protesters stage ‘die-in’ in Capitol Hill cafeteria,” reports that the protest was a response to several high-profile cases of unarmed black men killed by police officers.¹² In all of the recent cases, police officers were not charged with murder for killing unarmed black citizens, and so their unnatural deaths were neither crimes nor sacrifices but instead were rendered meaningless, and so rendered in the political and moral imaginary as *unworthy* of mourning. It is significant that these clergy interrupted the *everyday* activity of eating in the centre of American government to mourn these deaths that had been ignored and forgotten and disavowed by the very politicians who refuse to take seriously the pervasive police violence that destroys so many black and brown bodies and entire communities. Their ‘die-in’ served to interrupt ‘business as usual’ and remind the politicians that the status quo is genocidal, and that their complacency masked and denied the value of these lives that must be mourned against the

¹¹ Frankowski, *The Post-Racial Limits of Memorialization*, p. 98.

¹² Wesley Lowery. “‘Black Lives Matter’ protesters stage ‘die-in’ in Capitol Hill cafeteria.” *The Washington Post*.

state's refusal and in order to interrupt our emancipatory narratives about the United States. The politics of mourning is not a politics of sacrifice and martyrdom for a revolution that may never occur, but instead a politics of responding to and living with the violence that always precedes and survives the piecemeal reforms that perpetually forestall the revolution.

The theory that a sense of mourning can exert political resistance against narratives and structures that justify, perpetuate, and obfuscate the regularity of state violence against marginalized populations reflects a certain mood in the aesthetic domain that has led to works that represent victims of state violence in a position of mourning, and as needing to mourn in order to properly *respond* to this violence. For example, the act of mourning as resistance is poignantly illustrated in the recent Hungarian film *Son of Saul* (*Saul fia*, 2015, directed by László Nemes), which centres around a day in the life of Saul, a member of the *Sonderkommando* in Auschwitz, the unit of Jewish prisoners forced to work in the gas chambers and crematoria. In the film, as Saul is removing dead bodies from the gas chamber, he believes he recognizes one of the bodies as his own son. He spends the rest of the movie risking his life and the lives of his fellow prisoners in order to try to arrange proper mourning rites and a real burial for this young boy, amidst the industrial burning of Jewish bodies all around him. At some point in the film, it becomes impossible to grasp whether Saul's efforts or the system in which he is forced to operate is the more 'irrational' or absurd of the two. Saul is obsessed with finding a rabbi amidst the prisoners to properly mourn his son, and it is clear that this one act will allow him to die with some measure of peace. For his ability to mourn this one child indicates that the Nazis failed to eviscerate the significance *and the loss* of every single victim they killed who otherwise died anonymously, bereft of family or friends alive to mourn them. And in that sense Saul's insistence on mourning for the boy is a profound form of resistance against genocidal practices that inflict social death on populations judged superfluous to humankind. And here again we see that the attack on the *right* to mourn is itself one way to inflict social death on a people, or attack those rituals and practices that allow for a decent life and a decent death.

Both *Son of Saul* and the recent American film *Moonlight* (2016, directed by Barry Jenkins) make use of shallow focus cinematography in such a way as to expose the profanity of judging the victims forced to compromise in a world organized around their deaths, and at every moment the viewer is aware that she can both see and not see what is being represented. Further, the 'plot' or 'the scene' in which the events unfold does not make sense in itself; there are no handy narratives to make sense of what is happening in each film, and neither film can be interpreted within a traditionally tragic narrative that portrays suffering as meaningful and redemptive. So that which is unseen but critical to the possibility of each scene—or the larger socio-political-economic structure of state violence against racialized populations—is suffocating in its absence which is then unbearably present. In both films, the protagonists act in systems that preclude any real agency and instead leave each with so many

choiceless choices that only further entrap them in irrational and senseless systems where good intentions and moral sensitivity and rational expectations are useless and dangerous. In this way, the films aesthetically re-present state violence *as* structural (and so invisible) and genocidal (or as felt everywhere and at all times, in every moment that one is subject to material conditions that undermine the possibility of a chosen life and a decent death). And both films are pervaded by a sense of mourning-without-end as the only possible response to this violence.

In hip hop culture, there is a long tradition of mourning for the loss of black bodies to racist oppression in the United States through the use of graffiti and rap music, informed by a mood of resigned weariness rather than anger about racist oppression. Tupac Shakur's classic song "How Long Will They Mourn Me?" voices both the inevitability of his senseless death in a system designed to destroy him, as well as his need to be mourned and thus remembered after his death:

Damn! They should've shot me when I was born
 Now I'm trapped in the motherfuckin' storm
 How long will they mourn me?

Other, more recent songs, such as "Just a Moment" by Nas and "Soundtrack 2 My Life" by Kid Cudi, also aim to enact an elegiac practice on behalf of African Americans murdered in the past and for those vulnerable to an unnatural and premature death to police brutality in the present. These songs are part of a tradition in underground rap music that also performs the *preemptive mourning* that exposes the moral horror of a structurally racist society where senseless state violence is disavowed as a natural and inevitable part of 'national security.' In a more general way, hip hop culture has always served to provide counter-narratives to the *post-racial discourse* that minimizes the extremity of racist oppression in the neoliberal nation state. In the Trump regime, cultural expressions of mourning that serve to disrupt white indifference to structural oppression will become all the more important. The entrenched nature of post-racial and post-gender discourse that obfuscates the continuity of systemic racist and heterosexist violence indicates the need for a political shift incited by aesthetic means. As Frankowski explains in a recent response to a review of his book, "aesthetics gives us a different sense of the violence of the political because its focus is on the way the sensible becomes strange in reference to the political ... memorializations are politically powerful to the extent that they make the present strange."¹³ The sovereign

¹³ Alfred Frankowski, "Beyond the Dissensus Schema," reply to the review essay "Resistance and the Reconfiguration of the Sensible," by Adam Burgos. In *Syndicate Philosophy*, symposium on *The Post-Racial Limits of Memorialization: Toward a Political Sense of Mourning* by Alfred Frankowski. First published in the online symposium <https://syndicate.network/philosophy/>, May 15, 2017.

assault on mourning in marginalized communities as an integral part of the infliction of social death upon these same communities, indicates that the aesthetics of mourning is essential to the social vitality of communities and that the practice of *preemptive mourning* has political value as a form of resistance against social death. My hope is that the new philosophical attention on the political value of the *sense* of mourning-without-end that is already operative in multiple communities that are unnaturally vulnerable to state sanctioned violence will provoke new studies that better explore how, exactly, the practice of mourning the loss of a life grants meaning and significance to that life, and why it is the case that knowing one will be mourned allows one to cope with the terms of mortality. Further, for the sake of political resistance, it is imperative to more thoroughly examine the logic behind and harm inflicted by preventing communities from the rites of mourning and examine how, exactly, collective practices of *preemptive mourning* serve to mark and resist this harm.

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