



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

WITH THE DEAD: PERFORMANCE PHILOSOPHY, DYING, AND GRIEF AN INTRODUCTION

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How to Read this Introduction

[A note for slow readers and those of us who find long texts intimidating.]

Hello. This is Rajni, one of the editors of this issue. I am a very slow reader, something I find hard to communicate to academics and people who read at what is classed as a normal or fast speed. I am also a slow thinker. My slowness has meant I have struggled to do what is traditionally known as the role of the co-editor—I have only just managed to read through this introduction, let alone contribute anything significant to it. However, it occurred to me that maybe this very slowness might be a friend to those of you who also feel unsure how to navigate large amounts of text, and especially text that takes place in academic journals. So I have made a few invitations below, to be used as feels supportive by whoever finds them. They are not so much instructional as an offering of permission: it's okay to read this way, just as you are.

as a spiral

When I read the words in the introduction, they seemed to arrive as a spiral, returning around and around to the same points, repeating themes and thoughts with different nuance or focus. Knowing this, I was able to hold them more lightly, let them move through me, and focus my eyes less punitively. Maybe the spiral was saying:

be ancient,
take your time,
wait for it to come around.

as overflowing

Perhaps so many words are needed in order for them to overflow their container. Like grief, unruly and messy and too much to be held by what was there before.

as a breaking

The words might be in the moment of something that is breaking - something that has traditionally felt fixed or inevitable. A journal introduction that needs to cover certain ground, for example. A citation practice that cannot help but invoke hierarchies of knowledge, for example. If you can feel this breaking, then you are attuning to what is happening, what needs to happen.

as a portal

Maybe there is something here, one sentence or so, that you need to hear. And that will be enough to provide the portal that transports you in the way you need right now.

This moment

It feels impossible to begin this journal issue in any other way than with Palestinian death and grief. As Jewish Voice for Peace has described it, “This has been a year of unspeakable horror, grief and outrage” (JVP 2024). Alongside JVP, the International Court of Justice (ICJ), and countless other international organizations and communities: We grieve the mass slaughter of the at least 46,000 Palestinians killed by the Israeli military, with the awareness that the real death toll is likely considerably higher. We grieve the 1,200 Israelis killed in Hamas’s attacks. And we grieve the 3,000 Lebanese killed by Israeli bombings. We grieve the long and ongoing violence of settler colonialism.¹ Thinking alongside Siegmund Zacharias in this volume, we grieve multilaterally: we grieve genocide as entangled with ecocide, epistemicide, scholasticide, and domicide. We acknowledge that we are living in a time when grieving itself feels like a privilege that only some of

us are able to access. As Zacharias prompts us, we grieve “the neglect of the fundamental human right of the dead—the impossibility of preservation of the dignity of the deceased, including mutilating bodies, dumping bodies in mass graves, abducting bodies, the inability to bury those under the rubble, the desecration of graves, and the obstruction of death rituals” (Zacharias).

For many of our authors, the Palestinian genocide was a primary, pressing context of their writing and making towards this publication. They bring their shaken hearts to their contributions, collectively weaving a dense fabric of the affective textures that surround this witnessing of extreme violence—pain woven with numbness, despair woven with rage—compelling a dual urgency both “to mourn the dead and fight for the living” (Williams). Performance philosophy practices themselves emerge as ways of bearing witness to the unceasing brutality and destruction in Gaza. At the same time, we grieve the loss of the ability for those of us within institutional contexts to make unambiguous statements about these topics. We feel compelled to acknowledge that, whilst two of the editors and a number of the contributors of this issue are affiliated to the Amsterdam University of the Arts (AHK), the views expressed on the current situation in Palestine are their own—assuming the right to academic and artistic freedom—and do not represent the views of the institution.²

As many of the contributions in this issue indicate, grief can have multiple and complex relations to action, with the capacity to increase as well as decrease the affective power to act. Being acted upon by grief can call us to action. It can put a halt to “business as usual,” but it can also motivate political action and resistance, both individual and collective. As Daddario and Zerdy’s article explores, grief can turn into “a goad that stimulates social action. No longer simply equated with loss, pain, and heartache, grief becomes a means of creation” (Daddario and Zerdy). Or further, they suggest that

grief *potentiates*, that is, it creates a matrix of possibility through which any number of actions and productions are possible. Against the tendency to see these potential actions as dangerous or volatile or fueled by aimless rage, we see the vast potential made through grief space to be, at heart, positively transformative. (Daddario and Zerdy)

In this respect, when we are able to access the appropriate conditions, grief can move through our bodies, as an important and healthy “part of the rhythm of our lives” (Barton).

As Zacharias outlines:

We are taken by so many grieves simultaneously nowadays: we are grieving for the dead, grieving because of ongoing genocides,³ grieving because of the ongoing climate catastrophe, grieving because of social injustices, grieving the loss of the idea of a certain future. These and more accumulate as personal, collective, worldly and planetary grieves. (Zacharias)

The specific configuration of events unfolding since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic—the murder of George Floyd, increasing magnitude and visibility of devastation related to the climate

crisis, and the genocides in process in multiple countries and regions—has surely contributed to the widely shared experience of this historical moment as one in which death and grief feel particularly present. As our colleagues in the collaborative performance research project *Performing Ends* have outlined (<https://performingends.com/>), this is a time in which we are surrounded by “the omnipresence of narratives reflecting the ends of the human, the planet, and democracy (among others).” Further, as Dina Gachman has discussed,

In 2024, we are hardly the first generations to channel loss into art, but coming through the last few years shaped by a pandemic and cultural and political upheaval, it does seem like something is different. It doesn't feel relevant to ask questions like, *Why don't we talk about loss?* or, *Why are we so grief avoidant?* How could we come through these last few years together and *not* talk about it, write about it, make films, shows, paintings and songs about it? There are hundreds of podcasts devoted to the topic and Instagram accounts that exist solely to share poetry about loss. The questions now, for us, are how can we talk about death in a more meaningful way? What can we create or watch or listen to that will help us engage with grief as readily and as deeply as we do with love, or joy, or beauty? (Gachman 2024, n.p.)

And indeed, certainly in the small worlds from which we write these words, it appears as though there is growing momentum and more frequently affirmed urgency around the need to dismantle dominant ‘Western’ paradigms surrounding cultural attitudes towards death and grief; an increasingly loud call for the production of alternative discourses, practices and professions that challenge the residual stigma, taboo, and denial surrounding dying and grieving that have historically governed social norms within colonising and colonial cultures. For instance, we might note the international growth of Death Cafés (<https://deathcafe.com/>) over the last fifteen years, or the emergence of events like the international *Lifting the Lid Festival of Death and Dying*, an annual online festival where palliative carers, funeral directors, grief supporters, artists, and others explore topics such as mindful grieving, death literacy, living funerals, and coffin weaving. Alongside this, we witness a (too) slow recognition that we must turn towards Indigenous and ancient practices to learn what we once knew: how to grieve collectively.

Performance, Performance Studies, Theatre

In this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that contemporary artists and scholars, performance-makers, and performance philosophers are giving heightened attention to what their practices can offer towards grief, and more broadly to questions of how we relate to the dead and to dying at this particular socio-political and ecological moment. Of course, this builds on centuries of cross-cultural concern with the relation between the arts, dying, and loss: including specific traditions and discourses that locate an intrinsic relationship between theatre, performance, and death. As Fintan Walsh discusses, “theatre’s tragic roots evidence a foundational belief in the importance of ritualistic practice and communal gathering as a necessary response to suffering” (2024, 9), whilst drama’s classic tragedies frequently return to the fraught issue of how to appropriately mourn the dead. Likewise, performance art has a long history of staging acts galvanized by grief like Suzanne

Lacy's counter to media narratives of femicide *In Mourning and in Rage* (1977); just as documentary theatre has an established tradition of using its form to explore the deaths of particular individuals from the murder of gay student Matthew Shepard in *The Laramie Project* (2001) to *My Name Is Rachel Corrie* (2005), the play based on the diaries of the peace activist crushed to death by an Israeli bulldozer.

Based on this history, David Harradine, the co-artistic director of UK based company Fevered Sleep—known for their *This Grief Thing*—goes as far as to say:

From the earliest forms of performance grounded in ritual and religious worship, to the chronicles of change and murder we call the Greek tragedies; from mediaeval liturgical drama's reflection upon the moral and philosophical problems of death and life, to Shakespeare's meditations on time; from the classical aesthetics of death in French renaissance tragedy, to the personal experiences of death that run through nineteenth century realism; from the muck and ooze of death explored by the surrealists and expressionists, to the metaphor of life as a detour on the way to death poeticised by Beckett; from the reflections on the body and on mortality enacted by performance artists, to the contemporary fascination with escaping death through technology—it wouldn't be too difficult to claim that there has never been a performance that is not driven or shadowed, somewhere, by the spectre of death and dying. (Harradine 2000, n.p.)

In turn, many of the foundational scholarly texts of Theatre and Performance Studies have famously posited a special relationship between theatre, performance, death and loss, for instance, in Peggy Phelan's well-known characterisation of performance as a "rehearsal for death" and her proposition that "theatre and performance have especially potent lessons for those of us interested in reassessing our relations to mourning, grief and loss" (1997, 3). From Blau's "The Eye of Prey" and Carlson's *The Haunted Stage*, to Alan Read's *The Dark Theatre* (2020) to Mischa Twitchin's *The Theatre of Death* (2016) in the Performance Philosophy book series, theatre and performance studies abounds with a rich existing literature on theatre's relation to death, dying, and loss that forms the wider contextual domain for the discussions here. Various theatre and performance festivals dedicated to the topic have been hosted over the last quarter century, such as the *Matters of Life and Death* festival staged at the Battersea Arts Centre in the UK back in 2000 including works such as *Hymns* by Frantic Assembly (1999–2005) inspired by the untimely deaths of several friends of the company and Kazuko Hohki's *Toothless* (1998–2006) about the life and death of her mother. Alternatively, in 2021, several of the contributors in this volume—and other performance philosophers like Mark Price and Eli Belgrano—participated in *Borrowed Time* (<https://borrowed-time.info/>): a series of events on death, dying, and change held between 2020–21 which brought an ecological, process-based perspective to the relationship between art, philosophy, and thanatology, asking: What constitutes 'a good death'? How do we know death, personally? What room do we make for the dead—within our relationships, our ways of speaking, our shared geographies? And how might the insights of end-of-life care and death practices help us to navigate the fundamental unsustainability of the dominant culture, and to better imagine what comes after it?

And yet, despite this obviously weighty historical context, it still seems valid to observe that the last five years have seen a particular growth of scholarly interest in the specific topic of theatre, performance, grief and mourning, including as a particular response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Most recently, this includes works such as: Guy Cools' *Performing Mourning* (2021) and William McEvoy's *Reanimating Grief* (2024) which explores the poetics of bereavement in theatre and song, examining how dramatic works from Shakespeare and Beckett to Enda Walsh reanimate the dead to investigate the dynamics of grief and mourning. In turn, Walsh's *Performing Grief in Pandemic Theatres* (2024) addresses the key role in supporting grief played by theatre during Covid-19 "in the face of mass death" and in the context of the "widespread political denial of pandemic grief" (8). As Walsh describes, theatre artists oftentimes "stepped into the void created by the broad absence or inaccessibility of public mourning ceremonies by creating new aesthetic and dramaturgical forms and spaces for grief" (4). But whereas the framework of Walsh's book emphasises the notion of pandemic grief as a distinct phenomenon, the tendency with this issue is perhaps closer to that of the *Performing Ends* project in foregrounding the interconnectedness of differing forms of loss and the complex 'grieves' they produce. For their part, the lead researchers of *Performing Ends* project, Cervera, Iwaki, and Laine, propose that "we can now speak of a 'posthumous' tendency in the performing arts as a response to unfolding ecological, political, and technological ends" (*Performing Ends*, 2024). For them, this tendency, "implies a perspective on our time as one 'after extinction', in the literal sense of extinction of humans and more than human beings, but also of cultural and symbolic orders" (Ibid.).

In the context of Performance Philosophy

The themes of dying and grief are also by no means new in the performance philosophy context: from the Agitatsia group's (2022) research into the performativity of death in necro-performances of the collective *Party of the Dead* from Saint-Petersburg to the ongoing, in-depth investigations of the relations between song and death by Eli Belgrano and Mark Price (Borrowed Time) including through an exploration of the aesthetics of the Death-Song and the format of the vigil-performance. Back in 2015, with the journal's inaugural issue, we published "To Grieve", Will Daddario's (2015) deeply moving and revelatory text stemming from the multiple, sequential losses of his father, grandmother and his son, Finlay. Ten years ago, Will oriented himself towards these encounters with loss a "philosophical problem":

What does it mean to identify myself as the person for whom that last statement is true and for whom life has been molded by such sorrow? Acknowledging that the work of mourning creates the only path capable of piercing the dense and viscous fog of acedia, what does it mean to grieve rightly? Might there be such a thing as an ethics of grief, a practice of turning my full attention to the specificity of each loss so as to carry such loss in me and to become, in the words of Gilles Deleuze, worthy of what has happened to me (Deleuze 1990, 149)? (Daddario 2015, 2016)

Ten years later, Will is practicing performance philosophies of dying and grief no longer as an academic in a university theatre department (though his forthcoming book *The Last Laugh: Grief,*

Death, and the Comic will appeal to academics). Rather, he now performs as a trained counsellor and therapist. Furthermore, ten years after Finlay's death, it is joyful for those of us who know them to witness the flourishing of *Inviting Abundance* (<https://invitingabundance.net/>)—the company he and his wife Joanne founded to share their grief knowledges with others—and the extraordinary gifting of grief wisdoms and practices that they have given to so many—particularly in relation to infant loss. This is not a story of 'overcoming' of course; or a 'happy ending' to a grief process now complete. But it is a tale that tells us something about how grief performs and what grief does in terms of eliciting our participation in new temporal worlds:

While grieving the death of loved ones, the question will arise: how long does this take? That question, however, is not posed in a helpful way. The verb 'to take' must be placed aside and replaced with new words that conjure a different mode of time, one that commemorates the effort of building, growth, and the generative powers of the social and natural worlds. Grief neither takes nor gives. It rushes in from the outside and it inaugurates a new temporal existence that will be unique to each person or group who grieves. Another lesson of grief arises here: grief makes time, in the sense that you must now make a calendar for yourself that honors the nature of your existence. Rather than asking 'how long will it take,' you can try this: what time will grief make, and what will you make within grief's duration? (Daddario 2015, 270)

As a forthcoming issue of this journal will explore and document, the themes of dying and grief were also an integral part of the 2024 Performance Philosophy biennial in Austin, *After Tragedy*. And indeed, the performance philosophy of tragedy—for instance, how tragic performance thinks the relations between the dead and the living—has been a core line of concern since the field's inception: in the work of Freddie Rokem (2015, 2017), Kate Katafiasz (2018), Anna Street and Ramona Mosse (2016), and many others. Delving more deeply into the Performance Philosophy journal's archive, we listen in on how texts speak to each other across issues. Catalina Insignares piece on listening to the dead in this volume seems to enter into dialogue with Flavia Pinheiro's (2023) poetic decolonial consideration of choreographies in relation to the unborn, in communication with Abiku—the Yoruba word meaning "predestined to death" that refers to the spirit of a child who has died young. Whilst stëfΔ/V schäfer's article in this issue—on co-creating rituals with dying mountains—might also be productively read alongside Madeleine Collie's (2021) article on *The Ash Project* within the *Plant Performance* issue in which she proposes that "grief, when it is extended towards plant life under threat, might be a prefigurative practice for changing our relationships to place, to more than human liveliness, to ourselves" (Collie 2021, 170). Collie's words read as hauntingly prescient if we acknowledge the role of the colonially implanted eucalyptus trees that have participated, again, in the raging forest fires that devastated Southern California during the first weeks of 2025.

Grief, scholarship, and the arts

At the time of writing these words, there is the sense that 'grief is everywhere'—at least in the arts. There has been a proliferation of artistic events and activities offering space for grieving and/or

variously exploring how arts and creative practices can enable counter-hegemonic ways for grief to be experienced and shared. Among the many examples we could cite here and beyond those discussed in the journal issue itself, we might think of projects and works like the *Whale Fall* performance cycle by the New York-based choreographer mayfield brooks (<https://www.improvisingwhileblack.com/whale-fall-practice>); Milo Rau's *Grief and Beauty* (NT Gent 2021); Fevered Sleep's *This Grief Thing* (<https://www.feveredsleep.co.uk/project/this-grief-thing>); Ellie Harrison's *The Grief Series* (<https://www.griefseries.co.uk/>); Mallika Taneja's work exploring the voicing of grief, mourning and memory, *Do you Know This Song?* (Frascati Theatre 2023); and Jota Mombaça's recent installation *A Method/Grieving Time* (West Den Haag 2024) mapping and memorializing grief and resilience as they are woven into archival stories of immigrants and the lasting structures of colonial power. As Daddario and Zerdy note, beyond its dominant framing as a problem to be solved within medicalized grief territory,

Many thinkers, artists, community activists, and healers of various stripes have drawn attention to the ways in which grief, far from constituting an undesirable state of torturous longing, frequently leads to transformation and growth, both on individual and collective levels. (Daddario and Zerdy)

Building on the long standing awareness of the need for individual and collective healing in relation to loss “beyond medicalized and medicalizing institutions” (Trejo Méndez), artists have been increasingly exploring how artistic and creative approaches might facilitate acknowledgement, attunement, understanding, care, relief and repair, praise and honouring, resistance, and responsibility in relation to widely varying experiences of loss, dying, and grieving including in the context of systemic violence and oppression. The late, celebrated curator Okwui Enwezor's collection *Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America* (New Museum 2021) for instance, gathers together the work of influential Black artists from Basquiat to Ellen Gallagher and Theaster Gates whose practice has examined the relation between race, mourning, commemoration, and loss as well as their involvement in the social movements propelled by Black grief, from the Civil Rights movement to Black Lives Matter. More recently, there have been exhibitions like *How We Get Over: We Grow On* (2023) curated by artists Jasmine Williams and Sarah Jené (Mississippi Museum of Art 2023), informed by Southern mourning rituals which the curators described as “a contemplative space of rest that could hold Black people in our grief” (Harris 2023), including installations, spoken word performance, and works such as Justin Hardiman's *Color of Grief* (2023) project which combines audio work with photography to document the affective multiplicity of grief as experience by underrepresented communities in Jackson, Mississippi.

And as it feels omnipresent in practice, likewise in scholarship, recent years have seen a flourishing of writing and thinking around dying and grieving across various disciplines producing philosophical, critical, social and cultural theory and criticism. From works such as *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (Butler 2009); *The Smell of Rain on Dust: Grief and Praise* (Prechtel 2015); *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Sharpe 2016); *Grief: A Philosophical Guide* (Cholbi 2021); and *Aesthetics in Grief and Mourning* (Higgins 2024), the last fifteen years has created an abundance of new literatures on grief coming from a wide range of disciplines including philosophy and specifically

philosophical aesthetics. This includes a rich collection of texts exploring the need for alternative grief discourses and practices that attend to grief as a social phenomenon (e.g., Milstein 2017; Johnson 2021; Harris and Edmonds 2022; Barton 2024) and wider ongoing studies of ‘disenfranchised grief’ (e.g., Turner and Stauffer 2024, building on Doka 1989) addressing grief in relation to vulnerable groups, marginalization, and stigmatized deaths. It also includes a wealth of literatures addressing the specificity of Black grief and loss: the specific ways that grief, mourning, and loss relate to Blackness and antiblackness, and how grief shows up in the felt experience of black and brown bodied people (e.g., Rankine 2015; Ife 2022; Rolston and Vernon 2024). Among this writing, and building on work that will manifest in her forthcoming book *Art in a Time of Sorrow*, the art historian and theorist Tina M. Campt has written and spoken compellingly of what she describes as the opacity of Black grief:

We are living in a moment when we are forced to grapple with multiple frequencies of grief and grievance. They include the grief of personal loss that I and so many others have endured over the course of the pandemic, like the loss of loved ones to terminal illness or this deadly virus. But they also include the grief and the grievance of reckoning with the frequency of compounding grief at the cyclical, repetitive loss of Black genius. For we must reckon far too frequently with our compounding grief and grievance at the cyclical, repetitive, and disproportionate losses of vulnerable members of Black and Brown communities to the virus, to brutal policing, to targeted neglect, and engineered disposability. We must reckon with the frequency of the compounding grief and grievance we bear in the face of the loss of kin, community, and friends to the forces of white supremacy and antiblackness. These compounding griefs and their accompanying grievances exceed what is describable or comprehensible in human language. Their opacity is singular and unique, yet they are shared even in the distinctiveness of the unmistakable wounds they leave in their wake. (Campt 2022, n.p.)

Of course, death has always been a philosophical preoccupation, with centuries of reflection and practice across diverse global traditions devoted to the question of the nature of death and dying, the possibility of afterlife and the desirability of immortality, the relationship between death and our concepts of time, of what it means to ‘die well’ or what attitude we aspire to practice towards the event of dying, and the impact of death on how we understand the meaning of living. Specifically, “Grief and mourning have been a subject of interest to thinkers representing all of the world’s major intellectual traditions: from Platonism to Daoism” (Slawkowski-Rode 2023, 1). Multiple source books exist that survey the Western philosophies of death and dying (e.g., Cholbi and Timmerman 2020; Bradley et al. 2013) as well as recent collections that provide overviews of Anglo-American and European philosophies of death, loss, and grief (Slawkowski-Rode 2023) and vast numbers of monographs by contemporary academic philosophers on dying and grief (e.g., Ratcliffe 2023; Cholbi 2021; May 2014), including those that address ‘eco- and climate-grief’ (e.g., Read 2022). Existing for around a decade, there is an International Association for the Philosophy of Death and Dying (<https://www.philosophyofdeath.org/>), a global organization of over 200 scholars interested in the investigation of philosophical questions surrounding death and dying, which has held a biennial conference since 2014. And individual institutions host their own research groups dedicated to collective, cross-disciplinary thanatological investigation, such as the

Death Studies Research Group at Northwestern University (deathstudies.northwestern.edu) . It is by no means the task of this introduction to conduct a survey of these activities and literatures here—and we note the limited worlds of reference that we bring as editors—but only to mark the simultaneity of a notable increase in contemporary interest in dying and grief in performance and philosophy, with the weight of its vast historical precedents.

Whilst welcome to some extent, the contemporary proliferation of philosophical and artistic engagements with grief also leaves itself open to criticism. In the philosophical context, for example, much scholarship remains woefully Eurocentric and dominated by white, male, Anglo-American perspectives (Cholbi and Timmerman 2020). This recent literature from Anglo-US and European academic philosophy also has a tendency to leave unchallenged the dominant assumption that grief is something that needs to be ‘resolved’ and to reinforce an anthropocentric perspective focused on human loss (Slawkowski-Rode 2023). Related to this, as Daddario and Zerdy discuss in this edition, 2022 saw the entrance of pathological grief into the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edition, thereby authorizing psychologists and clinical mental health counselors to diagnose someone with abnormal, maladaptive, and problematic grief. In turn, in the arts context, the growth of interest in grief by artists can also invoke a certain wariness towards ‘bandwagoning,’ which can lead to care-less engagements with notions of grieving, raising questions around what skills and training artists and other facilitators might need to have before claiming to offer a space for grief and/or how the space that the arts offer for grief needs to be framed in order to share its practices responsibly.⁴ That is, there are clearly complex ethical questions raised by, on the one hand, the value of art to challenge assumptions of exclusive authority in relation to dying and grief by dominant knowledge-practices, and, on the other hand, the need for artists to learn from the experiences of other lived wisdoms to understand what it means to take responsibility for their work in the context of epistemologically experimental practices, particularly when it comes to trauma and trauma-informed approaches to their potential audiences.

In this respect, there would seem to be great benefits of further cross-sector exchange and learning between artists concerned with grief and dying and professionals working in the expanding field developing alternative practices and discourses in relation to death and grief beyond dominant traditions and roles coming from the contexts of medicine, mental health, religion, communities and commercial death industries. For example, recent years have seen the growth and development of roles such as ‘death doulas’ (Bu Shea) and ‘abortion doulas’ (Williams);⁵ the increasing maturity of fields such as ‘holistic deathcare’; and the emergence of new concepts from ‘death wellness’ to ‘intentional grieving’ (Bu Shea). *What can artists, activists, community workers and professionals in these fields learn from each other? What can we learn from encountering the performance philosopher as a death doula; as a grief worker; as an embodied social justice facilitator or community organizer?*

What will you learn under the banner of grief?
(Williams)

In the case of many of our contributors, the move towards working with dying and grief has not been so much a matter of choice as of necessity. Or, somewhere between choice and necessity, it comes from an openness to bringing grief into research or to acknowledging grief *as* research. As Laura Cull Ó Maoilearca writes in the performance philosophy work, *An [Interrupted] Bestiary* (2022): “Rather than thinking of my grief as something that was merely stopping me from doing work or as the ‘background’ to work, I have come to appreciate that *this is the work* on an important level” (11). Grief was coming with us into the studio, accompanying us to the library or the classroom, whether we liked it or not, so why not acknowledge this presence and see what grief can offer as a collaborator in performative and philosophical practices? In this respect, contributions often put pressure on lingering academic conventions underpinned by disembodied notions of objectivity, including by continuing and contributing to the longstanding investigation of how academic writing and thinking can manifest in, from, and alongside **the personal**, anecdotal and (auto)biographical, spirituality and systems of belief. And indeed, in many cases, the investigation of grief here is explicitly contextualized by authors as stemming from their own ‘personal’ experiences of living alongside dying and/or differing forms of loss (Daddario and Zerdy; Zacharias; Achikeobi-Lewis; Hazelwood; Saleh; Osborne; Sánchez-Querubín).

Borne from this lived experience, the idea of **grief as a teacher**—as an epistemologically generative source of insight—appears repeatedly throughout this issue. As does the notion of **grief as transformation**. Siegmund Zacharias, for instance, writes of “grieving as a portal to liberation and social transformation.” Likewise, other authors repeat the call to move away from the (Freudian) notion of grief as that which must be overcome, towards an emphasis on the transformative epistemological and ethico-political potential of grieving, as painful as it may be. Again, drawing from Zacharias, we see how the intensity of the disruption that grief brings into our lives

breaks open not just our breathing patterns and social patterns, but might open up a space in which we become aware of how cultural, social, historical, and political patterns show up in and on our bodies and our ways of living and dying and grieving. Grieving can offer us the opportunity to learn how not to comply to these patterns, teaches us how to resist and disrupt and not perform according to assumed structures by refusing to “get better”, to “calm down”, to “get it together”, to “keep going.” (Zacharias)

In many cases, the articulation of new practices and discourses takes place in a context of critique of dominant cultural norms surrounding death and grief and a strong sense of the need for alternative modes of thinking and being—to which the field of performance philosophy might contribute. Contributors point toward the impoverishment of Western paradigms where “death is something that needs to be dealt with as quickly and as silently as possible” and grief is something to be merely “overcome” (Insignares). For Williams, for instance, the dominant model of Western society is one that “systemically marginalizes and individualizes loss” (Williams). Likewise, Williams also notes the problematic impact of dominant bereavement discourses—such as the

misapplication of the Küber-Ross “five stages of grief” towards a one-size-fits-all approach to grief—which fails to support the diversity and multiplicity of grief experiences.

Throughout the contributions, we hear the repeated call to question normative paradigms which encourage us to distract or numb ourselves from the discomfort of grief, asking instead how we can “re-learn to identify where our bodies are holding grief, [and] to make space to be with it” (Barton) rather than approaching it as a pathology to be treated or a problem to be solved. Grief is something that we would do well to ‘tend’—to attend to and care for—Barton’s book *Tending Grief* suggests, and this is a place where performative embodied practices and rituals can support us.

Contexts, connections, communities

This journal issue is an outcome of *The Grief Project* (<https://www.atd.ahk.nl/das-research/projects/thematic-collaboration-program/the-grief-project/>): an ongoing practical research project situated at the Lectorate of the Academy of Theatre & Dance (ATD),⁶ developed in collaboration with the ARIAS Network as part of the “Thematic Collaboration Program” of the Amsterdam University of the Arts.

Since 2021, the ATD Lectorate has been working with grief and loss as one of the core themes of its research program (ATD Lectorate, “Care, Grief & Loss, Lived time”). Starting in Spring 2023, this has taken the specific form of *The Grief Project* which brings together invited artists and professionals to form a research group to consider grief from a social justice perspective and explore the role of creative practices in responding to individual, collective, and ecological grief. Since it began, *The Grief Project* has conducted a wide range of different activities including *What is grief doing in the Academy?* (ATD Lectorate 2024)—a month-long collective artistic research exploration of grief and its relationship to listening curated by Rajni Shah at the ATD in January 2024. This, in turn, was a project that grew from the Performance Philosophy issue *how to think* (Shah and Cull Ó Maoilearca 2021), a podcast series of slow conversations between humans who are re-centering the work of listening, healing, justice, and love—all of which were rooted in themes of loss and grief (<https://www.performancephilosophy.org/journal/issue/view/how-to-think>).

While much of *The Grief Project*’s work has taken place in Amsterdam—including the artist-in-residence project of Kai Hazelwood and Phoebus Osborne, *Grief-listening-time* (ATD Lectorate “Grief-listening-time”, 2023–4) and the guest lectures of Camille Sapara Barton and Staci Bu Shea in December 2023⁷—it has also, from the start, been developed in close collaboration and dialogue with international partners, particularly Will Daddario and Joanne Zerdy and their US-based organization Inviting Abundance (<https://invitingabundance.net/>), enabling us to nurture an emerging international network of artists, scholars, and practitioners using creative methods to approach dying and grief. And indeed, we are continuing to explore how creative grief practices, which are often deeply concerned with embodiment, can be shared remotely, across distributed locations and different timezones.

In June 2024, for example, several contributors shared their practices in the context of After Tragedy: the 2024 Performance Philosophy biennial hosted at the University of Texas, Austin, and organized by Minou Arjomand and David Kornhaber (Performance Philosophy 2024). As part of the biennial, we offered two hybrid workshops hosted simultaneously in Austin (by Will Daddario and Siegmund Zacharias) and Amsterdam (by Laura Cull Ó Maoilearca and Catalina Insignares) in which participants in both cities were invited to embody four creative grief practices facilitated in person and remotely. Insignares shared practices from her research *ese muerto se lo cargo yo*: listening, tuning in, sounding, moving with, attuning to the voices of the dead. Cull Ó Maoilearca did a live reading of the two stories about grief and whales that you will find in this issue. Zacharias offered a listening practice, for giving our bodies as resonance spaces for each other to be in the wild space of grief and connection through sound, proposing that somatic listening invites us to sense into our metabolic intimacies with the other, with the dead, and with the unknown. Daddario offered an exercise on the social learning of grief asking participants to answer the question, “If I could create grief lessons for myself in the present, what would those lessons be?” For Will, to reconnect with and turn-toward grief, so as to actualize the full capacities of being human, it is often beneficial, sometimes also necessary, to un-learn the lessons on grief we have encountered and silently internalized from our childhoods.

The special section of this issue on **The Politics of the Dead Body**—edited by Andrés Henao Castro and Elva Orozco Mendoza—is another very welcome instance of international collaboration that emerged unexpectedly in the process of putting the issue together. During the editing process, we encountered Andrés and Elva’s work with a group of authors thinking through questions of death and social justice, understood through performance but also through political philosophy, and invited them to contribute a special section to the journal. For us, this section adds highly valuable alternative disciplinary perspectives to the topics at hand, and brought productive new resonances to the pieces we had already commissioned.

Finally, interested readers can watch back the session where contributors to both the main issue (Raoni Muzho Saleh and Paulina Trejo Méndez) and the special section (Osman Balkan) shared their research in the context of World Ends Day in October 2024 (<https://performingends.com/world-ends-day>). World Ends Day is an annual online symposium that “brings together artists and thinkers to consider our shared durational ends—corporeal, political, organic; and yet, intangible, capitalist, and planetary” (Performing Ends, “World Ends Day”).

In this context, we hope that the publication of this special issue of the *Performance Philosophy* journal offers further strength to this emerging transcultural community of researchers working with the dead, dying, and grief through performative and philosophical practices: inviting new connections and offering up practices and conceptual tools that can be picked up and used by others in their own contexts.

Without a doubt, the tendency to ignore one of the few things that we all have in common—the fact that we will die—permits suffering to thrive in the contemporary moment. At the same time, though, the whole effort is absurd. Ignoring death is the turtle trying to shake off its shell. Absurd, but, in the case of human thanatophobia, not surprising. Cultural amnesia, seemingly unchecked in its spread through the matrix of Whiteness, seems to preclude not only actionable knowledge of the pain inflicted on Indigenous populations by colonizers, of the labor of the enslaved used to fuel the engine of capitalist production, and of the cyclical pattern of genocidal warmongering. Cultural amnesia also denies each of those inflicted with the paradoxical problem of not knowing one's self, one's body, one's entanglement with others, and of not knowing many of the arts drawn upon to tend to death, grief, and the foresight of much death and grief to come. As Raoni Muzho Saleh reminds us in this edition of *Performance Philosophy*, cultural amnesia prevents us from witnessing, from truly touching the reality of death and grief in this world:

On the duty and dilemma of bearing witness to the mass slaughter of her people, Sarah Aziza published an online text called "The Work of the Witness" (Aziza 2024). In it she explains that the Arabic word for witnessing shares the same root as the word martyr شهيد, shahid, namely شهد. The martyr is the one whose death is marked, touched and stained by bearing witness to oppression. Aziza remarks that: "To be a witness is to make contact, to be touched, and to bear the marks of this touch."

Let us, then, begin to remember, to remember what we already know, to open eyes so as to witness and touch and, by so doing, take up the work of grieving, which is to say the work of rebellion.

The fact that we will die may be one of the few things that we all have in common; but of course the inequalities that create the conditions for radically differing deaths and correlatively divergent experiences of grief mean that dying cannot be approached as universal. Contributions to this journal issue start from the recognition of the radical inequality where only some lives are grievable and others are disposable. Various theorised as 'necrocapitalism' (Mbembe 2003), as exclusionary concepts of what counts as a 'grievable death' (Butler 2009) and 'disenfranchised grief' (attributed originally to Doka 1989), this volume makes clear that performance philosophies of death and grief emerge from sites of fundamental geopolitical difference—"places where life can be lived by forgetting death; and places where death is never out of the conversation for more than 20 minutes" (Insignares). How can performance philosophy enact practices of thinking with death according to a careful attention to the vast differences between contexts: what it means for those who live in intimate relationship with death and for those who can forget or distance themselves from it? What modes of grief are possible for those "who live at the edge of life, or even on its outer edge—people for whom living means continually standing up to death" (Mbembe 2003, 37)?

As Derrick Johnson wrote in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, "In America, Black deaths are not a flaw in the system. They are the system" (Johnson 2020). To quote Johnson at length:

Too many Black people in America are dying.

We die driving our cars. We die playing outside. We die babysitting. We die eating ice cream. We die sleeping in our own beds. We die and die and die at the hands of the police who are sworn to serve and protect us.

Even then, we are not done dying. We die giving birth. We die trying to breathe. We die when doctors under-treat our heart attacks and dismiss our calls for help. We die because we are overrepresented where it hurts, such as poverty and prisons, and underrepresented where it helps, such as higher education, elected office, and the federal judiciary. We die from many causes, but one stands out from all others: racism.

The expendability of Black lives is not a flaw in the system; it is the system. We are meant to die or, at the very least, we are not meant to be protected, to be respected, to be valued, to be considered fully human. That is how racism works, and it has operated efficiently throughout American history. (Johnson 2020)

But while much new work is emerging that addresses the specificity of Black grief and loss (Rankine 2015; Ife 2022; Rolston and Vernon 2024), other authors in this issue point to how structural racial inequality continues to play out in various fields of knowledge-production. For instance, Achikeobi-Lewis notes how Western mental health counseling approaches to trauma offer 'no explanation or even recognition of the lived ancestral grief and trauma' that exist in her body as an African descendant.

Always more than one: throughout this issue, authors explore **the multiplicity of grief**, inviting questioning of the relationships between different forms and sources of grief from personal loss to ecological grief (schäfer); from the transmission of ancestral trauma and intergenerational grief memory (Achikeobi-Lewis) to the grief of dispossession (Saleh). Whilst the issue does give particular attention to how to practice performance philosophy with the dead and dying, we begin from the premise that "Grief is about loss—not just dying" (Doka in Turner and Stauffer 2024). As Barton notes: "Grief is not limited to the death of a loved one; we can grieve the loss of our homelands, the loss of former versions of ourselves or the pain of war and state violence" (Barton). Grief is experienced and practiced as feelings of sadness, aloneness, and "not being Home" related to diaspora and from losses of lands, homes, and cultures (Achikeobi-Lewis); grief arises from ends to relations with parents and siblings in the context of gender transition (Saleh); grief manifests in the experience of the loss of a body's ability after diagnosis and long illness (Hazelwood); grief can arise from so-called 'non-death losses' such as loss of access to housing, employment, autonomy, education, and certain forms of political power (Williams). Building on the work of Phyllis Windle in "The Ecology of Grief" (1995), Kriss Kevorkian (2004) on 'environmental grief,' and Glenn Albrecht on 'solastalgia' (2005), the notion of ecological grief is also becoming increasingly important to understand the affective, emotional, and psychological impacts of human-caused climate change and its associated losses (Cunsolo and Ellis 2018). As stëfΔ/V discusses, "Grief here is associated with physical, ecological loss (species, landscapes), with the loss of environmental knowledge (farmers' local seasonal knowledge) or with anticipated future losses (future culture, livelihood, way of life)."

And within this multiplicity, it is also often that grief is articulated here as irreducible to any one affect: grief tends towards joyful transformation as well as sadness (Saleh); grief is mixed with the fullness and intensity of rage as well as a sense of the loss or numbing of feeling and sensation; grief is a potential site of humour and play, not only suffering (Hazelwood); grief and relief crystallize into one another as a present/ce of loss finally catches up with its lengthy anticipation (Osborne); grief can generate feelings of togetherness as well as isolation (Trejo Méndez). As Martín Prechtel has so powerfully discussed, the relationship between grief and love, or between grief and care, brings out its multifaceted affective qualities: "Grief expressed out loud, whether in or out of character, unchoreographed and honest, for someone we have lost, or a country or home we have lost, is in itself the greatest praise we could ever give them. Grief is praise, because it is the natural way love honours what it misses" (Prechtel 2015, 31). Or as bell hooks writes in *All About Love*: "To be loving is to be open to grief, to be touched by sorrow, even sorrow that is unending. The way we grieve is informed by whether we know love" (hooks 2000, 200).

And yet, the concepts and practices of grief manifest here proliferate beyond any fixed, unified or essential definition; including Zacharias' invitation to us to move "away from a singular, universalist notion of grief towards a multilayered conception of *grieves*" (Zacharias). Amongst the many characterisations offered in this issue, we encounter grief not as an emotion "to manage and overcome," but as an "active, disruptive" process "capable of unsettling and reshaping personal and collective entrenched power structures and normative expectations" (Zacharias). In turn, for Osborne, grief is not only a multiplicity, but also inherently excessive: "Voluptuous monstrosity, alchemical overflow, contamination—excess is core to grief, even in its internal and less public mutations. Grief performs a profusion of material flamboyance, enacting a more-than-human, a more-than-one—an uncountable too much" (Osborne). And it is this excess that brings Osborne to dramatize the conceptual personae of grief as a drag performer—our Drag Mother who "turns what we think we know inside-out-outside-in."

Performance, embodiment, identity

This issue is specifically concerned with the relationships between dying, grief, performance, and philosophy. As ever, in the context of performance philosophy, **notions of performance** in this issue are broadly construed, touching on a wide range of practices both within and beyond the context of the performing arts, moving between and across private and public space: from choreography and performance art to participatory and socially-engaged art (Daddario and Zerdy) and performance on/for camera (Osborne); from the creation of personas or characters to singing and moaning as storytelling (Saleh); from one-to-one encounters (Insignares; Bu Shea) to collective practices such as Saleh's *Moaning Choir* (2020); from protest art, such as the collective weaving practice of the Mexican feminist collective *Hilos* (Trejo Méndez) to collective care and mutual aid considered as 'grieving rituals' (Zacharias); from practices working with plant medicine (Zacharias) to the act of hand poke tattooing and the design and wear of memorial T-shirts to initiate conversations around ecological grief (schäfer).

At the same time—as per its broadened understanding in performance studies, performativity theory, and performance philosophy—not all considerations of performance here relate to arts contexts, but bring the perspective of performance to contexts such as identity formation, knowledge-production, ritual, protest, and community organizing. Such an approach is also aligned within some approaches to the philosophical aesthetics of loss, grief, and mourning which look at the arts alongside aesthetic gestures as enacted in/as wider cultural practices surrounding death and loss, from funeral rituals and behaviours to memorialization practices such as shrine-construction and memorial T-shirts (Higgins 2024). In this issue, authors invite us to attend to how wisdoms related to dying and grief are performatively produced and to how death and grieving operate as sites of performative acts of the reiteration and resistance of normative values—pertaining to and intersecting with the performative production of subjectivities in relation to identity categories including race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, and species. This is particularly foregrounded in contributions such as Kai Hazelwood’s where the wisdom of the author’s own body—her embodiment of becoming and unbecoming as constituted by processes of racialization, ableism, and interspecies kinship—is both valued in its singularity and genealogically situated. Likewise, in their article, Paulina Trejo Méndez focuses on the racialized and gendered inscription and erasure of bodies within the context of forced disappearance and feminicide in Mexico, alongside the feminist artistic practices that have emerged in resistance to it. Or again, Ash Williams’ article reflects on the performative capacity of grief and mourning to gather people together, build solidarity and incite collective action.

In turn, contributors touch on how relations to the dead, dying and grief are constituted through varying forms of **social performance**, death and mourning rituals including “the global tradition of professional mourners, who in many cultures serve as choreographers of grief in times of loss”—for example, in the tradition of *oppari* sung in southern India and Sri Lanka (ironically itself a ‘dying practice’) (Saleh). Or again, in their contribution, Staci Bu Shea describes practicing the act of washing a dead body on their living partner within their training as a holistic deathcare worker as both a ‘*memento mori* performance’ and a form of rehearsal in which a loved one is playing dead. A real fiction: “Here we were, very alive, softening a fear, playing pretend” (Bu Shea). Further, Ash Williams’ article addresses how the performativity of rituals, immersions, vigils, and visioning sessions held by Black and indigenous, queer and trans, and disabled death workers create the embodied conditions for collective thinking and processing systemic forms of oppression.

Throughout, a recurring theme is the power of collective grieving as a means to resist oppression. Contributions repeatedly refuse the **individualizing paradigm** that can surround grief and foreground instead its social and collective dimensions (Daddario and Zerdy; Saleh; Trejo Méndez; Williams; Zacharias) in ways that blur conventional distinctions between grief and mourning, between supposedly ‘inward’ feeling and its ‘outward expression.’ Whether in relation to the Shi’a traditions of public lament and social mourning (Saleh) or the collective weaving practices of the Hilos collective in Mexico (Trejo Méndez), authors share the lived experience of the transformative potential of participating in collective acts of shared grieving: “to be amidst a huge mass of people whose chest and head have become a collective drum” (Saleh).

Show me that there is hope in coming together
That we can repair our wounds under the sunlight
That it can be different
That you can teach me how to stitch hope
I dream that a tapestry made of belonging covered the streets
People letting their hearts melt under the fabric
My feet could feel their heartbeat.

(Trejo Méndez)

Here, the interest of contributors in collectivity is less about seeking to homogenize or unify experiences; rather, as Saleh describes, it is more to do with creating a space where we can find “strength and guidance through the differences of our suffering” (Saleh).

This refusal of individualism resonates with the fundamentally **relational ontologies** that are introduced from different cultural perspectives, including the foregrounding of interdependence and interconnectedness in many African philosophies—as Mbiti describes (and Achikeobi-Lewis quotes in her text in this issue): In African tradition, “the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. Whatever happens to the individual is believed to happen to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual [...] The individual can only say: *‘I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.’* This is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man” (Mbiti 1990, 101).

In this issue, we have also made a particular choice to foreground the voices of **practitioners** and particularly queer, trans, and/or BIPOC practitioners: those who are deeply involved in the *practice* of how we might relate to the dead and to grief from a social justice perspective, across overlapping contexts such as the arts, education, activism, grief and death work, mental health counseling, healing practices and end-of-life care (including for more-than-human forms of life), and in varying modes of relation to academic institutions. Informed by an educational and cultural context where the epistemic value of diverse lived experiences, situated and embodied knowledges and practical know-hows still needs to be reasserted and reenacted on a daily basis, we consider this foregrounding of how performance practice thinks as part of a wider politics of knowledge. It builds on and aims to contribute to the wider efforts of performance philosophy to de-fragment academic and artistic, theoretical, and practical knowledges, in ways that are attentive to differences and inequalities between thinking-practices without reinforcing false separations, historical hierarchizations and exclusions, and outdated disciplinary distinctions which stand in the way of more equitable, holistic, transdisciplinary, and cross-sector approaches to topics such as dying and grief. In this sense, we consider the issue as joining a wider conversation and movement where researchers in other disciplines seek to foreground issues of social justice, equity, and diversity in contexts of ‘death, dying, loss, and grief’, including from a sociological perspective critical of the tendency of thanatology to “focus on individual experiences without taking into account the social and political contexts in which they belong” (Harris and Bordere 2016, 5).

Again, following the pluralising aims of performance philosophy, we have also specifically invited and encouraged these practitioners to locate the modes of voice and **formats** of publication that best allows their practice-thinking to emerge and articulate itself: whether through fragment and associative thinking (Insignares); images, poetics, and creative writing (Saleh; Osborne; Cull Ó Maoilearca); multimedia documentation of experiments resulting from artistic research (schäfer) or the invitation to whole body listening through offerings, rituals, and exercises provided in the form of accompanying podcasts and sound works (Zacharias; Hazelwood; Barton). Here, perhaps, this is not only a matter of pluralization for its own sake; but also an acknowledgment of the limits of normative academic forms and methods in relation to grief, whether in terms of the misfit of linear temporality in conventional approaches to the page or the residual operation of norms of rationality and objectivity in the evaluation of academic research. And indeed, it is commonplace for loss and bereavement to confront people with the limits of certain modes of language and articulacy: to turn to poetry, imagery, ritual, chanting and song, movement, and other embodied practices in order to be-with, share, and respond to the intensity and complexity of affective experience and knowledge that grieving can gift.

The embodied, multisensory, and temporal nature of performance practices lend themselves particularly well to death and grief relations, including through the focus on embodiment as multiplying points of access to alternative forms of intelligence, sense-making, and awareness beyond the cognitive. Contributors articulate the role of sensation (touch, smell), imagination, somatic practices, storytelling, and (deep) listening in how we relate to the dead, and to our own and to each other's grieving. Somatics—with its emphasis on the felt—is particularly valued in this context. Embodied practices for heightening attention to relation—informed by Reiki, Zen, and other somatic and spiritual practices—are emphasised as critical tools for inhabiting alternative ways of being with grief, dying, and death.

In terms of temporality, readers will notice that contributions often access these alternative modes of relation through alternative ways of being in time—for example, in her invitation towards the embodiment of 'reptile time' as distinct from clock time, Hazelwood emphasises the specific temporal conditions necessary for accessing transformative experiences of 'play' (Hazelwood). Likewise, both stëfΔ/V and Osborne allude to the deep time of geological processes that require an expansion of our thinking of the durations of dying and grief into more-than-human timespans.

How and when might you perform this issue?
How and when might this issue perform you?

In this respect, this journal issue also asks something of you, its readers, audiences, participants; it invites ongoing reflection on and embodied experimentation with the tempos and rhythms of performance philosophy's reception and (co-)production. Readers will find an extensive offering of practices that they can pick up themselves, from Insignares and Mendonça's *Landscapes of the Dead* to stëfΔ/V's offer of his practice as a soft guideline for how to approach co-creation of rituals with (dying) mountains. In some cases, practices are described and their insights articulated; in others, practices are offered directly for readers to do through guided exercises in audio form. As

contextualization, a proliferation of other practices (from Remote Viewing to Somatic Experiencing) help the issues' contributors to collectively map the complex lineages of these new grief and death practices.

Objects, materials, technologies

The role of **objects** and other materials in supporting the enactment of relations to the dead is also widely addressed. In his discussion of vigils, for instance, Williams describes how resistance to systemic oppression is strengthened through community altar-building in which "people share food and bring photos, flowers, trinkets, sacred items, flags, candles, water, dirt, incense for burning, crystals, stones, clothing items, sign-making materials, and other things to write on and write with to put on the altar and have at the vigil." In turn, Achikeobi-Lewis discusses contemporary artist Kwame Akoto-Bamfo's reference to the 17th- and 18th-century Ghanaian practice of sculpting Memorial Heads or Nsodie which functioned as loci for prayers and offerings: a material basis for invocation (Achikeobi-Lewis). Re-making this practice for the present, Achikeobi-Lewis suggests that embodied participation in Akoto-Bamfo's sculptural installation can support the healing of intergenerational trauma for African diaspora descendents. Situated in the context of theorizations of rituals and ceremonies, objects are understood as "the vehicles through which the invisible can become manifest and the consciousness can ascend to a more exalted state than its usual mundane condition" (Scott 2021, n.p.).

From a very different perspective and context, stëfΔ/V's contribution touches on the production of objects such as memorial T-Shirts: shirts that can be designed to acknowledge and commemorate a human or more-than-human death, but also to act as conversation pieces—"to allow death to enter the conversation" (Cann 2014, cited in schäfer). Exposing the performative dimension of speculative design, stëfΔ/V's memorial shirt for the death of the Ok-glacier in Iceland has been variously activated, including through being worn by gallery staff as a means to invite discussion on climate collapse, death, and disappearing glaciers with visiting audiences.

Questions of the constitutive role of **technologies** in enacting new relations to dying and grieving are also considered, including in relation to the role that mobile phones have played in the self-documentation and witnessing of the Palestinian genocide (Zacharias; Saleh). The integration of digital media into our death and grief experiences is the particular focus of Natalia Sánchez-Querubín's contribution, which foregrounds the role of the human actors within the performative production of relations within socio-technical assemblages that enable mediated care and grief, such as in the case of the hybrid funerals. Here, the author also touches on the affective role of 'digital remains;' namely, online content on deceased people on social media platforms and mobile phones as materials through which new practices for "maintaining ties with the dead" are being invented and practiced.

(In)Disciplining grief

To what fields do we turn when faced with the ‘problem’ of dying? To what domains of knowledge do we reach in the midst of grief? How can performance philosophies ‘know’ grief and dying and what can grief teach us including as performance philosophers, when the wisdom of grief often lies precisely in the acceptance of unknowing? This issue raises myriad questions of how performance and philosophy might interact with knowledge claims relating to dying and grief originating from a diversity of other sectors and domains. Authors approach grief and dying with insights from a wide range of disciplinary fields and practices including: psychology; psychoanalysis; anthropology; sociology; theology and spirituality; trauma studies; death studies and death care; somatics and bodywork; therapy and mental health counselling; medicine and science, including the biological field of epigenetics or heritable traits.

The issue particularly opens up questions of how performance philosophy might relate to **therapeutic** frameworks and practices, mental health, and somatics not least since many of the contributors are also professionals in those domains (Daddario and Zerdy; Achikeobi-Lewis; Sapara Barton). Contributions refer to and engage with a wide range of theories and practices from these fields: from Somatic Experiencing and Generative Somatics (Barton), to mindfulness and Saketopoulou’s psychoanalytic notion of “traumatophilia” (Saleh). At the same time, many contributors critically point toward the limits of Western medical and therapeutic paradigms, methods, policies and systems—for instance, calling for a decolonized approach that gives serious attention to experiences such as ancestral trauma (Achikeobi-Lewis) or calling for the affirmation of the radically social nature of grief contra its medicalization and individualization through dominant Anglo-U.S. and European psychological discourse (Daddario and Zerdy). Likewise, in relation to death and dying, Bu Shea positions their practice—and the work of holistic deathcare more broadly—in a critical relation to the medicalization of death and death-care industries in North America and Europe in the last century, including the distancing effect of outsourcing to commercial funeral homes the act of washing and preparing the dead body.

Contributions also often put pressure on **academic conventions**, including by continuing the widely-held investigation of how academic writing and thinking can manifest in, from, and alongside the **personal**, the anecdotal and (auto)biographical, spirituality and systems of **belief**. In many cases, the investigation of grief is explicitly contextualized by authors as stemming from their own personal experiences of living alongside dying and/or differing forms of loss (Daddario and Zerdy; Zacharias; Achikeobi-Lewis; Hazelwood; Saleh; Osborne; Sánchez-Querubín).

With the [living] dead

The title of our issue foregrounds the emphasis on relationality: the shared concern of many of our contributors with the question of how we relate to the dead and dying; a shared concern with ‘with-ness.’ Contributors ask how to care for and take responsibility for the dead (Insignaries; Bu Shea) and how to understand an “ancestral presence that I can feel but cannot see” (Achikeobi-Lewis); as well as exploring the role of the artist as a facilitator or host who mediates relations to

the dead and dying in varying ways: activating their presence (Insignares). Indeed, this 'with-ness' presumes some kind of presence, some demand for relation albeit that the dead are also invoked as 'invisible entities' (Insignares). By no means simply 'dead and gone' or consigned to some other-worldly realm, the dead here tend to appear as vivacious presences embedded into the movement of the now: "They seep into the faces of passers-by and emerge out of trees and restaurants in dreary new forms" (Howe 2001, 175, cited in Insignares).

Or perhaps it is better to say that the contributors to this volume call upon us to remain open to an expansive, non-binary ontology of the "both-and" where false dichotomies of absence/presence and real/imaginary are set in motion in multiple ways. As Daddario and Zerdy put it in their article, the grief that emerges with the severing of an attachment has the capacity to produce: "A reshaping of binary paradigms such that 'absent' and 'present' no longer function oppositionally but, rather, mix and swirl to create new combinations like 'absent-presence' and 'present-absence'" (Daddario and Zerdy). Likewise, in her text, Omi Achikeobi-Lewis thinks alongside John Mbiti's articulation of ancestors as the 'Living Dead' (Mbiti 1975): those who "are considered part of the family still, and will often show up in dreams, and visions with messages to aid the family or individuals' lives" (Achikeobi-Lewis). In the African tradition, she explains, kinship does not end with death; rather, "ancestors retain a role in human affairs" and are "tied to the welfare of the living" in ways that can be experienced as the explanation for both good and bad fortune, blessings and curses (Achikeobi-Lewis). This resonates in discordant ways with the notion of the living dead that we find in Achille Mbembe's account of necropolitics: the regime that subjects racialized groups "to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the living dead" (Mbembe 2003, 40). How do the 'alive whilst dead' and the 'dead whilst alive' encounter each other?

In the case of Bu Shea's contribution, caring for the dead specifically concerns the practice of washing a dead body: a ritual that, they note, holds "great significance across cultures and histories as a dignified rite connecting the living and the dead in support of the journeys ahead for both." While reference is made here to the death of 'loved ones' and to how we care for the dead whom we have loved, this is by no means assumed to be universal or uncomplicated, which would be to simplify and romanticize the oftentimes multivalent relations we have to that which is dying and entangled in our grieving, as Osborne's contribution points toward.

Memory is key here: its ontology, epistemology, and aesthetics, whether in terms of its role in perception or collective memory or its practice through acts of commemoration and memorialization. In a number of contributions, the discussion of memory leads to an emphasis on the aliveness, reality and presence of the past; as Christina Sharpe puts it: "the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present" (Sharpe 2016, 15). For Omi Achikeobi-Lewis, for instance, "Ancestors and their memory are real, passed on from generation to generation" (Achikeobi-Lewis). In turn, in their discussion of commemoration practices surrounding forced disappearance and femicide in Mexico, Trejo Méndez draws attention to the resistance toward official forms of state-sanctioned memory in the material production of collective, living, subaltern memories through practices of ephemeral 'anti-monuments' in public space. In Trejo Méndez's, Williams', and Daddario and Zerdy's articles, the politics of memorializing events such as vigils,

protests, and 'alchemical rituals' comes to the fore to emphasise the importance of performative gatherings that allow for the creation and publication of alternative narratives in the context of state-sanctioned violence, deaths at the hands of the state and gun violence, to support communities to process the emotions caused by systemic injustice and to galvanise resistance.

More-than-human dying and grief

In this issue, questions of dying and grief are not only considered in relation to the human, but also from a more-than-human perspective, including the question of how nonhuman beings themselves grieve (Cull Ó Maoilearca), the role of nonhuman entities in human-centred death practices (Sánchez-Querubín), and at how humans mourn the loss of nonhuman life (schäfer). From the circling of the vultures or *chulos* in Colombia in Insignares' piece, to the endangered southern resident orca population that centre in Cull Ó Maoilearca's whale grief stories, to the snake-inspired shedding of Hazelwood's offering, more-than-human lives and nonhuman agency figures strongly throughout the contributions: animals, plants, land and earth beings, technologies, and other vital material entities.

In Sánchez-Querubín's article for example, enacting Latour's actor network theory enables her to map the relational production of the event of her grandfather's funeral as constituted by "an assemblage of various (living and dead) human and non-human actors, including communication devices, data, and architectural elements, all acting in different ways and exerting influence on each other."

The more-than-human perspective is also particularly central in stëfΔ/V schäfer's contribution, where he asks what mountains and glaciers might want to tell us about life and death, within the context of (future) ecological grief. Noting the recent transnational phenomenon of funerals being held for dead glaciers—ostensibly as practices enabling humans to process ecological grief but also to raise awareness regarding anthropogenic climate change—stëfΔ/V's piece emerges from research seeking to explore what new performative rituals might emerge if dying mountains and glaciers were treated as collaborators in the creative process rather than the mere screens of anthropocentric projection. Here, we see how concepts of what counts as death and dying are performatively produced in relation to nonhuman beings—as a site of dynamic power relations between different forces, discourses, and agents, each contributing to the determination of when and why a mountain or glacier can be declared 'dead' and what this tells us about differing cultural conceptions of and relations to nonhuman life, agency, and personhood.

More-than-human lives and deaths also figure in Kai Hazelwood's exploration of what she can learn about how to practice liberation and transformation without fear and resistance through the lessons borne of companionship with her snake, Bisoux. For Hazelwood: "Liberation is a technique; I'm learning mine from snakes. Their capacity to move in any direction at every moment, the slowness they remind me to play with, their capacity to be in a constant state of transformation, and yet be fully themselves at any moment. Their shedding, constantly becoming and unbecoming, living peacefully in perpetual apocalypse."

In addressing more-than-human dying and grief, there is nevertheless a need to remain attentive to the relation between dismantling anthropocentrism and the urgency of ongoing dehumanization. For instance, in Saleh's contribution, we find the call to listen to nonhuman forms of moaning and wailing, but also to consider how vocal practices might be understood as a mode of witnessing and solidarity in which we "join with our voices the wailing calls of those deemed 'less than human' or simply as 'human-animals'" (Saleh), particularly Palestinians. Likewise, Trejo Méndez's article calls on us to consider how to situate more-than-human approaches in relation to the systemic dehumanization of racialized, feminized, and gendered bodies implied by the violence of feminicide in Mexico. In turn, in Daddario and Zerdy's discussion, the work of the Bakiné collective provides an example of how an intersectional Black eco-feminist perspective manifests the interconnections between resistance to racist, colonial, and anthropocentric oppressions and violence. As the collective describes: "We are committed to restoring rituals and practices that give room for black folks to grieve and connect with the land so that we can receive co-respite, widen our collective imaginations, prophesy & orient towards a black eco-feminist politic of liberation in the midst of climate collapse" (Bakiné n.d., cited in Daddario and Zerdy).

The Work

Suffice it to say, there is an abundance of thought to encounter in this edition of the *Performance Philosophy* journal. The editors would like to acknowledge the work of all the contributors and note that, due to the nature of this collection of articles and practices, 'the work' here refers to more than creating pieces for publication. Here, 'the work' refers equally to the work of grief with which each contributor has tarried. Pointing this out actually encourages us to think about the possibility that grief factors into the conditions that make possible all articles for publications and artistic expressions shared with audiences and spectators. We zoom into the materiality of the creation of scholarly and/or validated professional artistic practice and we find grief sprouting all around, like flowers and volunteer fruits and vegetables that have been thriving secretly in the tilth of daily life. We pluck a flower to learn from, and we find ourselves compelled to zoom in even further, at which point we find ourselves immersed in the irreducible complexity of grief's fractality. Even the structure of this edition hints to these fractal patterns that expose the everywhere-all-the-time-ness of grief's mycelial-like activity. You will encounter a second introduction as you read, one from Andrés Fabián Henao Castro and Elva Orozco Mendoza that introduces the nested section entitled "The Politics of the Dead Body." For now, however, we'll leave you to the work.

Notes

¹ This issue is being published at the moment when a ceasefire has been agreed. We find it important to recognise the ongoing effects of settler colonialism and genocide, even while we acknowledge the significance of this moment.

² For institutional statements on Palestine by the AHK, see <https://www.ahk.nl/en/news-and-events/news/2024/05/let-us-use-the-space-provided-by-art-and-education-to-prevent-polarisation/>.

³ At the time of writing the Lemkin Institute issues active genocide alerts for Palestine, Sudan, Congo, Yemen, Armenia, and Ethiopia (Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention).

⁴ Camille Sapara Barton's practice provides a useful example here: where invitations to grief gatherings are always offered accompanied by clear and transparent statements regarding for whom these sessions may or may not be suitable, and what they can and cannot provide in terms of grief support.

⁵ As Williams describes in his article for this volume: "With the consent of abortion seekers, abortion doulas provide informational, physical, and emotional support before, during, and after abortion."

⁶ A 'Lectorate' is a Dutch term for a research unit, research group or professorship within a university of applied sciences. The professor who leads a lectorate is called a 'Lector.'

⁷ The contributions of Camille Sapara Barton and Staci Bu Shea to this journal issue emerge from guest lectures provided by both practitioners in the context of the *Participation in Arts and Education* series co-curated by Laura Cull Ó Maoilearca, with colleagues Emiel Heijnen and Melissa Bremmer for Amsterdam University of the Arts. You can watch a recording of this session here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NKXSFo4niQI>.

⁸ Translation: be mindful of the dead.

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Biographies

Laura Cull Ó Maoilearca is an artist, writer and researcher based in Amsterdam, Netherlands. She holds a joint appointment as Lector (the Dutch title for professors at applied universities) of the Academy of Theatre and Dance at Amsterdam University of the Arts, and as special Professor of Performance Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam. Her latest publications are *Interspecies Performance* (2024) co-edited with Florence Fitzgerald-Allsopp for Performance Research Books and the expanded publication project, *An [Interrupted] Bestiary* (2022). Laura is a founding core convener of the Performance Philosophy network and an editor of its journal and book series.

Will Daddario is a performance philosopher, clinical mental health counselor, and clinical addictions specialist at Nova Transformations in Matthews, North Carolina. His forthcoming book is *The Last Laugh: Grief, Death, and The Comic* (Ethics Press, 2026). Previous publications include, with Matthew Goulish, *Pitch and Revelation* (Punctum) and numerous edited anthologies. He is one of the founding members of the Performance Philosophy network.

Rajni Shah has been making performance since 1999. From 2005–2012 they worked with other artists under the names 'Rajni Shah Theatre' and 'Rajni Shah Projects' to create a trilogy of works exploring moments of cultural identity and alienation (*Mr Quiver*, *Dinner with America*, and *Glorious*) and alongside this a series of public interventions exploring gift economies between strangers, entitled *small gifts*. From 2018–2020, after completing a practice-based PhD at Lancaster University, they accepted a Horizon Postdoctoral Fellowship at Concordia University, working with Luis Carlos Sotelo Castro to set up the *Acts of Listening Lab*, a physical location where artists and community members gather to research listening in post-conflict societies. In 2021, Rajni published their first monograph, *Experiments in Listening*, as part of the Performance Philosophy series with Rowman & Littlefield. They are currently a Researcher and Head-Heart of the THIRD programme at DAS Graduate School within the Academy of Theatre and Dance, University of the Arts Amsterdam (AHK).

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PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

NOTICING GRIEF IN THE BODY

CAMILLE SAPARA BARTON INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER

Context

In this time of political uncertainty, many of us are striving to create ways of being that will generate more care, compassion and equity in the collective. However, it can be hard to sustain this work when we are weighed down by untended grief. In the West, numbing or distracting ourselves when we feel discomfort or grief is very common. How can we reclaim our ability to be with grief, as part of the rhythm of our lives? I sense that we must re-learn to identify where our bodies are holding grief, to make space to be with it, when this feels supportive for us.

Once we can notice where grief is sitting within our bodies, we can choose how to respond. This is a practice, not a one-time event. Grief is not limited to the death of a loved one; we can grieve the loss of our homelands, the loss of former versions of ourselves or the pain of war and state violence. Untended grief can linger, smothering our creative capacity and ability to vision, until we give it space to be acknowledged. This exercise may support you to touch into grief that might be present in your body. After the practice, you can decide how you want to be in relationship to what arises.

Lineage

This exercise is inspired by Embodied Social Change workshops that I developed using partner work and body awareness practices to explore socially engaged topics. My approach to embodiment work is rooted in mindfulness, The Resilience Toolkit, Generative Somatics and the politicized somatics space more broadly. To access rituals to tend grief, you can read my book, *Tending Grief: Embodied Rituals for Holding Our Sorrow and Growing Cultures of Care in Community* (Barton 2024).

Exercise

- 1) Find a comfortable position, such as being seated or lying down.
- 2) Play the audio recording (10 minutes).
→ This will guide you through an embodied resourcing practice and guided meditation.
- 3) After listening to the recording, you are invited to journal or draw for five to ten minutes to reflect on anything you noticed during the practice.



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Biography

I'm a Social Imagineer, multidisciplinary artist and somatic practitioner, dedicated to co-creating networks of care and liveable futures. I work across the realms of embodied social justice, grief, harm reduction and the cultural sector. Rooted in Black feminism, ecology and harm reduction, I use creativity, alongside embodied practices, to create culture change in fields ranging from psychedelic assisted therapy to arts education. I am certified in the Resilience Toolkit—an embodiment framework to navigate stress, increase resilience and grow our collective capacity to change the conditions that create systemic harm.

In 2022, I launched the GEN Grief Toolkit—a collection of embodied grief rituals to support personal and community grief work. I am currently based in Amsterdam, working as the Director of Ecologies of Transformation, a temporary master's programme at Sandberg Institute (Amsterdam), that researches how art making and embodiment can create social change.

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PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

GRIEF AS RADICALLY SOCIAL

WILL DADDARIO AND JOANNE ZERDY

INVITING ABUNDANCE, INDIAN TRAIL, NORTH CAROLINA

Grief—the complex and entangling intra- and interpersonal emotions, sensations, and memories that unfold in the wake of a significant death, loss, transition, or severing of a meaningful attachment—is not the possession of an individual. It is not a feeling one *has*. It is not something one does in isolation, even when the griever in question is “alone” in a room. The reason one grieves is because one loves, one is attached—to a person, to a beloved animal, to a place, to a vocation, etc. With the attachment severed, grief rushes in. A longing. A reshaping of binary paradigms such that “absent” and “present” no longer function oppositionally but, rather, mix and swirl to create new combinations like “absent-presence” and “present-absence.” We cannot even think grief, then, without acknowledging the degree to which “I” is socially constructed, dependent on others, given to those with whom an attachment of considerable strength promises not only the joys of intimacy but the pain of irrevocable loss. Grief is radically social. This is our argument.

But we face opposition straight away. Consider that since 2022, with the publication of *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, Text Revision*, aka *DSM-5 TR*, psychologists, psychiatrists, and mental health counselors have the power to diagnose Prolonged Grief Disorder. This is a pathological form of grief. Grief gone awry. Marked by symptoms such as “Intense yearning/longing for the deceased person” and “Preoccupation with thoughts or memories of the deceased person” that exceed 12 months in duration (following a death), Prolonged Grief Disorder understands grief not only as a malady to remedy but also as a distressing situation that may require medication: “naltrexone, a drug used to help treat addiction, is currently in clinical trials as a form of grief therapy” (Barry 2022). An individual grieves

excessively, as defined through medical discourse, and licensed professionals can return that individual to a “normal” state of functioning by altering their brain’s chemistry.

Christine Valentine (2006) helps us understand how Prolonged Grief Disorder entered clinical discourse. The dominance of positivist paradigms throughout the 20th Century led academics and medical professionals to overvalue quantitative studies and undervalue subjective experiences of bereavement. In turn, “the experiences and responses of the bereaved are viewed in isolation from their social world and in the light of psychological measures of what constitutes normal and healthy grieving” (2006, 57–58).

Valentine illustrates how three dominant academic discourses took part in the shaping of prevailing contemporary Anglo-U.S. and European understandings of grief. The first was psychology and its “culture of prescription, by means of which grief has been medicalized and pathologized” (58). In hand with the formation of the construct of psychological grief we find counseling strategies to treat this grief, but, as Valentine notes, “such services may also marginalize and separate bereavement from ordinary life, giving rise to a ‘cult of the expert’ that runs the risk of disempowering people” (59). “Grief Work” in this light becomes synonymous with the “severing of ties” between the living and the deceased in order for the living person to be able to reinvest in new attachments.

Somewhat an equal and opposite reaction to the medicalization and individualization of grief promoted through psychological discourse, the discourse of anthropology led to a re-socialization of grief linked primarily to the desire for forming continuing bonds with the dead. “Such studies have highlighted the social construction of bereavement and demonstrated the diversity of ritual behaviour around the world” (62). On the one hand, anthropological discourse redefined and repositioned grief as a social product, one only thinkable through the practices and epistemologies that reveal the myriads of ways in which living members of society connect with the dead. On the other hand, the sources of anthropological discourse tended to exoticize “pre-industrial deathways” (59), which, in turn, Othered the grief of “those people” whose spiritual beliefs permit such connections between the living and the dead. Additionally, the findings of anthropological discourse rarely made their way into the practice of mental health counseling, and, as a result, treatment for “abnormal” or “distressing” (Western) grief rarely took note of global social bereavement.

The third discourse shaping the contemporary, dominant discourse on grief in the West comes from sociology. Starting in the 1950s, sociologists began to critique the individualization of grief. By the 1990s, following in the wake of the public grieving of those who died from AIDS, sociologists began to focus on personal agency and interpersonal connection through the act of grieving, which, in turn, led to preferences for the stories of grief experience. Ultimately, “The use of discursive approaches has facilitated the deconstruction of taken for granted categories and boundaries: between life and death, grief and mourning, and self and other” (74). Again, however, this discourse, though certainly at least in part responsible for the rise of postmodern articulations of mental health counseling such as narrative therapy, rarely gained access to the counseling

techniques that professionals relied upon to treat (and ultimately *resolve*) “complicated” and then prolonged grief.

Thus, in terms of the professions who assess, diagnose, and treat grief, we arrive at the understanding of grief as something one *has* but would like *not* to have. Grief becomes something to get through. We grieve and then we “return.” Outside of this medicalized grief territory, however, many thinkers, artists, community activists, and healers of various stripes have drawn attention to the ways in which grief, far from constituting an undesirable state of torturous longing, frequently leads to transformation and growth, both on individual and collective levels.

Here we find inspiration from, among others, Cindy Milstein, Michelle Cassandra Johnson, Camille Sapara Barton, and Jane Harris and Jimmy Edmonds. Milstein, editor of the essays *Rebellious Mourning: The Collective Work of Grief* (2017), describes the work of the text as asking

its contributors and readers to journey without answers, with curiosity, by walking directly into our grief. It [the book project] sees the work of grief, and spaces for it, as something that, similar to water and libraries, should be freely, healthily, and publicly available to all. In this way, precisely because we can more openly experiment with sharing the fullness of life, we can begin to rehumanize the world and ourselves. (4–5)

In this configuration—one that we deeply value—it is impossible to sever grief from “normal” (meaning “non-grieving”) daily life, as proponents of Prolonged Grief Disorder may wish us to do. And, collectively, the individual narratives that comprise this book directly confront the “12 month” parameters of Prolonged Grief Disorder diagnosis in vital ways. When grief has existed around us from before we are born until, likely, after we die, how is it possible to think outside of grief’s perpetual shaping of life?

As in *Rebellious Mourning*, Johnson’s *Finding Refuge: Heart Work for Healing Collective Grief* (2021) and Barton’s *Tending Grief Embodied Rituals for Holding Our Sorrow and Growing Cultures of Care in Community* (2024) weave poignant personal accounts of life, death, and grief together with compelling reflections on the social dimensions that shape individual lives. Each text joins the collective voices of *Rebellious Mourning* in suggesting that there is an ethics to grieving. Grieving is generative; it provides insight, clarity, and (re)connection. Barton writes, “By feeling into what is happening, by connecting to our grief and our love, we can reorient ourselves to the moment and adapt as needed to make emergent choices that serve life and are aligned with our intentions” (2024, 65). With a never-ending list of personal losses and sources of social grievances—e.g., the disintegration of social institutions, the violent persistence of white supremacy, the degradation of the more-than-human world, to name a few—we argue that the longer we live, the more important it is to choose how we move through our physical and socio-cultural terrains.

Both Johnson and Barton provide for their readers various embodied activities to call forth, hold, move with, and integrate grief in powerful ways. These include yoga practices, journal writing prompts, invitations to connect with the natural world, the use of candlelight vigils, and herbal

medicine. Arguably, each text advocates for intuitive and thus creative thinking and space-making when it comes to grieving and mourning on one's own and in relationship with others.

With an explicit need to explore the multifaceted dimensions of their grief, Jane Harris and Jimmy Edmonds began processing their son Joshua's death through various creative acts. They write, "Our own understanding of grief is that almost by definition it is a creative process—one of doing and creating new things that fill the void left by a loved one's absence, things that would and could not have existed before and unless they had died" (2022, 98). As they grieved for Joshua, Harris and Edmonds began facilitating hands-on workshops for grieving parents and siblings, inviting them to explore their impulses to process and memorialize their loved ones' lives and deaths. Harris and Edmonds's book *When Words Are Not Enough: Creative Responses to Grief* (2022) showcases some of their creative grief work alongside the artful and heartfelt work done by 13 fellow griever. Through photography, painting, running, swimming, singing, *Ikebana* (Zen flower arranging), social media, woodworking, drawing, and more, these griever make visible the life-making that can be done by exploring grief with curiosity, compassion, and, in some cases, a dose of humor.

We thus situate ourselves—as griever, grief workers, researchers, and writers—within this group and with many others who understand and navigate the currents of grief as a long-term practice. As we have been uprooted by trauma, loss, and grief (experiences we understand as distinct yet related), we have followed intuitive signals to reevaluate our social connections and how we wish to show up in a world full of pain and love, division and unity, destruction and repair. Joanne Cacciatore writes, "In doing with grief, grief is not gone, or forgotten, or recovered from. Grief remains our partner, our companion – the source of our compassionate action in the world. When we do with grief, grief is being lived openly, honestly, ennoblingly" (2016, 169). Significantly, we have learned through our own journeys, from those who have written of their own journeys, and from those with whom we have worked in our grief classes and workshops; we have learned that practicing grief helps us participate in the most meaningful aspects of life.

Our experiences have taught us that grief is radically social. Just as every individual human relies upon others (humans and more-than-humans) from the instant of conception, so too does grief emerge from the relationship between beings. Thus, we ask: How can we better understand this notion of radically social grief? What growth is possible once we embrace this social nature? How might we learn with and from the complex social-natural worlds in which we live? We explore these questions through a series of activist-art projects that foreground the transformational qualities of objects from death to life, individuality to community.

Grief as Social Alchemy¹

Consider the following progression of artistic projects that begin with a trio of works by Mexican artist Pedro Reyes.² The first is *Palas por pistolas* (*Shovels for/through guns*) from 2007–2008. In Culiacán, Mexico, Reyes found himself surrounded by guns, gun violence, and gun death. To process the grief of this situation, the artist devised a method for transforming the problem through a kind of social alchemy that drew from the resources of his community. These resources

came from business and philanthropic partners working at the Botanical Garden of Culiacán and the owners of the firearms. Through Reyes's artistic vision, the resources transformed the guns into shovels, and while this act of magical transformation might at first seem banal, a closer look shows true alchemy in action.

Gun owners encountered television commercials inviting them to exchange their firearms for vouchers that could purchase electronics, appliances, and other commodities. The local police department also advertised the project. At the end of the exchange period, the military was enlisted to help handle the weapons. Though rendered in the plainest of language, Reyes's own description of the transformation that followed reveals the power of alchemy at work:

1527 weapons were collected. 40% of them were high power automatic weapons of exclusive military use. These weapons were taken to a military zone where they were crushed by a steamroller in a public act.

The pieces were then taken to a foundry and melted. The metal was sent to a major hardware factory to produce the same number of 1527 shovels. The tools were made under specifications such as a handle with a legend telling the story.

These shovels have been distributed to a number of art institutions and public schools where adults and children engage in the action of planting 1527 trees.

This ritual has a pedagogical purpose of showing how an agent of death can become an agent of life. (Reyes 2008)

The word "ritual" feels appropriate here. An artistic idea sparked a participatory project—equal parts political and aesthetic—that culminated in the physical transformation of firearms into tools for connection and growth. By enlisting children and adults in the action of planting trees, Reyes highlights the temporal duration of this ritual's effects. The human lifespan, from adolescence to adulthood, receives extension from the lifespans of the trees, which will likely surpass that of the humans who handled the saplings. It is possible that future children of these children will benefit from the shade of these same trees. Perhaps they will even share the stories of the ritual inscribed on the shovels to their children from the balm of that shade.

Where is grief in all of this? At first, the grief appears as the condition or motivating factor of the project. Guns caused fear, injury, trauma, and death. Grief appears alongside each singular event. Over the course of the project, however, this perception of grief changes. Grief turns into a goad that stimulates social action. No longer simply equated with loss, pain, and heartache, grief becomes a means of creation.

This creative force, at first operative at the level of artistic concept, takes material form in the physical transformation of guns to shovels. When children's hands take up the shovels to plant trees, grief transforms again into a hybrid form of physical and emotional labor. Grief *works* to plant trees. Throughout the project, we learn that grief's identity draws from all these various states: fear, death, motivational force, means of creation, social-emotional labor, a point of connection. In other words, as Priya Jay writes, grief shows itself to be a "shape-shifter," a playfully

mischievous energy that animates time, space, and matter (2021). Like the hyphae and mycelia of fungi that spreads out and through the terrestrial landscape, grief infuses every facet of the social landscape. The shovels may be the fruiting bodies, but the network of grief is palpable within the vast social landscape activated by Reyes's initial idea.

The gun violence motivated *Palas por pistolas*, and the grief brought together a community to create life.³ This collective grief energy transformed through a second project, *Imagine* (2012). This time, Ciudad Juarez undertook a public destruction of weapons. The government contacted Reyes and asked him if he wanted the leftover metal, which, if not collected, would otherwise be buried underground. Reyes said yes and acquired the leftover parts of 6700 weapons gathered from citizens of Juarez. He decided not to transform the remnants of the weapons into shovels this time. Instead, the metal metamorphosed into tools of musical labor. Through guidance by curator Jessica Berlanga, six musicians transformed the metal into 50 playable instruments. Reyes underscores the magical element of the transformation:

The task was challenging but they succeeded in extracting sounds, from percussion to wind and string. It's difficult to explain but the transformation was more than physical. It's important to consider that many lives were taken with these weapons; as if a sort of exorcism was taking place the music expelled the demons they held, as well as being a requiem for lives lost. (Reyes 2012)⁴

The alchemical transformation of guns to shovels continues through *Imagine* as firearms become a source material for making music. Linked with *Palas por pistolas*, *Imagine* shows us how grief fuses with musical vibration. The breath that utters a cry of anguish for the dead or for a pained community can become a musical requiem. Grief is both the cry and the song of praise, as Martin Prechtel asserts, the pain and the prayer, the emptiness and the aspiration (2015).

Whereas the radically social dimension of grief in *Palas por pistolas* finds physical expression in the upturned soil that provides a new home for young saplings planted by the guns-turned-shovels, the social dimension of *Imagine* coalesces in the collaboration between metalworkers, musicians, and auditors. The musicians play with and through grief as the audience, dwelling with their own grief, receives and interprets the notes. Though each person carries their/her/his own individual grief into this encounter, *Imagine* amplifies the collective experience. As these musicians play in Mexico City (Mexico), Guangju (South Korea), Istanbul (Turkey), and London (England), the instruments transpose and transport the grief of Juarez to global audiences and the griefscapes in which these audiences live.

The sonic grief emitted from the collective music-making of the *Imagine* instruments transformed in 2013 when *Disarm* was born.⁵ This time, artists and technicians created a group of eight instruments from more firearms collected and destroyed by Mexican military forces. Unlike the music of *Imagine*, which required and drew strength from the work of human musicians, *Disarm* channeled grief into computer software. Designed as musical machines, the instruments made from these weapons resembled less a classical concert orchestra and more a contemporary electronic event. Reyes explains, "These machines are mechanical musical instruments; they can

be programmed and operated via computers, making them capable of performing music concerts with compositions prepared beforehand” (Neri 2013). The decision to fabricate musical instruments that resemble machines aligns with the artist’s desire to retain a sense of the weapons’ power. The music made of these machines is not always pretty:

The various parts of these automatons are recognizable as shotguns, pistols and rifles; while they no longer pose the threat of physical harm, they keep the sheer might of their most recent purpose. Now, these former arms strum, ring, crash, hum, and vibrate at different volumes and intensities to express elaborate compositions with a wide range of sonic nuances. (Neri 2013)

Surprisingly, to explain the conceptual work of this project on his website, Reyes turns to Japanese poetry. Specifically, he summons the master of haiku, Bashō (1644–1694), who, as Reyes tells it, offered instruction to his students while walking through a field one day. The walking poets observed nature and composed the following:

Red dragonflies
Remove their wings
And they are pepper pods

Bashō, however, explained that the syllables didn’t yet assemble themselves into a true haiku. The master made a subtle adjustment (visible but harder to specify in the English translation):

Red pepper pods
Add wings
And they are dragonflies

Reyes explains his citation of Bashō in this way: “For Bashō, what constitutes a haiku is not only its technical construction, but also a moment of insight; when an object or image is seen in a new light or when something is added or revealed in a meaningful way” (Reyes 2013). In other words, the technical transformation of guns into musical instruments is only part of the total event at work through the trio of projects, from *Palas por pistolas* to *Imagine* to *Disarm*. The perception of the transformation—the ability to see the material of the gun transmuted to the sound of music, for example—is equally important. It takes an audience to make the artwork complete. For Bashō and his students, the magic of the dragonfly inheres within its likeness to the pepper pod. A dragonfly is a pepper pod infused with a different form of life. The magic of the haiku, in turn, comes about through the artful arrangement of words. Bashō also emphasizes not the stripping away of a dragonfly’s wings but rather the addition of wings to a pepper pod, thereby highlighting the power of flight for the poem’s auditors.

Bashō’s entrance into the story brings us around again to the social dimension of this work. Japanese *Renga*, or “linked verse,” was a collaborative poetic undertaking that unfolded when multiple poets got together. Group authorship through sonic exploration presided over these poems. Multiple individuals with knowledge of poetic phraseology adapted mundane reflections

on the happenstances of the moment. A walk through a field becomes a poem on the similitude of dragonflies and pepper pods. Bashō and his companions provide exemplary forms of these Renga poems.

When Reyes cites Bashō, (another) something magical happens. Reyes fuses 21st-Century Mexico and 17th-Century Japan. He turns his fellow citizens and collaborators into poets whose materials are metal instead of words. And grief is ever-present. Japanese Renga poetry flourished at the same time as Zen Buddhism and thus the poetry often contains reflections of the fleeting nature of life, the juxtaposition of life and death, and the suffering that meditative minds attempt to absorb and accept. While no longer in the register of Zen or verbal language, Reyes's poetic operations continue to help grief find expression through material form. In particular, Reyes shows how grief lives in guns and lives, albeit differently, in shovels and musical instruments. Bashō and his students found inspiration in nature, and Reyes and his companions found inspiration in the social landscape, one in which guns could become collaborative artistic offerings when sonic wings were added through artistic alchemy.

Remarkably, the transformation continues. Working as a copy editor on a retrospective of Reyes's work, brontë velez experienced the power of the Mexican artist's social praxis. Driven by a desire to share this "medicine" (as they call it on their website) with inhabitants of the United States, velez teamed up with Kyle Lemle to form Bakiné (fka Lead to Life), an organization dedicated to "a people's alchemy for regeneration."⁶ Self-identifying as "a trans-local collective led by black-diasporic and queer artists, healers & ecologists," Bakiné undertakes applied alchemy to conjure healing justice.

The group's website hosts an archive of two specific alchemical ritual events, one in Atlanta (2018) and one in Oakland (2019). The events clearly build on Reyes's work, in fact velez had worked with Reyes (Wing 2008). Individuals in the community were invited to surrender firearms to be melted down and converted into shovels. The shovels became the tools for planting trees and installing food forests in urban centers. velez even transmuted some personal pain into the alchemy of the Atlanta project by planting a Redbud tree at the site where a friend lost their life to gun violence in 2013. velez surrounded the tree with the friend's ashes and soil "gathered from the site of an early 20th-century lynching along the Chattahoochee River" (Ibid.). Viewed from a distance, the social fabric made visible through this ritual action appears vast and rich in nutrients. Community members acknowledge the toll of gun violence, come together to transform the instruments of destruction into tools of cultivation, and then these tools engage with land that holds centuries of pain and resilience. Land stolen from Indigenous People provides the canvas on which Black communities, themselves forcibly relocated through enslavement and terror, can express their strength and aspirations.

Grief Makes Space

The spatial dimension of grief takes center stage in Reyes's work and its evolution through the social alchemy of the Bakiné collective. Institutions and individuals alike tend to present grief as

something that closes, confines, takes hold of, and stultifies. Here, however, grief thrives on openness, collective gesture (e.g., ritual), and interconnectedness. Bakiné helps us understand how this is so when they say,

We are committed to restoring rituals and practices that give room for black folks to grieve and connect with the land so that we can receive co-respite, widen our collective imaginations, prophesy & orient towards a black eco-feminist politic of liberation in the midst of climate collapse. (Bakiné n.d.)

This statement seems to arise from the frustrating, awful, and sadly too true fact that *space* to grieve is not available to all in equal measures. Imagine, for example, many black and brown bodies gathered together and demonstrating against gun violence outside of a capitol building somewhere in the United States. Recent history suggests that police perceive these demonstrating bodies as threatening, as if prone to spill over an imagined border separating peaceful protest and violent riot. At no time do police—or, for that matter, government or public media outlets—consider the space of the demonstration as something constructed by and through grief.⁷ Furthermore, if grief was permitted to enter the picture, the kind of grief on display would almost certainly not be understood as something productive, sustaining, and necessary to the wellbeing of the lives gathered together. And this is precisely what Bakiné seeks to rectify. Their transformative rituals permit the construction of sacred grief spaces in which bodies can gather together in love, strength, and hope.

Bakiné emphasizes the fact that respite comes from connecting grief with the land, likely for at least two reasons. First, the land of our shared planet Earth is big enough to hold and process all human emotions. Humans are not separate from Nature, yet we often re-produce a distinction between the two in order to highlight the benefits of human knowledge and power. In grief, reconnection with the land is akin to plugging ourselves back into the source. While our individual lives may wither beneath the weight of devastating life events, reconnecting with the land reminds us that we, as humans, are interdependent and, therefore, more expansive than we typically imagine or feel ourselves to be. Second, White colonizers and enslavers attempted to completely sever this connection between Black people and Nature while building the American nation-state. Of course, colonizers were unable to achieve their goals and enslaved people held and shared knowledge of, for example, plant medicine and agriculture. To reconnect with Nature through Bakiné gatherings, then, manifests the ongoing resistance to colonization (of the past and present) through the collective remembering that the Earth holds us all.

If we could add a footnote to Bakiné's statement, it would emphasize that rituals produce "*room to grieve*." Somewhat magically, a ritual enlivens a given physical environment and all the history that it contains, history that includes individual and community grief events. Once activated in the present, the history of this site collaborates with the ritualists to nurture new connections between individuals (the dead and the living) as a social group and between this newly fashioned collective and the ground itself. Part of the magic displayed by Bakiné, and by Reyes before them, arises from this ability of grief to spark meaningful action and generate a highly grief-literate community. Like a volcano whose lava joins with the ocean to produce new land, grief nurtured and sustained

through ritual practices creates a generative environment in which collective imagination can thrive. For Bakiné, this collective imagination helps develop an image of the future in which the alchemy of the gun-to-shovel transformation continues to grow in power and construct a society in which such alchemy is no longer necessary precisely because gun violence has been eradicated by love and a redistribution of power and resources.

Each of these community-oriented artistic projects, and the tendrils that connect them to one another, helps us better understand the notion of radically social grief. Without being overly prescriptive, perhaps we can clarify this grief by naming some of its essential features. First, radically social grief is not a thing but, rather, a transformative force. Nobody contains this force within themselves. Instead, the force exists *between* bodies. Second, this transformative force produces space. Think of how the charged atmosphere produced by the embrace of lovers scintillates, or how a cubic meter of ocean teems with microscopic and visible life. Similarly, we would say that the space produced through grief *potentiates*, that is, it creates a matrix of possibility through which any number of actions and productions are possible. Against the tendency to see these potential actions as dangerous or volatile or fueled by aimless rage, we see the vast potential made through grief space to be, at heart, positively transformative. Third, radically social grief works in tandem with Nature. Indeed, the two commingle and inform each other. Radically social grief has the power to undo the constructed binary between “the social” and “the natural” and reveal some other kind of hybrid materiality in which human labor and natural forces speak of the same Oneness.

Two more elements of radically social grief space reveal themselves to us. One shows itself through Reyes’s artwork and deserves to be called aesthetic. This kind of aesthetic is not superficial. It doesn’t relate to surface appearance, and it cannot be reduced to something less potent than, say, politics or philosophy. The aesthetics of radically social grief are like the fruiting bodies we know as mushrooms. Mushrooms are the reproductive organs of vast mycelial networks, the health of which are vital for the thriving of all life on Earth. Similarly, the aesthetics of social grief are the fruits of active grief networks. They sprout when the grief network is healthy. The shovels made through Bakiné’s alchemy and the musical instruments made through Reyes’s art are examples of these aesthetic blooms. Once they bloom, they continue to work. As fungal spores travel on the wind seeking fertile places to land, word of creative grief projects spread to those receptive to their collective poetry and wisdom. Grief aesthetics fuel the social body like nutrients fuel the biological body.

Finally, and this is why we emphasize the social nature of grief, radically social grief *is* grief. There is no grief that is not radically social. Yet, this social nature of grief is often ignored or simply unseen, and the consequences of *not* seeing it are immense. When ignored, the discourse of individuality swallows grief, and people become separated from each other rather than connected. Perceived as an individual attribute, grief then succumbs to pathologization at which point medicalized recovery methods start to seem logical and even necessary to “return” individuals to “normal” functioning. If, however, we honor the radically social nature of grief, then we can

champion togetherness, collective transformation, and an intersubjective identity that views individuals and society as mutually constitutive.

The intimacy of interconnectedness

Grief and intimacy do not usually appear together in conversations about loss, but Reyes's and Bakiné's work show us how these two entities partner with each other. The harm wrought by gun violence conjures images of fracture and fragmentation, devastation and social imbalance. Those images certainly reveal the painful truth about guns, which, given the proliferation of guns and related violence throughout the so-called United States of America, discloses an equally painful truth about our country. At the same time, woven into that story is a social interconnectedness constructed through the togetherness of people who may not ever meet each other. We know this invisible connection intimately from the deep impact that many authors and artists (whom we have not known personally and many of whom were already dead when we came upon their work) have had on us during our own grief journeys.

Reyes's collaborative project, for example, unites those in Culiácan and Juarez whose lives were taken by guns with Reyes himself, the benefactors at the Arboretum, the volunteers who participated in the destruction of the guns, and the community members who used the guns-turned-shovels to plant trees. These connections are then multiplied exponentially by the organisms who will live on, in, under, or around these trees. The humans' lives are intertwined with the saplings, too, the metal of the guns, and the lives that will spring from the augmentation to the local landscape. This web of interconnectedness grows even wider when we recognize the artisans who made the musical instruments for *Imagine* and *Disarm*, the auditors who heard the music at various venues, and even *you* who are reading this essay right now. Northward from Mexico to Atlanta and Oakland, the reach of the web grows wider still. If we sat down and mapped out every connection, we may find a web that touches inhabitants of many different places on our shared planet.

How precisely does this interconnectedness forged through grief in the wake of gun violence appear as intimacy? Just as Reyes surprised us with his turn to Bashō, we will surprise you with a turn toward the playwright Naomi Wallace who helps us with that transformation. In "On Writing as Transgression," Wallace harnesses the tone of the manifesto to address those who teach young playwrights. Her goal is to turn these young playwrights into "dangerous citizens," which means citizens whose art can confront, lay bare, challenge, and transform the devastating reality of our world (2007).

To do this, she argues, writers need to make a distinction between intimacy, on the one hand, and sexiness, on the other. According to mainstream marketing discourse, sex sells. Because of that, many young playwrights think they have to make theatre sexy in order to catch a break. But sexiness often stops at the surface and bars our vision from seeing the intimacy of interconnectedness that thrives at the molecular level of our social world. Wallace asks, "What could be more intimate and personal than the history of our bodies and their relationship to the

world?" And where do we find that trove of intimate stories? History. "What else is history and politics but the struggle of people to define who they are and what they can and cannot do?" Look no further than Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* (originally published in 1980) and Robin D.G. Kelley's *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (2002) to find millions of scintillating details that could give rise to decades of compelling performance projects.

What she says next, however, is what brings Wallace into the orbit of radically social grief and the work of Reyes:

That thousands have died and many thousands more have been maimed in the Middle East by U.S. bullets and shrapnel is again certainly not sexy, but surely very intimate, as is the fact that the bullets that enter the bodies of Palestinian children, fired by Israeli soldiers, are paid for by American taxes earned by American workers who dream of fishing, baseball and sex. What could be more personal than the names that are given to the bombs used to tear our fellow humans in Iraq and Afghanistan into as many pieces as possible—Fishbeds, Floggers, Fulcrums. Adams, Beehives and Bouncing Betties. There is even a weapon called Sad Eyes. What could be more intimate or personal than the fact that we get up in the morning, kiss our loved ones, go to work, come home, pay our taxes—and those taxes from our daily labor are used to kill you and you and you, and I never saw your face nor knew your name. (Wallace 2007)

Through this train of thought, intimacy transpires as a touch that is also *not yet* touch. Workers on an ammunition assembly line touch bullets. Soldiers touch these same bullets as they load them into their guns. These bullets, carrying the fingerprints of the worker and the soldier, touch the body of the target or the errant bystander thereby making a physical connection across individuals located in distinct times and places. Who has a hand in the death of the target or the victim? Who spawned the grief wave that emerges from their death? Not only the worker but also the taxpayer who funds the labor, which is to say all taxpayers. The issue isn't one of direct responsibility but of connection. How are we connected to the deaths of those who die by bullets made on American assembly lines and paid for by U.S. taxpayers? We are connected physically as well as poetically. Wallace advocates for a kind of theatrical writing that makes visible that physical connection through poetic language and artful staging.

The lesson for those of us contemplating radically social grief is clear: tune in to the intimate connection. Grief is a shared experience. One person grieves, we all grieve. Is this why so many people try to run away from grief? When grief rushes in, we sense the interconnectedness of the world, and the feeling is overwhelming. To shut out the hugeness of it all, we may attempt to isolate or anesthetize ourselves or look for sufficient distraction. But none of those techniques are sustainable because the social world informs every fiber of our being.

What if, instead of trying to shut it out, which is basically like closing our eyes to make something in front of us disappear, we dwell in the intensity of the radically social nature of grief? This isn't easy. To do so, we have to build structures that can function like crafts to help us journey safely into the web of interconnectedness. Once we create these structures—through community

gatherings, performance events, writing projects, participatory workshops, et al.—we can offer one another various architectures capable of communicating with our physical and social worlds in intimate and, hopefully, meaningful ways. As Yolande Clark-Jackson (2024) writes, "For the sake of personal and collective well-being and empowerment, individuals and society must choose to acknowledge and process grief. The power of public grieving is its ability to connect us and drive healing and change."

What if this grieving together is actually what love is? Could radically social grief engaged and expressed through collaborative projects lead to a greater awareness of our interdependence and a deeper sense of compassion for ourselves and for one another? If so, perhaps, the violence that has shaped the artful practices of Reyes, the Bakiné cohort, Wallace, and others will ultimately yield to more generative ways of being together on this planet. At the very least, reflecting on the social dimensions of grief may inspire us to challenge pathological assertions of grief as an individual's responsibility to "cure" and, instead as an opportunity to make visible and tangible a shared response to the contours of life and death.

Notes

¹ We thank Priya Jay for bringing this notion of "social alchemy" to our attention. We are honored to have Priya as a collaborator in our griefwork.

² For a different engagement, see Humbert (2019).

³ The shovels were part of a museum exhibition in Santa Fe, NM, in 2023. For more information on that, see Caoba (2023).

⁴ You can hear the result in Reyes (2012b): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rgMW2VuGItM>.

⁵ To see images of an exhibit of *Disarm* at the Lisson Gallery, visit <https://www.lissongallery.com/exhibitions/pedro-reyes-disarm>.

⁶ Since beginning to work on this essay in 2023, Lead to Life has changed its name to Bakiné. The statements cited here no longer exist on the website, which is still <https://www.leadtolife.org/>. See also Jones (2008).

⁷ For more on grief and social justice movements, see Devich-Cyril (2021).

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Biography

Will Daddario and Joanne Zerdy work together as a married couple to run Inviting Abundance, a business dedicated to improving grief literacy in the United States. They combine their doctoral level research in theatre historiography with radical pedagogical practices aimed at broadening the range of what counts as grief and making visible those whose grief practices have been silenced and made invisible by Western, patriarchal, and medicalized discourses. Zerdy also infuses her griefwork with herbal medicine and permaculture design thinking, all of which helps shape her wee apothecary, Finlay's Garden, named for their dead son. Daddario is a clinical mental health counselor and clinical addictions specialist at Nova Transformations (Matthews, North Carolina) dedicated to bringing performance philosophy into the domain of addictions recovery and mental health care. They finalized this article during the devastating aftermath of Hurricane Helene, which demolished their hometown of Asheville, NC.

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PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

THE EROTICS OF GRIEVES

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Dear Reader, this part is trying to give some orientation into the text before we start again in the middle:

The Erotics of Grievances, invites you into a practice of somacoustic reading/listening that integrates a re-conceptualisation of grieving with a listening practice that was developed as container for collective un-numbing. Situated within an era marked by violence, silencing, and systemic oppression, this work explores how grieving can be more than a solitary, passive state to be overcome, and calls on you to imagine a dynamic, embodied, collective practice and an active force of intimacy and solidarity, of resistance and regeneration.

Moving with Audre Lorde's concept of the erotic as a source of power and Fred Moten's idea of refusal in the erotics of fugitivity, this essay shifts the conversation from a singular, universal notion of grief to the plural and relational concept of *grievances*, emphasizing that mourning is contextually bound, layered, and multifaceted. Grievances are presented not as emotions to manage and overcome, but as active, disruptive processes capable of unsettling and reshaping personal and collective entrenched power structures and normative expectations.

As we deepen our capacities to witness, share, and embody grievances, we might experience our bodies as resonant spaces that co-sense and co-shape realities, re-memembering the connections to ancestors, land, and each other. I invite you to listen—not just with your ears, but with your whole body. What might emerge when we share our breath, our wails, our grieving?

You may listen to the sound piece now or later in the text when you are invited to. If you decide to do it now, please find a comfortable place, listen with headphones and find a heavy object that you would like to hold in your hand or place on your body as you listen. The QR-code will take you to the recording of *Practicing Futures while Grieving*, a piece on SoundCloud that is 46 minutes long. Press play. See you on the other side.



<https://soundcloud.com/siegmazacharias/practicing-future-while-breathing>

Take a minute to notice what has been coming up for you in terms of sensations, emotions, thoughts and images. If you want, take a minute to write things down for yourself. Drink some tea or water and let's start again.



Dear Reader, Griever, Listener, Lover,

I want to write about grieving as a portal to liberation and social transformation, yet I find it difficult to write and craft words while the only thing I want to do is scream, cry and shout, about the killings, dehumanisations and brutalities that are going on in Gaza right now... and about the criminalization of pro-Palestinian solidarity all around the world. I am not Palestinian, and I cannot write about Palestinian grief, and I won't; but I can write about my grieves and I must describe the context these words are coming out of and are falling into.

It is May/June/July 2024 and we have been made into witnesses of the genocidal military campaign of the IDF (Israeli Defence Force) against the Palestinian people for the last almost 10 months. The time a human takes to grow inside another human.

As I'm writing this I am sitting in a room with four walls and a large glass window. I am sitting in a room that is in the middle of Berlin. In Proto-Slavic language, *Berl* means swamp and *-in* is a suffix that denominates a place. So Berlin means "place in a swamp" and was given to the place around

700 CE by Slav settlers. Berlin is also the place where the largest number of Jewish Germans lived before the Holocaust. Berlin is also the place that has presently the biggest diasporic Palestinian community in Germany. And now Berlin is also the place of policies that silence surges and of violent police crackdowns on people who protest for human rights, for the right to life, liberty and security of person of Palestinians (UN General Assembly 1948a). The protestors here in Berlin are mostly Arabs, Muslims, anti-Zionist Jews, regime critical Israelis and other allies; mostly migrants and queer folks mostly from the global south who live here in Berlin, because when we moved here Berlin seemed a live-able place. Berlin is also the place where the government of Germany resides and pronounces its steadfast support of and alliance with the state of Israel, even in front of the International Court of Justice, where South Africa accused Israel of committing acts of genocide (ICJ 2023).

I am sitting in a room with four walls and a glass window that is not shattered. For the past ten months, I have been looking into another window—my mobile phone—watching the self-documentation of Palestinian people being dehumanized, displaced, slaughtered, and starved to death. I see men and sometimes children digging out other children and adults from under the rubble. I see humans hurt and mutilated, holding the lifeless bodies of their loved ones. I hear the screams and wails of parents cradling the severed parts of their children in bags.

In these past ten months, I have learned new words from UN experts, high commissioners, special rapporteurs, and international human rights organizations describing what is happening in Gaza. These terms are absent from the lexicon of the German government and mainstream media:

Domicide: The systemic destruction of civilian homes through attacks, bombings, and shelling, displacing millions into homelessness, the razing of entire cities and villages violating the human right to adequate housing in times of war (OHCHR 2023).

Scholasticide: The systematic obliteration of education by arresting, detaining, or killing teachers, students, and staff, and destroying educational infrastructure, violating the human right to education in times of war (OHCHR 2024a). There are no universities left in Gaza.

Epistemicide: The systematic destruction of indigenous knowledge, archives, traditional symbols, objects, architectures, and sites, and the killing of knowledge-holders and their pupils (Santos 2014).

These terms were new to me, adding to the familiar lexicon of brutality:

Ecocide: There is a push of legal experts to make ecocide into the 5th criminal act under international law. They define ecocide as “unlawful or wanton acts committed with knowledge that there is a substantial likelihood of severe and either widespread or long-term damage to the environment being caused by those acts” (Expert Panel 2021). This includes the killing of flora and fauna, poisoning of land and waters with explosives and white phosphorus, and the destruction of biodiversity.

Genocide: Coined in 1944 to describe the Holocaust, adopted by the United Nations in 1948, it encompasses acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group. This includes killing members of the group, causing serious bodily or mental harm, deliberately inflicting conditions to make life unliveable, preventing births, and forcibly transferring children (UN General Assembly 1948b).¹

Yet, there are still words missing in this gruesome lexicon:

How do we name the “systemic destruction of health services,” the assaulting, detaining, and killing of medical staff and patients, the obliteration of medical infrastructure, and the incapacitation of medical and humanitarian aid delivery? (Arslan 2024).

How do we name the systematic attack on freedom of opinion and expression, the persecution and killing of journalists, the shutdown of media infrastructures, and the censorship of expressed opinions? (UN General Assembly 1948a, Article 19).

And what word will we use to describe the neglect of the fundamental human right of the dead—the impossibility of preservation of the dignity of the deceased, including mutilating bodies, dumping bodies in mass graves, abducting bodies, the inability to bury those under the rubble, the desecration of graves, and the obstruction of death rituals? (OHCHR 2024b; UN News 2023; Wikipedia Contributors 2024a).

I am sitting in a room with four walls and a window that is not shattered, while Western powers continue to supply ammunition to Israel, ignoring the International Court of Justice’s declaration of probable acts of genocide, rendering the perlocutionary power of the court useless (ICJ 2024a and 2024b). Protests for a political permanent ceasefire are met with police brutality. Students worldwide occupy university campuses in protest demanding a ceasefire and divestment from institutions profiting from the “war on Hamas,” as Israel’s governmental officials like to call it. Here in Germany the call for ceasefire faces severe repression, often justified as preventing antisemitism—a conflation contested by anti-Zionist Jews, law activists, and legal scholars.²

In this necropolitical³ climate, I invite you to think with me about erotics of grieves (Mbembe 2003, 39–40). And for that we have to ask who is grieving what and whom? What kinds of grieves are we talking about? What practices of grieving are involved? Moving away from a singular, universalist notion of grief towards a multilayered conception of *grieves*. I’m inviting you to think/feel with Audrey Lorde’s concept of the power of the erotic and Fred Moten’s concept of the erotics of fugitivity and explore what the *erotics of grieving* might be. What might grieves enable, what might they resist? Might grieves begin to open up questions around the self-protective and exclusionary mechanisms of social infrastructures and hegemonic systems of oppression? Are grieves the cracks in the autonomous, sovereign Western, individualised subject of modernity?

We are taken by so many grieves simultaneously nowadays: we are grieving for the dead, grieving because of ongoing genocides,⁴ grieving because of the ongoing climate catastrophe, grieving because of social injustices, grieving the loss of the idea of a certain future. These and more

accumulate as personal, collective, worldly and planetary grieves. How can grieves assist in reorientating and reorganizing towards non-normative bodies of knowledge and flesh, as generative forces of liquefied encounters, affectivities, dependencies, and desires between multiple others. How might we imagine alternative enactments of the world if we acknowledge the erotic power of grieves? How might performance become a grieving practice and learning ground for developing and enduring dynamic systems that are not predetermined, but generative and co-created across diverse agents, socioeconomic locations and power relations? In other words, how can we be with the “hard shit” and learn to face and metabolise it, the uncontrollable the unfixable and the unknown? And how can we do that collectively and publicly in re-generative grieving practices?

GRIEVES

Grieving, as I have come to understand and practice it, is not a monolithic experience but a spectrum of ‘grieves’—each unique, each valid. It is not a static state but a collection of active processes, practices of doing, and being undone, and being done by grieves. This understanding emerged from my personal journey with different intersecting grieves: grieving with my younger sister Susanne Irina, as I accompanied her into death, grieving after her death; grieving the always too little and always too much of a mixed identity (Romanian, German); grieving a complicated migration story; grieving the extinction of thousands of nonhuman creatures, kin and ecosystems; grieving the unpredictable futures we are bequeathing to our children; grieving with friends and comrades who have lost friends and family to war and genocide; grieving the ongoing daily racism against my black and brown siblings, as a person who profits from being read as white and cis; grieving my complicity in racialised patriarchal capitalism; grieving my complicity in land and human exploitation as I’m writing on a computer.

Grieves is a term I coined to suggest that there is no universalist concept of grief, but that there are as many grieves as there are bodies and situations. I have stopped talking about grief as an absolute singular, just as we have given up talking about the universal idea of the body.⁵ I prefer writing grieves with a “v” to highlight a conceptualisation of “grieves” that has more to do with the ways in which we “do” grieving and how we are being “undone” and “done” by grieving than with a state of a pre-existing subject.

Cultural contexts determine the ways in which grieves are expressed, understood, and processed across cultures. For instance, in Mexico, Día de Los Muertos is a vibrant, communal celebration of life and death, a time to honor the deceased with joy and remembrance. Contrast this with the sombre, private mourning of some Western traditions, where grieving is often a solitary journey. Consider the traditional, embodied practice of the wake in rural Romania, where my great grandmother used to follow her call as a wailing woman. These wakes are communal gatherings that mix mourning with celebration, wailing with laughing, drinking and eating. Or let’s remind ourselves of the spreading of the ashes of loved ones into the Mississippi river during the AIDS crisis. These self-organised queer funeral rituals with a lot of glitter and exuberant costumes during Mardi Gras were, and still are, organised because the state and the church and sometimes the

biological families refused to bury people who died of AIDS. Who is *grievable*,⁶ when, how, and by whom? These practices highlight how grieves are culturally specific, with each community developing its own ways to face death, honour the dead, cope with loss and support the bereaved. It also already points to the fact that grieving is not merely a private practice but also very much shaped by and expressed as a political practice.

Our understanding and expression of grieves are historically contingent. When I grew up in Romania, elaborate mourning customs dictated what a grieving person should wear and what they should do and shouldn't do, creating a highly visible expression of their grieving. Today in the global north, contemporary Western societies often emphasize a quick return to so called normalcy, reflecting a shift in how we deal with death and mourning. Grieves are not a fixed state but practices that change with societal attitudes and norms, that in turn change throughout time. Social norms and values heavily influence how one's grieves are perceived and expressed and how we are constructed as grievers. These expectations shape our grieving, adding layers of complexity to our experiences of loss and endings. Race, gender, class, and sexuality intersect to create unique and asymmetrical experiences of grieves and accentuate how each is socially constructed and differently valued. Who dictates these values?

Grieves can manifest in various emotional responses, including for example sadness, anger, relief, or numbness. Grieving is not a linear process and can involve a complex interplay of emotions that do not fit neatly into predefined stages. We may experience them simultaneously, or bypass certain emotions altogether. This emotional complexity reflects the multifaceted nature of grieves, resisting simplistic categorization and highlighting the need for a more nuanced understanding. Personal grieves intersect and accumulate with collective grieves. There are those grieves that a whole group of people carries across generations. They come with legacies of colonialism, genocide and slavery, stories of forced migration, displacement, enslavement, brutal exploitations, dehumanisation and killings.⁷ There are those in which we grieve the futures that our children might not have in the face of climate catastrophe. And there are collective grieves around understanding one's own implication, complicity and entanglements with these histories of harm. Collective grieves are grieves that are shared to different degrees and in different intensities, in a community or globally. They are bigger than one person and affect groups of people and ultimately all of us across time and space in asymmetrical ways. What collective grieving practices can we cultivate to be with collective grieves like witnessing genocides, dealing with one's complicity in systems of oppression, witnessing and contributing to the climate catastrophe? I want to consider protests, and activism and collective care, and mutual aid as grieving rituals. Here are some initiatives that I participated in in the past 10 months in Berlin alone: I was at a protest/vigil organised by an activist group called *The Grieving Doves*, where all the names of all the children killed in Gaza up to the 1st of June 2024, International Children's Day, were read out aloud. It took fifteen hours. I hosted listening sessions as collective grieving practices. I am part of a collective that provides first aid plant medicine and bodywork for people who are physically and psychologically impacted by the ongoing brutalities. There have been protests and public vigils to honor the dead and the living.

Our grieves not only co-shape us but also co-shape how we are given to the world. This attends to the agency that grieving has over our bodies and our relations. It is time to move away from the idea of grief as merely a psychological state or a bad emotion that we need to overcome. Instead, we must centre the corporeal, embodied, shapeshifting, and transformative, political potentials of grieves and their relation to the social body, sociality and intra-connectedness.

Challenging the idea of a universal understanding of grief and emphasizing the plurality of grieving experiences, narratives and practices as grieves, acknowledges difference and asymmetries in the ways in which grieves are made possible or impossible, and at the same time it asks us to stay attuned to how grieves are part of practicing futures. It invites us to embrace the diversity of grieving experiences and reject normative frameworks that seek to standardize our responses to sorrow. Grieves invite us not to assume what grief is but to sense into the intersecting grieves and to listen, witness, and validate one's own and others' nuanced and diverse complexity of grieving experiences. This conceptualisation of grieves can integrate solidarity movements, protests, collective care, collective mourning rituals, and collective transformative justice work.

THE EROTIC—learning from Lorde and Moten

When I suggest an erotics of grieves, I think of the words of self-described “black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet” Audre Lorde and her essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power”. Here is a reminder what she says about the erotic.

The erotic functions for me in several ways, and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them. And lessens the threat of their difference. [...] Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinise all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives. And this is a grave responsibility, projected from within each of us, not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe. (Lorde 1984, 56–57)

Lorde speaks to the ways in which the erotic develops in practices of sharing intimacy not just in a physical way but in intellectual, spiritual, emotional, creative ways. By calling it a power not merely a sensation or a force, Lorde addresses the political aspect of the erotic as a disruption of patriarchy, capitalism and individualism. In this sense the erotic has the power to disrupt oppressive powers and oppressive systems that hold us in place, that hold us in assumed safety and where the power of the erotic lies precisely in breaking open the structures of that assume safety. It does so through intimacy. For her this intimacy is the force that can hold us when we go outside of comfort and ease, and it helps us discern between values we desire to live by and values that we are coerced into.

And then I continue thinking with Fred Moten and *The Erotics of Fugitivity* (2018, 241–268). There he talks about an obscene ethics exemplified by the story of Betty's case:

In 1857, Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw of the Supreme Court of Massachusetts declared Betty to be free. Betty, a slave woman, had been brought from Tennessee into Massachusetts by her owners, the Sweets and by virtue of their travel and stay in Massachusetts, the Sweets' relation with Betty had been legally converted from one of enslavement to one of labor. It was within this latter context that Shaw determined Betty to be a contractual agent with free will. This case, driven in its ruling and circumstances by a question about the legal personality of a slave, would come to be called Betty's Case. [...] As matter of the legal issue of contract at the heart of the case, the law recognized Betty's free will. But as a matter of the facts surrounding the case, Betty curiously, even unthinkably, asserted and exceeded this legal freedom. For against the disapprobation and outright hostility of the abolitionists who had successfully brought the case before Shaw in her name, and immediately after Shaw's declaration of her freedom, Betty decided to return to Tennessee with her owners. In Betty's Case we find the crucible of mounting national tensions around the issue of slavery, the particular legal issues of contract and property at stake for the parties involved in the case, and the scandal of Betty's decision to return to slavery. (Moten 2018, 246, cited in Han 2015)

This is a legal document that Moten quotes and of course this is only in the voice of the judge. We never hear Betty's voice. The obscene ethics that Moten talks about when we try to understand what the erotics of fugitivity could be, is that Betty declines freedom, because she "refuses what was refused to her" (Moten 2018, 246). This practice of the refusal is to understand that the very idea of freedom is linked to the idea and the reality of her capture. The scandal is to choose against freedom under this system and to apply her free will to choose sociality over individual freedom. Because the alternatives here at stake are to be free and alone in Massachusetts or to go back with her owners and live with her people in Tennessee. Betty's choice points to the conceptual entanglement and interdependence of the concept of freedom of the modern individual with the concept of slavery. To refuse to perform adequately to what modernity has constructed as the free individualised subject, to refuse it from a position of having been denied full humanhood by the very same system, is to take a fugitive response. To be fugitive here then is not from the capture of the plantation but to be fugitive to the capture and control mechanisms of modernity. To refuse categorisation and capture under modernity and to choose sociality over individuality is what Moten calls the erotics of fugitivity.

The power of the erotic of the fugitive is to put in question and to refuse that which has been refused. To refuse those systems which give freedom or give the status of a subject.

EROTICS OF GRIEVES

Thinking with these two extraordinary descriptions of the erotic let's circle back into grieves. Grieving has the power to disrupt and to put you in touch with, to let you become intimate with and marked by these intense perceptions that are not only self-perceptions but more importantly

inquiries about your relational entanglements. In what relations are you with what and whom? What relations do you desire to live in with what and whom? I want to suggest that we experience this dis-rupture because of the loss of a relation with something or someone who was important, valuable and precious to us. This can be land, the ecosystem, a certain idea of a live-able future or a person. The intensity of the disruption in our lives breaks open not just our breathing patterns and social patterns but also might open up a space in which we become aware of how cultural, social, historical, and political patterns show up in and on our bodies and our ways of living and dying and grieving. Grieving can offer us the opportunity to learn how not to comply with these patterns. It teaches us how to resist and disrupt and not perform according to assumed structures by refusing to “get better,” to “calm down,” to “get it together,” to “keep going.” Grieving might teach us to sit with the unfixable, and sense into what values, relations, life-affirming practices appear in that space where we are broken open yet not apart. Grieving can be experienced as an opportunity to reconstitute not One-Self as an individual but as Many, with ancestors, with land, with waters, with humans, and more than humans, with the dead and the not yet born. It might open up a space to ask: How can you live with what has been given to you and what do you want to pass on? How can I contribute to an honouring and remembering of the past, a life affirming present and a live-able future for generations to come?

I want to invite you to be with some questions in an erotics of grieves: How do grieving processes violently disturb your life cycles, relational constellations, bodily functions, and value systems? How do theses disruptions give possibilities of reorientation? If you don't try to appease, to manage, to get through your grieves, might they become a portal, an opening, where the processes of adaptability become exactly where you ask: adapting to what? What forces of which powers are you being asked to adapt back into? Which of those structures, infrastructures, relations and behaviours do you refuse to adapt back into? What are the mechanisms of oppression that you are asked to adapt into? How can you refuse to assimilate into the prevailing structures. And how might you become attentive to the formation of new constellations? How might you tend to them and what would it take to adapt into those new formations? What practices of resistance and what practices of care, solidarity and joy might come up?

In an erotics of grieves we might experience ongoing connection and that this connection to the dead, extinct, destroyed, and lost makes palpable the awareness that we might be connected to the living as well in ways we were taught to neglect. And as we experience this inseparability we might start asking about the systems of domination and normativity in modernity that separate us through technologies of individualisation, exploitation, and exhaustion (Ferreira da Silva 2016). What connections have been severed? What connections have we been denied? Grieves activist Francis Weller describes as one of the five gates in which we meet grieves the “sorrow that calls forward the things that we might even not realise we have lost” (Weller 2015, 54). This sorrow evokes a sense of emptiness and hollowness that comes from experiencing separation from community and land and kin. When an acute grieves reaction reminds us that these bonds might still exist and be regenerated, we can tend to these grieving practices. Grieving can become a practice that not only lives in the cracks of the house of modernity but also helps to enlarge the cracks until seemingly stable constructs and structures fall (Machado de Oliveira 2021, 105–120).

The space in the cracks might grow and transform, when we find practices of attuning to them and tending to them.⁸ Indeed we might experience the responsibility that comes with experiencing connection. It is this experience of metabolic intimacy and response-ability that I want to call the erotics of grieving. It opens the space for reorientation and reorganization of non-normative bodies of knowledge and flesh as generative forces of encounters, affectivities, dependencies, and desires between multiple others. An erotics of grieves invites us to imagine alternative enactments of the world.

The audacity to grieve in a dominant culture that marginalises and pathologises grieving

The audacity to feel in a dominant culture that wants you to be numb

The audacity to breathe in a dominant culture that constrains your breath

The audacity to relate in a dominant culture that fragments and isolates

The audacity to witness in a dominant culture that wants you to look away

The audacity to speak up in a dominant culture that wants you silent

The audacity to be shaken in a dominant culture that wants you to be stable

The audacity to find joy in a dominant culture that wants you to consume

The audacity to not perform in a dominant culture that wants you to perform

The audacity to listen in a dominant culture that wants you to assume

LISTENING SESSIONS—performance as collective grieving

Dear reader, in a while I will invite you to listen to the sound piece—maybe for the second time. It is an invitation to listen, to attune, and to reconsider our relationship with grieves and inseparability. It is an invitation to listen with your whole body. It is an invitation to explore how, through collective practices of listening, we can reorient ourselves towards new constellations, new ways of being and knowing, and a more interconnected and solidaric existence. In this case it is an invitation to listen with somebody that you invite to listen together with, or to listen with everybody who has read and will read this paper and will have listened with you.⁹

Since March 2020 I have facilitated listening sessions where folks could gather, listen, and let the sound waves traverse their bodies. These sessions are framed as collective grieves-work, where any sorrow is acknowledged and given space to. I have committed to working with the acoustic energy of sound as a way to create spaces that allow us to experience the possibility of intimacy and alienation not as oppositions but as co-active elements of our infinitely entangled experience and existence. By following the movements between bodily discomfort, arousal, and calm, we can trace possible connections between pressure and expansion, cultivating a heightened somatic

awareness. All of this, for me, directly relates to the embodied experiences of grieves in their many forms, manifestations, and activations. The listening sessions I facilitate do not prescribe what grieves you should feel or how you should feel them. They simply propose to hold space for each other's grieves through embodied listening and to open up a space for collective exploration.

During the social distancing and lockdowns from March 2020 to March 2022, with the closure of theaters and strict contact restrictions, I wanted to provide a space where we could still experience connection. I sought to explore how performance could hold a space for collective public grieving practices, where we could grieve together, breathe together, witness each other, and experience touch—even if only through sound. Sound waves seemed the perfect medium to invite people into a remote yet somatic and visceral, immersive collective experience.

A wave is a disturbance that moves energy from one place to another. Waves travel through matter and space. Light waves travel through the universe connecting celestial bodies. Seismic waves travel through the layers of the earth, water, buildings and other infrastructures and shake up the very ground on which we stand, re-orient the particles, destroy existing structures and settle into new formations. Sound waves travel around the planet, through bodies of water and flesh, and other matter (Urban 2016).

Our bodies resonate with different frequencies—our hearts, eyes, sexual organs, bones, and lungs each vibrates at their unique rates. Depending on their density, your bones, fluids, flesh, and cavities vibrate in various ways. Everything moves and oscillates with everything else, as all things consist of vibrating energy.¹⁰ We vibrate at different speeds in different situations: in grieving, differently than in joy; in fear, differently than in ecstasy. You vibrate differently when you are calm or in rage, happy or distraught. Sound waves can support these internal vibrations, contributing to healing processes, or they can disrupt them and cause damage. We do not just hear with our ears but with our entire bodies, as sound waves touch us, pass through and between us, and move us.

WAVES - Listening Towards Social Bodies is a series of listening sessions that serve as sonic invitations to experience being shaken and connected together. These sessions are sound containers, inviting participants to wander together into a space where we do not need to be alone. Building on a feminist practice of regeneration and critical care, we sustain transformative quaking while asking: How can we be together otherwise? The invitation is to practice listening with our whole bodies while holding space for the complex grieves present in this time—grieves for the dead, grief because of genocides, the climate crisis, social injustices, a certain idea of the future, and many more. By embracing waves as disturbances, we acknowledge their transformative potential. They remind us that change often begins with a ripple, a small shift that can grow and spread, altering the landscape in profound and unexpected ways. Whether in the physical world or within our emotional and social spheres, waves as disturbances are powerful agents of transformation and connection.

Each listening session consists of three parts. First: an introduction that contextualizes the invitation as a space for collective grieving and offers some stories, about sounds, our nervous systems and ancestors or lands. Second: we listen to a sound piece simultaneously. The

participants are invited to notice what comes up for them. Third: we engage in a conversation where participants share their sensations, perceptions, feelings, and thoughts. These introductions and exchanges are always facilitated by me. For the sound pieces, I collaborated with Steve Heather, an Australian musician and composer. In *ANIMaterialities*, I recorded the wet sounds of the mouth cavity and internal visceral sounds. In *Resisting Disconnect*, I focused on breath, and in *Re-Generation*, I worked with humming. These three sessions mostly took place online and were listened to with headphones.

WANDERING INTO A SPACE WHERE YOU ARE NOT ALONE

These works explore the connections between acoustics and the nervous system, the body's capacity to self-regulate, and the potential to co-calibrate with other nervous systems in shared experiences. Our nervous systems are porous and interrupted and they are made of electrical impulses, and so when we share spaces we not only sit in a cloud of spit in which we inhale each other's insides, but we also sit in a network of electricity of interconnected nervous systems. So, what I'm trying to offer with the listening sessions is to co-sense not to be a single being. Co-sensing of an actual material/electric waves entanglement. There is a profound relationship between sound and the nervous system, particularly through the lens of the polyvagal theory developed by Stephen Porges (2011). The vagus nerve, the tenth cranial nerve, plays a vital role in regulating our autonomic functions, influencing states of fight, flight, freeze, rest, and digest. It is responsible for our feeling of safety and social engagement. It is named 'vagus,' meaning 'wanderer' in Latin, because it meanders through the body, connecting the brain to various organs, including the heart, lungs, and intestines. Somatic abolitionist Rezmaa Manekem calls it the Soul Nerve. Menakem (2017) specifically addresses how the soul nerve is affected by racialized trauma, and the historical and ongoing oppression of people of color. He argues that healing racialized trauma requires attention to the soul nerve and the body's physical responses, not just cognitive or emotional processing.

Practicing Futures while Grieving is the fourth listening session and was conceived as a live multisensory multi-modal installation in Düsseldorf and in Berlin in 2024.¹¹ I had organised a half-year program of listening, researching, and working with young makers. At the end, there was a festival and symposium with speakers and practitioners like Alexis Pauline Gumbs and Bayo Akomolafe, Neha Spellfish, Kathy Ann Tan, Dani D'Emilia, Eroca Nichols, Mithu Sanyal, and many others shared works around questions of regeneration and grieves with an audience. Together we asked how we could live together otherwise addressing depletion, renewal, and healing, offering decolonial queer perspectives on living through and having our bodies marked by exploitation, colonialism, and capitalism.

Differently than the previous online listening sessions, *Practicing Futures while Grieving* took place in a shared physical space. It was important for me to create a situation in which the participants could feel private in public. Together with textile artist Lea Kieffer we designed hanging and laying textile sculptures made from second-hand jeans. We also created different invisible yet vibrating scent spaces, designed by scent alchemist Liza Witte. During the online listening sessions there is

always an invitation to take a heavy object in your hand or place it on your body while listening. As people could not just take something from their homes, I made objects, out of water, earth, and crystals that I had grown on the jeans. These relational objects¹² were spread throughout the space and people could take them, handle them, place them on themselves.

Using binaural technology, the sound piece enveloped the listeners in a spatialized psychoacoustic experience employing a nine channel surround-sound set up. It worked with, for example, Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) triggers that evoke a tingling sensation, blurring the lines between sound and touch. This auditory-tactile synaesthesia fosters a heightened somatic awareness. It brings attention to different spaces, inducing a spatialized multi-selves-awareness that unsettles proprioception. These experiences of being shaken and connected, of wandering into a space where we do not need to be alone, where we share the intimacy of sensing each other's porosity, can contribute to an experience of grounding but also of discomfort, sensing an erotics of grieves as a simultaneously disruptive and regenerative force.

The sounds that you will hear in *Practicing Futures while Grieving* all come from my body. Their spatialisation is not produced through panning during the mastering process but by the movement of my body in relation to the binaural microphones. I move in relation to your ears. There is humming and purring and clicking and slurring. There are two frequencies in particular I worked with while humming. They are called solfeggio¹³ frequencies and are part of an ancient scale that is believed to have been used in ancient Sanskrit teaching and singing. In the global north it was used in Gregorian chants. The scale was forgotten in the West, some say it got prohibited by the Catholic church because of its powerful impact on the mental and physical health of its listeners. By using Pythagorean numerical reduction, Dr. Joseph Puleo, a physician and herbalist, "re-found" this scale of six electromagnetic sound frequencies (Horowitz and Puleo 1999). These frequencies are sometimes also called universal frequencies as they relate to the Schuman Frequency of the earth's electromagnetic field (BRMI 2020). This vibrational field between the earth and the ionosphere is the "Earth's heartbeat" as NASA calls it. It is generated by lightning activity and produces a very low frequency: 7.3–8Hz. It is the universal vibrational field that all entities on the planet earth are soaked in (Wilson 2013). All of the solfeggio frequencies have a sum of 3, 6, or 9 which are numbers that Nikola Tesla associated with the "key to the universe" as principles of growth and decay or construction and destruction. In soundhealing practices, solfeggio frequencies are considered to have an impact on different parts of the physical, emotional, and spiritual body and to have the capacity to heal, restore, and calibrate (Lorenz n.d.; Longdon 2020). I worked with 528Hz and 963Hz and their overtones.

528 Hz is sometimes called the love or miracle frequency. It is believed to support transformation and repair on a molecular level (e.g., Akimoto et al. 2018). It resonates with the heart and the solar plexus, contributing to regulating heart rate and blood pressure as well as having an impact on the endocrine system and its regulation of cortisol and oxytocin. It is also believed to support the regeneration of DNA, which is why some hospitals play music built around 528Hz before and after surgeries. Its effect is often described as dissolving tensions and inducing a feeling of calm and

compassion. As light and sound travel on the same electromagnetic wavelengths, 528Hz shares a location with the colour green, the colour of chlorophyll.

The second frequency that I worked with is 963Hz which is said to resonate with the frequency of the pineal gland. This little endocrine gland in the shape of a pinecone resides at the center of your brain, at the base of the two lobes of the frontal cortex inside the epithalamus, where the limbic system is connected to other parts of the brain, it is responsible for melatonin secretions that regulates wake and sleeping cycles in relation to circadian rhythms and the light changes of day and night. In some amphibians and reptiles this gland sits much closer to the bone and has a light receptor variously called the pineal eye or the third eye. Ancient Greeks believed it to be a valve, a guardian for the flow of pneuma. Descartes regarded the gland as having mystical purpose, describing it as the “principal seat of the soul” (Lokhorst 2018). More recent research has found that the pineal gland might be responsible for the body’s own production of the hallucinogen DMT. Although there is still much dispute and research to be done on the matter, clinical psychiatrist Dr. Rick Strassman holds that DMT is naturally released by the pineal gland facilitating the soul’s movement in and out of the body as an integral part of the birth and death experiences (Strassman 2001; Timmermann et al. 2018; Nichols 2018). If this is true then it would probably only be true for processes of dying, in which the body has the possibility to shut down in its own time. It would not be true for people who die in accidents or get shot or bombed.

Another sound material that I worked with in this listening session are fragments of Romanian lament singing. I heard them as a child when I would spend my summers at my great grandparents’ house in Romanian Moldavia. My great grandmother was a wailing woman in her village and would follow her calling to sing to the dead. When someone died, the door of the house would be unhinged and placed on a table in the largest room of the house. The dead person would be laid out on it in their best clothes and adorned with flowers or objects, like a walking stick or freshly baked bread reeves. The entire village would gather, come and go and stay. There would be crying and wailing and sobbing and laughing and eating and drinking and the wailing women would give rhythm and structure with their singing to this collective grieving practice that took three days.

There are many different wailing traditions in Romania, most of them are performed by women. The one my great grandmother was a part of was mostly practiced by one to three women. One voice would address the dead person directly. Believing that the soul is still in transition for three days the singing is supposed to both lure the dead back into life and accompany the soul into the other world, by reminding them of their deeds and losses and mis-deeds in their lifetime (Reteganul 1897; Bota 2020). In patriarchal rural Romania this was also taken as an opportunity to engage in political commentary on the side of the cis female singers while at the same time having direct communication with the dead. This speech was sobbing and a wailing more than lamenting. Being fully improvised and not adhering to a pre-given form or song it was giving rhythm and creating space for collectively crying in public. The other wailing women who took the second and third voice would not use words but make the sounds of birds and wind and trees and insects and other animals and weathers.¹⁴ If there was more than one woman, they would take turns in speak-wailing and sounding. When my great grandmother performed the duty of her calling she always

had tears in her eyes and when I once asked her what it was she was doing there, she said: "Wailing is breathing out loud for others." She never said whether it was for the dead or the living.

I think it is for both. To give your breath for those who cannot breathe anymore, or who could not take their last breath in peace, is honoring and supporting the dead in their transition. Giving your breath for those who cannot breathe because their grieving has taken their breath in shock and pain, or those who cannot breathe because in spite of them being alive their life is made unliveable by oppressive systems, or those who feel suffocated from the rage against those systems is supporting the living. Wailing as breathing out loud for others, if nothing else, can become a channel for energies to flow again, to work against stagnation and blockage and restraint. And as the wailing women in that Romanian village took turns, I want to suggest we take turns in holding space for each other's grieving and breathing. What I've learned from these traditions is the necessity to create a space where grieves can not only be expressed but also held and witnessed by community. It embodies the erotic dimensions of grieving, as in its vibrations we sense the entanglements of individual and collective, presence and absence, life and death, prayer and protest.

LISTENING: PRACTICING FUTURES WHILE GRIEVING

Dear Listener, as you probably don't have a 9-channel surround set up, using headphones might still be a good option. Otherwise, laying down between the left and right speaker pointed to your body could also work. Please take a heavy object that you might want to hold in your hand or place on your body. Heavy doesn't have to be big. It can be a small pebble that you want to place on your eyelid or on your tongue. Cats, dogs, books, potted plants, babies, and other humans have also served as heavy objects in the past. Choose what you want to be in relation to and invite it into the listening together. And with this I invite you to scan the QR Code and listen to the sound piece. Press play on the sound cloud track and see you on the other side:



<https://soundcloud.com/siegmazacharias/practicing-future-while-breathing>

After listening together, this is where part three would begin in a typical listening session where we exchange with each other what came up as we were listening. If you want, you can take 5 minutes and use automatic writing in which you neither stop writing nor edit or censure yourself; you can write down, take note of what came up for you, as sensations, feelings, images, thoughts, bodily reactions.

This is not the end. The listening sessions are meant as a beginning. A beginning of practicing an erotics of grieves. The erotics of grieves are not a commodified, appeased, assimilated universalised grief, where grieving is often required to assimilate quickly into the white heteropatriarchal capitalist demands of productivity. An erotics of grieves hold a force that can be experienced as disruptive and intimate, building solidarity and community as well as adding cracks into power structures and building counter power. Grieving can break you open. This might feel violent. It can unsettle your breathing patterns, your sleeping patterns, your relational patterns. You are beside yourself, maybe because for the first time you experience the fantasy of the individual, maybe because you experience yourselves as many, entangled with the living and the non-living, with humans and non-humans, with land as ancestor. An erotics of grieves is not just honoring the dead; it is mobilizing towards kin, be it human or more than human. An erotics of grieves makes you want to care for the dead, y/our kin, y/our ancestors, waters and lands. The word *care* has a deep connection with grieving. The etymological root of the word “care” is *chara* which is old high German for “grief, lament, or sickbed.”¹⁵ If a culture fears grief, can it really understand care? Is a culture that is uncomfortable with death able to honor life? What would it mean then to embrace death, to care for each other by hospicing the fantasy of the individual? (Machado 2022). What would it mean to become a death doula to colonialism, racism, patriarchy, ableism, and capitalism? How does our ability to relate to grieving relate to our connection with land? This is what an erotics of grieves can teach us. We don’t have to fix them, but tend to them and through them care for our communities. A beginning can be made by listening with your whole body, co-sensing how you are given as a resonant space for others, living or dead.

Notes

¹ In addition to UN General Assembly (1948b, Article 2), see the ongoing case South Africa v. Israel in the International Court of Justice.

² For a good summary on the situation concerning “anti-antisemitism” in Germany 2024 see Wikipedia Contributors (2024b). Several national and international cultural workers and academics who support the Palestinian struggle and/or are anti-Zionists have been cancelled because of accusations of antisemitism. A third of them are Jewish. Amongst them are Judith Butler, Masha Gessen, Nancy Fraser. For contextualisation within the German “Gedächtniskultur” (memory culture) and “Staatsräson” (raison d’état) see Frieze (2024) and Otto (2023). Since 6 December 2023, the Archive of Silence has existed as “a crowdsourced archive documents [of] silenced voices.” Their mission is to chronicle the alarming waves of erasure and violence directed at Palestinian advocacy in Germany. There has been an uprise of bans, cancellations and censorship. The list can be accessed here: <https://linktr.ee/archiveofsilence>.

³ For Mbembe necropolitics is a socio-political regime that creates "deathworlds" in which "vast (racialised) populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the living dead." Mbembe 2003, 39–40.

⁴ At the time of writing the Lemkin Institute (2024) issues active genocide alerts for Palestine, Sudan, Kongo, Yemen, Armenia, Ethiopia.

⁵ The universalist concept of the body is a fallacy that overlooks the ways in which bodies are shaped by intersecting social, cultural, historical, and political forces. This concept presumes that all bodies can be understood through a singular, neutral framework, often centered on Western, Eurocentric, and masculinist ideals. Such a universalist perspective erases the lived realities of bodies marked by race, gender, ableism, and class, reducing diverse experiences to a homogenized norm. Feminist, queer, critical race, and disability theorists have long critiqued this fallacy. For instance, Judith Butler (1993) argues that the body is never purely biological but always already embedded in social norms and discourses that regulate its intelligibility. Similarly, Sylvia Wynter (2003) and Denise Ferreira da Silva (2007) critique the universalist body as a construct that perpetuates the racialized and colonial logic of modernity, where the white, able-bodied male is posited as the normative standard, rendering other bodies as deviant or subhuman. Moreover, Hortense Spillers (1987) highlights how the racialized Black body, particularly within the context of slavery, was rendered into a flesh that could not participate in the humanist project of bodily autonomy. Jina B. Kim's scholarship (2020) explores the intersection of race, disability, and social justice, focusing on how Black and Asian American disabled individuals navigate marginalization. The fallacy of a universal body thus supports systems of domination by denying the differential ways bodies are subject to power, erasing the specific histories and materialities that constitute embodied subjectivity.

⁶ "The differential allocation of grievability [...] operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death?" (Butler 2009, 14). Butler argues that not all lives are afforded the same value or recognition; some lives are systematically dehumanized and excluded from the sphere of grievable life. This exclusion often correlates with race, nationality, gender, and other social markers that determine which lives are considered legitimate subjects of human rights and mourning. Lives that are not recognized as fully human are also lives that, when lost, do not produce collective grief or public mourning.

⁷ Especially writers in feminist critical black studies have developed a rich scholarship addressing black mourning. Hartman's work, particularly in *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007), explores the legacy of slavery and the ongoing mourning it necessitates. She examines how the Middle Passage and the history of slavery continue to haunt contemporary Black life, shaping collective mourning. In *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), Sharpe discusses the concept of "the wake" as both a site of mourning and a mode of living in the aftermath of slavery and ongoing racial violence. She explores how Black people live in the "wake" of slavery, constantly negotiating grief and survival. Moten's work often touches on the aesthetics of Black mourning and the relationship between mourning and resistance. In *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003), he examines how Black music, particularly jazz, serves as a form of collective mourning and resistance. In "The condition of Black life is one of mourning," Claudia Rankine (2015) encapsulates the enduring grief that pervades Black communities in response to ongoing racial violence and systemic oppression. underscores the importance of acknowledging and understanding this state of mourning as central to the Black experience in America, while also pointing to the potential of mourning as a powerful form of collective resistance.

⁸ In 2021 Bayo Akomolafe hosted a collaborative learning festival called *We Will Dance with Mountains - Into the Cracks, a journey of depths and praxis and longing to other sites of power*, as he called it. The invitation was to build sanctuary together not as a mere place of safety but as a place to fall apart and become something else. The content of these gatherings can be accessed as Slow Studies Akomolafe (2021).

⁹ Developed for artspace, the listening sessions have migrated into educational work as somatic foundation building with students mostly at the studium generale at the University of the Art Berlin. They have been part of the grief immersion for death workers program, organised by Inviting Abundance, an online Grief Work platform by Will Daddario and Joanne Zerdy. They have been offered in social spaces for collective grieving, where people

come together, who might have family in Palestine, people, who have been impacted by police violence, people who struggled with their practice of daily witnessing of genocide. The sound pieces are freely accessible on SoundCloud and have been accessed and shared by former participants of the listening sessions with their clients, loved ones, and friends in tending to different grieves. I encourage collective listening and using the exchange about what comes up during the listening, as sensations, feelings, images, and thoughts, as gate openers to have difficult conversations about how we move with grieves towards liveable futures.

¹⁰ “This field was also the medium through which the vibratory nature of Akash could pass and be made evident in life. It is also within the Akash, it is believed, that the divine and primordial sounds of nature are “recorded” as vibratory codes and were interpreted by the Siddhas as mantras” (Chaudhary 2020, 43).

¹¹ *Practicing Futures while Grieving* took place in the Festivals RE_GENERATION: a festival for pleasure, solidarity and healing, 2023, Forum Theater Düsseldorf with: Siegmair Zacharias, Mithu Sanyal, Eroca Nicols, Neha Spellfish, Joy Mariama Smith, Monique LaPlante, Mzamo Nondlwana, Pêdra Costa, Paca Faraus, Carmichael Jones, Asad Raza, Evan Webber, Sandra Röseler, Matti Rouse, Liza Witte, Lea Kieffer, Steve Heather, Dani d’Emilia, mar~yã, Kathy-Ann Tan, Annick Kleinzen, Rahel Spöhrer. Funded by: Re_Generation receives support from Kunststiftung NRW and from the Federal Commissioner for Culture and the Media, as part of the Alliance of International Production Houses. In cooperation with Cheers for Fears. See the website for more information: <https://www.fft-duesseldorf.de/series-festivals/re-generation-eng>.

¹² I’m using Lygia Clark’s expression of relational objects found in Rolnik (2010).

¹³ The name derives from the syllables from the hymn to St. John the Baptist **Ut** queat laxis/ **resonare** fibrismira gestorum/**famuli** tuorum**solve** polluti / **labii** reatum Sanctelohannes. Ut 396Hz, re417Hz, mi528Hz, fa639Hz, sol741Hz. la852Hz.

¹⁴ “When we experience sound waves either directly from or mimicking nature—such as waves lapping on the shore or certain bird songs—we relax. Research has shown that the sounds of nature increase attention capacity and shift our nervous systems into the rest-digest state. Our breathing tends to slow, our heart rate decreases, and the nervous system releases oxytocin, the so-called love hormone, associated with feelings of connection to others. And, when levels of oxytocin increase, other more arousing hormones, such as the stress hormone cortisol, decrease” (Chaudhary 2020, 24–25). See also van Praag et al. (2017); Tal et al. (2017); American Music Therapy Association (n.d.).

¹⁵ Interestingly not connected to the Latin “*curare*.” See Online Etymological Dictionary (2024).

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Biography

Siegmar Zacharias was born in Romania and lives in Berlin. She is a performance artist and researcher. She trained as a death doula and studies traditional plant medicine. At the intersection of art, radical pedagogy and activism she creates performances, immersive installations, 24hrs praxis symposia that address the generative dynamics of transformation. She collaborated with uncontrollable materials such as smoke, slime, and drool. Working with the connection between sound and the nervous system, she developed a series of somacoustic listening sessions *WAVES – listening towards social bodies* as containers for collective grieving. She received an AHRC TECHNE grant to develop her PhD project on *The Erotics of Grieves* at Roehampton University. She teaches at Bard College Berlin, Studium Generale UdK, and is a tutor at DASResearch ATD Amsterdam for third cycle artistic research. With Kitty Zsiga, Shelley Etkin, and migrant and post-migrant women in a Berlin neighbourhood they developed the *SocialBody Apothecary* for intercultural plant knowledge exchanges and collective plant medicine making towards SocialBody transformation.

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PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

LISTENING TO THE VULTURES¹

CATALINA INSIGNARES INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER

A note on “vultures”

The internationally understandable Spanish translation of “vulture” is *buitre*, however this is not what we call them where I grew up. In Colombia, we call them *chulos*.

Chulos are emblematic figures in the popular history of the country. From many songs to all sorts of artistic iconography, we have endeared this bird, with a note of dark humour, as a familiar companion. Once I saw beautiful graffiti where someone had replaced the glorious Andean Condor at the centre of the national flag with a Fat Vulture. This is understandable when you know that 40 years of war have reportedly left 49,000 people dead,² our *chulos* are well fed, and they are very often darkening our sky with their circling flight.

Through this text, I will share the path I threaded starting from an individual one-to-one practice of mediation between a deceased person and a living person, the *Landscapes of the Dead*, and arriving at a collective performative practice of noisy listening titled *To know the vultures so well*. This path has led me through intimate, in-depth research on the different sensorial and imaginal relations we can establish with the dead.

The *chulos* have been accompanying me through these years of research. Their flight is not as majestic as the one of the condor, but their elegant turns and glides in the air give us a sign in the sky of where death is happening on the ground. I have made of them my allies in the search for material signs of the invisible in the visible realm. I have asked for their wisdom, trying to tune my intuition with their sense of smell, listening to their daily closeness to death as nutrition, as something we cannot do without.

A note on fragment

I have walked this research path with colleagues and friends in practice and also with voices coming from books, and from texts handed in by other friends.³

Below, you will follow my thoughts and words (some of my writing comes from journals of times in research through the years) but also theirs, following the not-so-linear logic of the fragment. Often my work as an artist ends up dialoguing with fragment, collage and association as a form of meaning-making that relies not so much on the deployment of an argument, but more on the resonance of meanings that happen when you place a thing next to another. I recognized my gesture when I read Clara Schulmann in her book *Chicanes* (2023), and, with her I propose this text to be “imagined as a listening device where writing serves to record and preserve. All one has to do is listen to these voices and isolate them from the context in which they initially appeared, so they can be perceived differently. The work takes on the form of a re-transcription, and eventually a reassembling” (12).

Passing things through my body that come from outside of it is a practice I've kept in my work since I can remember. It may be by reading aloud for hours in the night, or re-dancing very old dances, or sounding and singing by transforming my throat into an open radio frequency. Today this text will pass things through my fingers to let them resonate with each other. Sometimes I have masticated and digested these excerpts for a long time and sometimes I will be just spitting them back almost unchewed. You are invited to engage in a process of association following this path without me holding your hand too tight, letting meaning emerge through different coherences and incoherences that might remain unsolved.



Figure 1: A torn wing in the ground in Nuquí, Chocó, Colombia. Photo by Catalina Insignares



As soon as the crowd was out of sight they closed in in circles. The near ones got nearer and the far ones got near. A circle, a swoop and a hop with spread-out wings. Close in, close in til some of the more hungry or daring perched on the carcass. [...] The flock had to wait the white-headed leader, but it was hard. They jostled each other and pecked at heads in hungry irritation. Some walked up and down the beast from head to tail, tail to head. [...] He had scented the matter as quickly as any of the rest, but decorum demanded that he sat oblivious until he was notified. Then he took off with ponderous flight and circled and lowered, circled and lowered until the others danced in joy and hunger in his approach.

He finally lit on the ground and walked around the body to see if it were really dead. Peered into its nose and mouth. Examined it well from end to end and leaped upon it and bowed, and the others danced a response. That being over he balanced and asked:

'What killed this man?'

The chorus answered: 'Bare, bare fat.'

'What killed this man?'

'Bare, bare fat.'

'What killed this man?'

'Bare, bare fat.'

'Who'll stand his funeral?'

'We!!!!'

'Well, all right now'

So he picked his eyes in the ceremonial way and the feast went on. The yaller mule was gone from the town except for the porch talk, and for the children visiting his bleaching bones now and then in spirit of adventure.

(Hurston [1937] 2018, 70)

In the beginning of my work with the dead I wanted to understand different ways of taking responsibility for them, for those with whom I had a relationship, but also all the others.... How did I relate to them as invisible entities that accompany the living? How was their apparent absence made present through different bodily practices?

The research was developed in response to the apparently "disenchanted" western context where I have been residing for almost 20 years, in which death is something that needs to be dealt with as quickly and as silently as possible. This heritage and certain currents of psychology leading from it, see grief as a thing to be done with; they condemn the dead to be only bodies to be buried, never spirits that can speak and consider mourning as a passage to leave behind the person who departed, never as a way to keep them with us for the future.⁴

I could feel, through appearances in dreams, smells showing up abruptly, lively memories, sensations in my skin, and conversations happening in my head or in my heart, that my relationship

with the people that were said to be “gone” or “absent” was actually quite vivacious. As Fanny Howe reminds us, “The dead grow in stature as time passes. Their personality intensifies becoming a scent. They seep into the faces of passers-by and emerge out of trees and restaurants in dreary new forms” (Howe 2001, 175).

I had no need for any sort of confirmation that would decide whether those presences would be “real” or “imaginary,” since those binaries had not been very important in my life. As my grandma used to say in her southern-Colombian accent “*los fantasmas no existen, pero que los hay los hay*,” ghosts don’t exist, but for sure they are among us. This place where things are and are not simultaneously has shaped the epistemology within which I’ve lived and felt all my life. When I started wanting to tend towards dead people it was never a matter of disentangling belief, superstition, imagination, hallucination, reality, absence or presence.

I had other problems.



The research actually started with my difficulties in maintaining and entertaining relationships with my dead. Between 2016 and 2018, my aunt Popola, my cousin Quique, and my aunt Susi died in Colombia and I was not there to participate in the collective ritualization of their deaths. I had to find my own way to relate to them in the new state they had transformed into. I knew that doing this alone would not provide the comfort or sense-making I felt I needed; the presence of other living people was required. In general, I have never been able to make sense of things without entering into dialogue with someone. Some people make sense through solitary moments, walks, writing. I make sense through encounters, and my work has always put relationship at its centre, whether in one-to-one performances or in group gatherings. Thus, I started conceiving different practices of an imaginary, sensorial or psychic nature, putting in place exercises to be done in groups or in twos, to try different ways of nourishing my relationship to the loved people that died in those years.

The door suddenly opened to all the other relationships that I hadn’t been tending to: Willis, Pacho, Enrique, Grandma Chelo.... And at the same time, when you start relating to your own dead together with other living people who want to talk or nourish their own set of relationships, slowly “their” dead become yours too.

When invoked in a porous sensorial context, the presence of dead people is surprisingly easy to activate, it just requires some space for story-telling or sharing how you feel the presence of that person in your life, and very simply others can feel them too. When my friend Maritza told me that her mother always comes to her house in the form of a bird, whenever I see this bird, I think of her mom. When somebody tells me that this song reminds them of their deceased friend, I will think of their friend next time I hear that song. The dead are easily invoked, this was a phenomenon I wanted to study and handle with care, since, obviously, there are also some dead I definitely did not wish to invoke.

As an artist, my background rests in modern and post-modern dance training, and for years, dance, movement and touch have become tools for paying attention to the world and the way I relate to others. Inhabiting the body through different states of consciousness has been crucial to me, informed by somatic practices such as Continuum Movement or Body Mind Centering, hypnosis, Reiki, Zen meditation, Paulina Oliveros' Sound Meditations, and different syncretic spiritual practices active in the feminist circles of Bogotá.⁵

Shifting the focus of movement and touch practices towards sensing different invisibles, I began holding workshops and performative spaces where we could feel death as deeply entangled with life, and the relationship with a deceased person as something that we can re-invoke, and remember as a presence to keep us company. I worked in response to an ideology of forgetfulness and of cutting life from death, one that pushes death to the realm of the unnameable and unrelatable. I responded to the socially acquired habit of silencing the dead with a piercing ear ready to listen to the quieted murmurs around us.⁶

Through these different practices, a vision kept coming: all living beings are surrounded by a thick mesh of relationships, a mesh that surrounds us all (sometimes holding us and sometimes binding us). With my friend and partner-enquirer Carolina Mendonça, we began to call this the Matrix of the Dead. We started to understand that we were practicing ways of keeping this mesh of relationships alive, through deep listening, tuning-in and amplifying the capacities to feel them. All of these practices were collective discussions and storytelling that utilized chanting and learning to catch and utter almost imperceptible information.

Within those spaces, together we developed a practice called *Landscapes of the Dead*, in which we channelled images through touch and movement, inviting information of a person who is deceased (human or not) to appear and take the form of a landscape.

One person lies down and another person touches them and lets images come to their mind and their mouth. It is a touch that awakens memories, sensations, images, a touch that pays attention. In this practice we invite images and we speak them aloud, generating strange poems said by our mouths but coming from places that are still mysterious to us. We follow the intuition that if we think and feel the relationship to someone who is deceased *in the form of a landscape*, we will literally *make space*, for that relationship to exist, be nurtured as a soil.

The body-as-landscape becomes a relationship-as-landscape. The images that come from sensation, the images that come from the dead person, and the images that come from the tissues all overlap and enmesh in an affective and sensorial moment that gives us embodied time to be with the dead.



Letting the images come means allowing the imagination to be something that does not come from *within* but somehow from an *out there*.

For a few years before all this, I had been training in a practice called Remote Viewing, after my friends and collaborators Myriam Lefkowitz and Simon Ripoll-Hurier had taught it and practiced it with me. It is a pen-and-paper practice where one trains to see things at a distance with the mind's eye, speak it aloud and write it down on paper. In the ideology of Remote Viewing, it is said things are all related through a matrixial field, and a "viewer" can tap into the field and thus see objects, places and people, through the distance of space and time.

In the *Landscapes of the Dead* we also wanted to tap and see, but instead of using the paper and pen for this, we were using touch and the bodies of two people. We were less interested in the early cybernetic thinking that was behind Remote Viewing and more interested in what felt like information that was at the same time in the body and somehow below it, in deeper currents of water or in invisible caves.

By synchronicity, the writings of Gloria Anzaldúa came back to my life at that moment, and helped give these caves or deeper currents names we could understand. She spoke of *nepantla*, the liminal space where realities bridge, where things are and are not what we are used to recognizing. She spoke of *el cenote*, the pool of the collective imaginaries, memories, shapeless dreams.

When you wake up you're still between realities, in "nepantla", a Nahuatl word for the space in between, un lugar no-lugar or tierra de un medio. Via nepantla you tap el cenote, the archetypal inner stream of consciousness, a dreampool or reservoir of unconscious images and feelings stored as iconic imagery. El cenote is a mental network of subterranean rivers of information that converge and well up to the surface, like a sinkhole or an opening to the womb of the earth. (Anzaldúa 1999, 250)

Anzaldúa knows that the body is the place that allows the access to vision, she knows it is the flesh, with its charge of denial and of wounds that can tear open the access to what is otherwise invisible or unsensible.

I want to inhabit the body, discover its sensitivity and intelligence. When all your antenna quiver and your body becomes a lightning rod, a radio receiver, a seismograph detecting and recording ground movement, when your body responds, every part of you moves in synchronicity. All responses to the world take place within our bodies. Our bodies are tuning forks receiving impressions, which in turn activate responses. An artist has to stay focused on the point of intersection (nepantla) between inner and outer worlds through her senses. (Anzaldúa [2003] 2009, 292)

I committed my practice to finding different ways of being this radio receiver, and to study how different ways of activating the senses of touch, of the ear, of the inner sight, could connect us through intuition to collective knowledge and imagery. Spooky coincidences started to happen: someone in a workshop ended up describing with precision the house of someone's deceased grandma; I once described the stones hidden underneath the land by the grandfather of one of the participants; a flower that was given a few years ago by the deceased person came up in someone's vision while touching the body of her sister. Signs that our imaginary was not only "ours" started to appear.

I can only invent words, play with what happens when we call it *The Matrix of the Dead*, for what happens when we call it *el cenote*. As Fanny Howe did, so I must say, "I don't believe in the unconscious, because whatever it is, it is not un-anything. That watery junk that floats through and around my bones is alive and well and near the luxuriate in sheets and pillows and night all around them as if the head is a bed" (Howe 2001, 111).

It is not my place to theorize about where these images come from, some might call it collective unconscious, others the imaginal, others perhaps quantum continuum, Anzaldúa calls it *el cenote*... what I am interested in is engaging with the effects that take place when signs and coincidences start being activated between us, creating some form of dialogue with what seems to be cut from our reality.



Belief in immortality is harmful because it is not in our power to conceive of the soul as really incorporeal. So this belief is in fact a belief in the prolongation of life, and it robs death of its purpose.

Piety with regard to the dead: to do everything for what does not exist.

(Weil [1947] 1997, 84)

After a few years of embodied practice and research, it became clear how necrocapitalism—or, the world order of dispossession based in the fact that some lives are disposable for the sake of accumulation—has dedicated itself to denying the presence of death in our daily lives in order to advance its constant, underhanded killing. It erases death from our view and tries to convince us of the project that we should all be immortal through outsourcing the care of the dead or simply hiding it under social carpets. Certain places in the world get to forget about the killings that sustain their lives *because* they have been made to forget that they too will die. To be able to sustain consumption of goods, we need to forget how the cobalt in the phones, the diamonds in the medical tools that save lives, the cocaine that provides a good party, the ingredients of the medicine that allow people to live until 100 years old, are all a direct consequence of killing and forced displacement of certain other people. Denying the existence of death seems to be the best way to get away with murder.

I come from a place where imperialism and capitalism have produced over 49,000 killings, over 6,000 internally displaced people, and over 80,000 missing persons. Having moved and lived in Europe or North America for almost 20 years, I have been a constant witness of parallel realities: places where life can be lived by forgetting death; and places where death is never out of the conversation for more than 20 minutes. As a witness of this, there was always a sense of responsibility (not unproblematically linked with a sense of guilt for having left the place I grew up in) for the masses of people killed and buried under that territory. However, in the years following the signing of the Peace Agreement with the FARC (and an incredible national movement towards testimony and memory work that was taking place through the Comisión Nacional de Memoria Histórica and other grass-roots organizations), I also felt strongly that I did not want to engage my work in any narrative of memorializing, collective mourning or repair.

Resonating with visions of history stemming from black and indigenous thinkers such as Saidiya Hartman, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, and Christina Sharpe, in which “the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present” (Sharpe 2016, 9), I was interested in holding space where we did not need to engage with logics of reparation, or the compulsion to leave anything behind in order to “move forward.”

And though wake work is, at least in part, attentive to mourning and the mourning work that takes place on local and trans*local and global levels, and even as we know that mourning an event might be interminable, how does one mourn the interminable event? Just as wake work troubles mourning, so too do the wake and wake work trouble the ways most museums and memorials take up trauma and memory. That is, if museums and memorials materialize a kind of reparation (repair) and enact their own pedagogies as they position visitors to have a particular experience or set of experiences about an event that is seen to be past, how does one memorialize chattel slavery and its afterlives, which are unfolding still? How do we memorialize an event that is still ongoing? (Sharpe 2016, 22)

Materially, my research became hosting social situations where all participants could be together with the dead, in a sense of connection and continuation of relation, but also of obligation that could be somehow negotiated and set in movement. Yes, the dead sometimes feel heavy; when we start speaking about them our chests, our guts and in general our muscular tissues more often than not start dragging us down. The spaces my work was holding wanted to acknowledge these weights and feel them and move them in our tissues, but also give space for the weight itself to perhaps change its quality.

In these spaces grief could find a space, but also all sorts of different affective modulations and complications of the relationships we entertain with the deceased. Some people might want to celebrate the fact that somebody has finally died, some might feel a loss as a relief, not everyone wants to honour a dead person or mourn them, but this doesn't mean they would not like to have a space and time to engage in this relationship.

Sometimes the deceased oblige us to do things we actually would prefer to refuse to do, but if we see the dead as a monolithic force that deprives us from our agency then we might feel stifled by

them. We attempted not to romanticize our relations with them, but to enter the complexity, and this sometimes meant to tell them to fuck off. Other times the weight and obligation and accountability the dead were asking from us was one we did want to respond to, and then we could use the collective space to think and imagine ways of doing this.

November 2021

If the dead are composed of fungi, and we are too, then the Matrix of the Dead is indeed going under and through us. And carrying so much knowledge and traces of what has always been, of who has come before.

In Aymara culture, it is said that in places where there is a bigger number of cruel deaths, there are more ways into the World Below, the aka pacha. More cruelty creates more caves and tubes and holes and entrances.

Does this mean that some horrible locations can give us a privileged access to the Matrix of the Dead? Or just that in some places the living are surrounded by so many holes that they cannot connect anymore?

In one of these places people sit down in plastic chairs and put on random music at the loudest volume possible. People seem to use this technology to become deaf to the voices of the dead speaking, or at least try.

A young soldier who came from another one of these places, told me that when he was there, they told him that if you dream of a friend who is dead, then you will die the next day. To mute the voices of the dead because their presence can imply our own death.

The dead often demand a response, in some places they even demand a payment... what is our debt to the dead? Especially to those who die from a violent death? Am I here to honour them? To propose some form of reparation? What if dead is not heroic? What if it is not a wound that seeks to be closed?"

(Catalina Insignares, research journal)

+++

In 2019 I met Léa Rivière, a dancer and poet that had been actively nourishing and learning from C., a dead person that was always close to her, actively intervening in her life by apparitions, synchronicities and songs. The learnings that C. brought to Léa, catalyzed her into being an amazing facilitator for other people to nourish their relationships with the dead. Since we met, we keep on thinking together what responsibility with the dead might mean, what it may or may not have to do with grieving.

Léa also accompanied me from far when my grandmother Judith died in 2021. This time I could be in Colombia and by the years of death-practice I had within me, I could be present in the time of

her passing in aesthetic, poetic and ethical ways I would not have previously been able to access. On whatsapp, Léa asked me to describe to her how the room looked and felt after my grand-ma had just died. I could then observe, by the means of being able to address this to someone, the suspension in the air, the silence cut off by sobs and wailings, the cleaning of sheets and carrying of weights, I could take in every moment of this incredible assemblage of movements of care and pain. I could breathe in and breath out through death as one breathes in and out of pain, as one breathes in and out of a thought. I could be there.

Recently, Léa has been busy defining the intricacies of traditions, dead people and the central work of trans people in the masterdom of all sorts of transitions (between life and dead, or between different gender embodiments). Her thought keeps twisting linear narratives, keeps twisting time, keeps twisting bodies and gender roles, twisting the relations between peoples and their milieux, keeps helping me twist.

I see our work and our researches growing like neighbouring plants in the same soil, but with different shapes and uses. We have both dedicated ourselves to inhabiting worlds in which death is as necessary as life and where the concrete and sensorial relationship with our dead is part of a way of listening, consenting and being part of the rhythms that the earth and our bodies need. All of this sometimes feels like grief work, for ourselves or for others, sometimes it feels more like awakening relationships that have been dormant. It implies becoming sensitive and practicing materialities and epistemologies that think time and space from non-linear logics, that know that there are wounds in territories that have been open for centuries, and that dialogues and material exchanges with the invisible are as important as the dialogue with rivers, mountains, plastics, and birds.

[From an encounter] with Guaranis, Aymaras and Qhichwas emerges an image of effective non-contemporaneity: the juxtaposition of spaces, populations and cultures that seem to emerge from the depths of other times. In *El laberinto de la soledad*, Octavio Paz expressed the same idea, but emphasizes the traces of pain:

'[In our territory] various epochs confront each other, ignore each other, or eat one-another up on the same land or separated only by a few kilometres. The old epochs never disappear completely, and all the wounds, even the oldest ones, still stream blood'. (Cusicanqui 2018, 29, my translation)

Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui speaks of the time of colonized places as one where the present is made of strata that make past, present and the future-to-be, simultaneously sensible. In resonance with this thought, Léa speaks of the entanglement of past and present that is necessary for acknowledging and countering the violence made on trans bodies and on the dead.

She asks, so, do you think it's the dead who make our traditions?
Lila replies, yes, but that's not enough. She catches
her breath as she ties up her hair.

The dead don't do anything on their own.
In fact, it's often said that without traditions, we end up
forgetting our dead. But it's true that without
our dead, we'd probably end up forgetting what it even means,
a tradition.

And yet, we have to manufacture the dead to make them
able to oblige us. And I imagine that a tradition
is supposed to prevent us from forgetting to do it.

It's neither the one that makes the other nor the other way around,
or rather always both at the same time.

[...]

When you take care of the dead, you take care of everything.
And we don't give a shit about anything when we don't give a shit about the dead.
If there's one thing we don't make it's traditions
(making new traditions my ass, the new
world my ass, the new age my ass).

We take care of the dead by maintaining their ability
to oblige us, to make of us the obliged of the world.
What a joy, damn it, we relay, we do with, we manufacture to be manufactured, we
manufacture because we're manufactured.

Taking care of the ancestors just means to stop
killing the dead. The other day, a guy said on the radio
"It's because things don't last that they
last." He died a few months later
and I hear him even better now.

In English, passing on means transmitting
and it means to die. Two birds with one stone.
If we don't take care of making our dead last,
we prevent them from really dying. We deprive them of
the luxury of polysemy, we kill them by not having
let them die, by not letting them last. Passing on,
passing away, passing for: who are the artists
of passing if it is not trans people?"

(Rivière 2023, 82–85; my translation)



In 2021, Carolina and I were invited for a residency to share the practices with the dead in Nuquí, a small town on the Colombian Pacific coast. The people from the town are Colombians of African descent and Embera natives. Their history is one of slavery, impoverishment, and abandonment by the state and more recently, violent control by groups of drug dealers and corrupted military or police members.

The art association that hosted us insisted on the pertinence of our proposal and thought that a four-week residency period could be a good time for us to develop and transform our practice with the local community. Yet we knew that it is a region where violent death is omnipresent, and we knew it would be a challenge to speak about death.

We came to Nuquí with the intention of proposing to people to engage with the practice of touch and vision that we called the *Landscapes of the dead*. This never happened. Sometimes out of disinterest, sometimes a strong wilful refusal, sometimes a distrust in what the practice could actually do or not do as a spiritual tool, the “NO”s we received questioned the very basis of our beliefs and the ideas behind the practice. It became clear that our ways of listening to the dead were inadequate to resonate in the context.

In the midst of so much death and the fact of Black life as proximate to death, how do we attend to physical, social, and figurative death and also to the largeness that is Black life, Black life insisted from death? I want to suggest that that might look something like wake work. (Sharpe 2016, 20)

In Nuquí, the dead are so present, so urgently present (as unsolved violent murders, as funerals that mobilize the entire town in songs and dance for a few days), that our proposal of “reconnecting” with them made no sense. And furthermore, if someone in this community did need to reconnect with someone or find help to grapple with grief, they would never go to an artist, even less one that is white and comes from the capital or another country. They had *las mayores*, the elderly wise that heal the pains of bodies and souls for the community. Hundreds of years of spiritual and bodily practices of epistemic resistance were in place and next to that our proposals were not only irrelevant but, in many ways, impossible.

We lost all ability to know how to respond in Nuquí, and yet we did not leave. We remained there and listened to the refusals, listened to the soundscapes and the dogs and the parties. All we believed our practices could do was in crisis, so we did nothing else but listen.

July, 2022

I lost, we lost something
and I think the most interesting space we need to make now is to share this loss.

Not so much the practice that creates relation and another mode of relating to the dead, not exposing or sharing that. Not sharing the past, not exposing what we lived in Nuqui neither.

How to be and act with the feeling of constant loss?

Yesterday three more people in the news, killings killings killings,
I guess since we went together to Colombia the question is less, what to do with the dead? and more, what to do with the constant murder?

with what is lost without any sense of justice, without any sense other than to expropriate and capitalize and make more profit.

The knot in the stomach for me is that.
The unstoppable snail.

The vultures that don't stop going around and don't forget.
Before I could sometimes forget, and now I can't

and that's winning and losing something.
And that doesn't only generate despair or sadness or helplessness,
I also feel that a power is acquired with the knowledge that I no longer forget,
with the fact that my chest and my stomach are bound to that place,
that land is so heavy.

The question is no longer how to channel a dead person or the dead in themselves,
But how to channel a vibration que retumba, it rumbles and it does not stop,
a death drive, a tremor under the earth that announces that we can no longer forget.

It's as if a tube is always connected from me to there, and it doesn't let me forget it anymore. And I know so many of us have all those tubes connecting them to places, close and far.

I would like to dwell, to stay inside that hole with others.
To create the possibilities so that this hole can be inhabited for a while and that during that time, not only we won't forget but also
We will see what else is in that black cave.
To enter a little cave of the Aka Pacha and to linger there,
because it is that negative that sustains us
as well.

A density of space
Knots that do not let go.
Not to tell the story of what generated the knot,
but to be there, inside of it.
A darkness, a fear, a warmth, of gathering inside there.

(Catalina Insignares, research journal)



After the humbling learning we had to do in Nuquí, and after dwelling in our incapacity of responding to that situation for over a year, we decided to propose another collective practice called, *to know the vultures so well*.

This is a listening experience proposed to a group of people, or audience. Five moving speakers, each one playing a different playlist containing songs or sounds that are in relation to a dead person (human or not). One of the playlists is made by songs that the group gives us on that day. Then they sit and listen to a loud, sometimes overwhelming, cacophony of the five playlists sounding at the same time. Carolina and I start moving the speakers around the space allowing different acoustic relations to take place between speakers and between them and the people, dead or alive. This work is for us a way of training how to listen to the dead that come in multitudes, because they have always been part of the collective, to the dead that are so much a part of the constant background noise that we sometimes don't manage to hear them. It is a work that trains this group of people to listen through what seems to be unbearable noise; to listen to other affective, sonic, vibratory information; to train how to not shut down when we are overwhelmed, but to keep engaging, leaning into the discomfort, to sustain the listening of the tumult of the worlds inside and outside.

Within the practice, loss is acting as an amplifier of connections with the world. Loss shows up as constitutive to living, and death exits the realm of the unthinkable, of the notion of a limit beyond which we cannot know. In cyclical time there is no origin story, and there is also no ending. There is mystery, there is loss, there is grief that undoes the self, but these things are what being is and they can then be embraced, instead of avoided. Seeing death as part of life does not stop the grieving and the mourning, it does not dissolve the fear of death, but it does mean that we can inhabit the affective places made of the discomfort of loss and the discomfort of not knowing.

In 2021, I invited Camila Marambio as part of a program I was curating to performatively expand her writing and thinking with cancer and necro-powers. In the end of the performance, *The House of Cancer*, she, together with the sound artist Ariel Bustamante, conjured and repeated these words over and over: "*hay enfermedad porque hay medicina, hay enfermedad porque hay medicina, por debajo, dispuesta, y la tenemos que encontrar.*" There is sickness because there is medicine, underneath and we need to find it. This has been a spiritual teaching that they received and passed on, and it has remained with me. There is loss, because there is grieving. Grieving is what constitutes and facilitates change. We need change; therefore, we need loss. A world without loss is an illusion that would want us to believe we can remain identical, to believe we can remain, to believe we will not die. In a recent talk with Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2024), she was talking about the bread that is made in Bolivia for the altars to the dead. She said it is absolutely necessary that this hard bread-dough is strongly massaged and rubbed, *sobada*, so that your body heats up and you sweat. The bread needs your sweat, and it also needs your tears. We need to give our body liquids to the dead, the dead need to be fed this bread, we need to literally lose parts of ourselves for us to continue living.

[...] Wailing, i pull my hair
suck snot back and swallow it
place both hands over the wound
but after all these years
it still bleeds
never realizing that to heal
there must be wounds
to repair there must be damage
for light there must be darkness.

(Anzaldúa [2002] 2009, 249)



Figure 2: A dead cat in the beach of Nuqui. Photo by Carolina Mendonça.

Notes

¹ I started writing this text in September 2023, I've been re-writing and editing for months now, and all along, I have, as probably you all have, seen hundreds of images and read horror stories on the killings of the Palestinian people. Every time I go back to the text, every time the notion of a plural idea of "the dead" is with me, I sense this growing number of murdered people. It has been like that before I started writing; there has always been ongoing genocides, but the scale and horror of what is happening in Palestine today is relentlessly screaming to me and leaving no escape, to in the very least, feel the un-bridging distance between the air entering my lungs, the sun touching my skin, the laughter in my days, and all those manifestations of life that are disappearing every second. I do not address this explicitly in the text, as I do not address this explicitly in my practice, but I did not want you to start reading without us invoking all those children, all those people, and making space for them in the weight of our hearts.

² The actual numbers come from the Observatorio de Memoria y Conflicto (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica) in 2022.

³ One person that has been such an important figure for making me read voices that resonate, challenge and push further my thinking is Tamara Antonijevic. I see this text as the counterpart to a text I asked her to write in response to my practice and that we co-edited with Das Publishing and De Nieuwe Dansbibliotheek, *High Shine* (Antonijevic 2023).

⁴ Very early in the research, I came across Vinciane Despret's book *Au bonheur des morts* (La Découverte, 2015), and her thinking of the dead as agents resonated deeply with the ways in which people had spoken about the dead around me throughout my up-bringing. Also, her analysis of the West's apparent disenchantment allowed me to bring together two epistemologies that were co-existing in me. Her work got intertwined with my research in ways so deep that I can't even disentangle. Her book is now translated in English: *Our Grateful Dead: Stories of those left behind* (Despret 2021).

⁵ In particular, the witch and psychic Ana Ortiz has been great company and a dialogical force in the past years. A talk between her and ecologist Brigitte Baptiste took place as part of the development of my research in the DAS Third research program in Amsterdam (Baptiste et al 2021).

⁶ María del Rosario Acosta López (2019) touches precisely and delicately upon this idea of silences and silencing in the context of the labouring of Historical Memory that has been taking place in Colombia after the signing of the Peace Agreement with the FARC in 2016. Her article, "Gramáticas de la escucha: aproximaciones filosóficas a la construcción de memoria histórica," was a beautiful recommendation for a resonator to the listening that this text proposes.

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Biography

Catalina Insignares is a Colombian choreographer and dancer based in Brussels. She's interested in how to use the sensorial and fictional means of the body and of touch to develop ways to communicate with the invisible. Her practice includes, among others, a duet danced with a participant over a few weeks (*us as a useless duet*, 2015), a night reading addressed to sleeping bodies (*useless land*, 2017), and sensory practices that listen to the connections we have with the dead (*landscapes of the dead*, 2019; *to know the vultures so well*, 2022). Since 2015, she collaborates with Carolina Mendonça, maintaining close complicity in different manners of working together. Since 2017, she has been working with Myriam Lefkowitz in a collaboration that seeks to infiltrate sensory practices in the social and political realities of exiled people (*La facultad*, 2017). From 2019 to 2022 Catalina developed her research as part of DAS THIRD in Amsterdam. From 2019 to 2024 she was a co-curator at the Gessnerallee in Zurich, where she developed the festival El Caldo and the curatorial programme Discrete. Catalina has been periodically invited to intervene at DAS Choreography, as a teacher or mentor, and more recently at P.A.R.T.S for the Master program. She teaches in the Master Program Live Art Forms in the Nuremberg Academy of Fine Arts.

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PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

A MATER OF LOSS

PHOEBUS OSBORNE INDEPENDENT ARTIST

Part I: Mothers die.

It's been hard to sit down and write about such a thing as grief. It's hard because who am I to say anything, and is there anything to say that could hold grief for what it really is? These questions have held me back from writing on this matter—the matter of loss. When I say the “matter of loss,” I mean both the subject matter of loss and the materiality of loss. “Matter” derives itself from the Latin word for mother, “*mater*.” When a mother dies, a material movement of renewal unfolds through which the origin body ceases to perpetuate itself and enacts decay, with the offspring left to carry on with the material efforts of living.

My mother passed away in the early hours of May 3, 2023. It was my first night of a month-long stay in the Yucatán in Mexico, and I was alone. I arrived within a quick succession of unexpected life events: putting my mom in hospice, followed by losing my housing in New York City, overlapped by rushing out to California to nurse my father after open-heart surgery. I wasn't sure I could find affordable housing in New York again, and I wasn't sure I even wanted to stay there anyhow. I had packed up and placed all of my belongings in my rat-infested, roach-ridden, leaking-ceiling studio in Long Island City, covering everything with a layer of thick plastic. This resulted in a suffocating interior, an impermeable topography—a bulbous display of my material life as landscape, refusing penetration of water and light. That spring, I knew my mother's death was imminent. I hoped she would pass while I was out west caring for my father, but she didn't. The last time I would ever see my mother was on the 21st of April. I brought her an embroidered shawl from her mother and some flowers. I put my hand on her hand and told her I loved her. My partner, C, stood beside me

supportively. My mother stared at me, her face busy with thought and after some time, she cast out the words I had felt from her my entire life, “Go away.” As you might imagine, my heart stung. My bones ached and my skin retracted inward. My throat closed-off into a familiar state of muteness. I *turned* to gaze into C’s eyes—these eyes, so full of secure love. I was immediately reminded of the abundant relational intimacy I have managed to kindle in my life. I clasped my hand in theirs and together we *turned* toward the future.



*Image of my studio filled with all of my belongings, covered in plastic in protection from the leaky ceiling, 2023.
Photo credit: Phoebe Osborne*

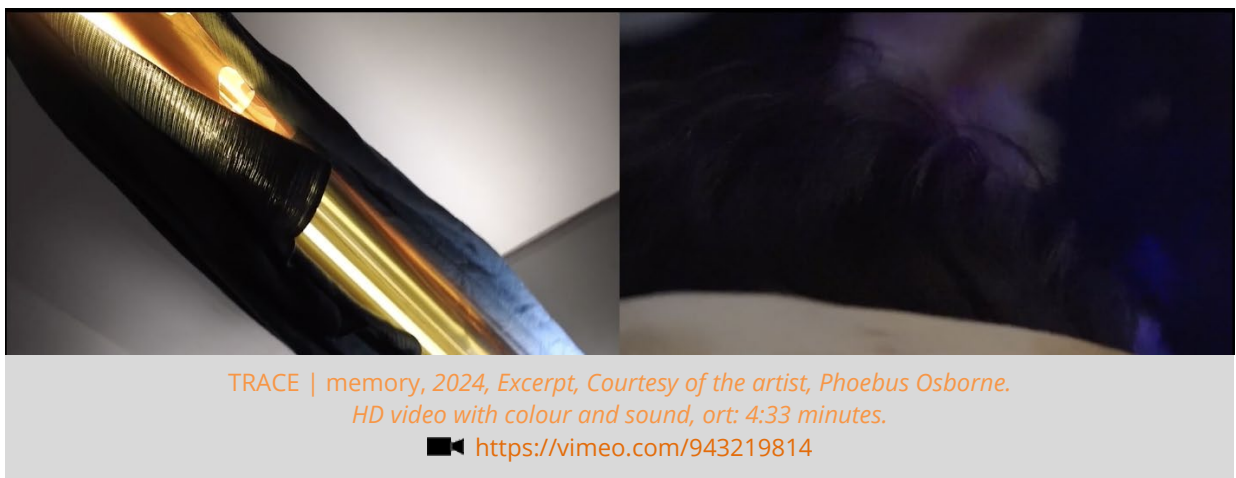
More recently, I read aloud a passage from a book *Underland: A Deep Time Journey* by Robert MacFarlane (2019) during a group practice in my studio. MacFarlane writes of ice as a matter of memory: “Ice has a memory and the colour of this memory is blue” (338). Memory encompasses the matter of loss perhaps more adequately than anything, therefore, perhaps the matter of memory can also be considered a matter of loss. What follows is an excerpt from *Underland* in which I replace all words akin to “ice” with the singular or plural words “memory” and “loss.”¹

High on the **memory** cap, **loss** falls and settles in soft layers known as firn. As the firn forms, air is trapped between **loss** and so too are the dust and other particles. More **loss** falls, settling upon the existing layers of firn, starting to seal the air within

them. More **loss** falls, and still more. The weight of the **loss** begins to build up above the original layer, compressing it, changing the structure of the **memory**. The intricate geometries of the **memories** begin to collapse. Under pressure, **memories** start to sinter into **Memory**. As **loss** crystal[izes], the trapped air gets squeezed together into tiny bubbles. This burial is a form of preservation. Each of those air bubbles is a museum, a silver reliquary in which is kept a record of the atmosphere at the time the **loss** first fell. Initially, the bubbles form as spheres. As the **loss** moves deeper down, and the pressure builds on it, those bubbles are squeezed into the long rods or flattened discs or cursive loops.

The colour of deep **Loss** is blue, a blue unlike any other in the world—the blue of time.

(Original text from MacFarlane 2019, 338)



It was M who in early March of 2023, during our Pisces birthday walk in the winter barren Brooklyn Botanic Gardens, exclaimed, “You could go to Mexico!–to the cenotes!” in response to my bewilderment as to what to do with myself amidst these unexpected upheavals. In a futile attempt to thwart my mark of colonialism and white supremacy as a white European American, I rarely entertain the idea of going to the Global South, but I found myself taking in this idea and sensing my body’s deep desire to nonetheless follow it through. Leaning into this intuition, I decided that it was okay. I bought my tickets and arranged an apartment and a rental car for the month of May. I arrived on May 2nd and that night, two hours into May 3rd, the nurses called me to tell me my mother would die within a few hours. Two hours passed and they called again to say she had died. Mothers die. I laid in the dark, intimate solitude of night, and thought, *I am finally here, in this moment*—a moment I had anticipated my entire life. I felt subterranean depths of relief and grief and exhaustion. My grief was not a new grief—not a soft fresh firn, but rather a fuzz of stale ice crystals that had built-up discreetly in the back of a freezer over decades, patiently awaiting me to assist its melt. My grief was not the grief of losing a mother, but rather the grief of something ending that I wish had been otherwise—the grief of accepting that *that was it—it was what it was*.

"Motherly" is not a word I would use to describe my mother. My mother was plagued with rampant addiction entwined with significant mental illness, which is not particularly helpful to the already quite difficult task of living a life. Even in brief hopeful bouts of sobriety, her presence was often mean, volatile, and generally extreme. Her struggles, human as ever, have shaped me tremendously—I have spent the better majority of my life recuperating and pushing to thrive despite all the ways her lack of mothering has possibly hindered me. This form of let's call it "chronic grief" generates a layered crystallisation of loss—weighted under the pressure of itself, consolidating and mutating its contained memory—all the while, dreaming to be released in a melt.²

In the fresh wake of her death, I spent my days departing from the sweltering heat of the Yucatán sun, descending down into cold wet dark underground cenotes, their ancestral limestone walls, ancient and ambivalent wombs cupping my body.³

Dripping draws a shape—a cenote.
a flooding sinkhole in the midst of a vast complex of corridors.
C and I in the hallways at Sylvias' just days before I've fully moved out, drenching
the empty floors. A flood of trans fluids, an excess of moans at excessive volumes
in an excess of time.
On a weekday.
Trans sex in New York City is akin to
hidden holes of cool water in the Yucatán.

Within the circumstances of urgency and stress,
our trans joy exceeds it all.

In 2021, on the living room floor of Sylvia's, surrounded by half-consumed pots and cups of tea, half-smoked spliffs, half-read books, amidst various shells and rocks and folds of paper, a collective of friends by the name of Weme composes a text, *Tectonic plates meeting*, weaving our thinking-feeling practices together, published in the Brooklyn Rail.⁴

What does it mean to swallow your silence?
The swirling matters of voice-sound refracted. Sound waves hit the folds of a
vibrating door toward the outside and then bounce back down into the bodily
depths, being left unheard.
Voice is a wave-particle/transitory-material insistence on being.
When voice is cut (muted)
it refracts down into the underground,
dwelling in the subterrain of the body.
Waves mutating beyond language in the dank soil of the undergrammatical: a trans-
becoming of pain and endurance, moaning in its voluptuous monstrosity.
The throat is the faultline through which voice trespasses, becoming an extension
of the body.
Voice is always a production of trash ... Is always a libation (a touch). Is always
an alchemical pouring out...
excess, overflow, offering, swallowed by the earth or

flushed into the sewage, dumped into the ocean, where sediments of memory are imprinted. If memory is matter then it cannot be destroyed, but transformed. "You are contaminated / with our ancestrality / careful, you are contaminated, you are on indigenous land" Brisa Flow, *Passado e Futuro Presentes*, Free Abya Yala. Past and future relationality are not inherently determinate, but rather becoming-ancient in an ongoing reconfiguration of enfolded contamination, within and through histories of erasure. (Weme 2021)

Voluptuous monstrosity, alchemical overflow, contamination—excess is core to grief, even in its internal and less public mutations. Grief performs a profusion of material flamboyance, enacting a more-than-human, a more-than-one—an uncountable too much. A vocal expression of grief performs this excess as it extends the body beyond itself in an ungraspable trans poetics of refusal: "Voice is a wave-particle/transitory-material insistence on being" (Ibid.). Riding the air, voice glides, rubs, presses, tickles, and slams into and over a local territory of material life. Wail, whimper, moan, screech—vocalisation is a matter, both material and topic, of loss. Lip-syncing traces the vocals of another. A long-standing performance in drag communities, lip-syncing forms a prosthesis of vocals that may not otherwise be possible in the body that lip syncs. This is a flamboyance that extends not just out into space, but embodies the understanding that we become through our relationship to and for one another.



TRACE | lip sync, 2024, Courtesy of the artist, Phoebe Osborne.
HD video with colour and sound, 4:33 minutes.
🎥 <https://vimeo.com/943213517>

Part II: Our Drag Mother and Drag Father grieve.

"You're born naked, and everything after that is drag."

–Divine

The sensation of long skirts trailing the floor.⁵

Grief is a long skirt trailing the floor. Its trace is a wake of memories.

Grief is a drag. A long slow drag.

an uncountable too much.

"Too much" tends to remain, loitering about. Litters itself around, bits and bobs flying onto the floor in every flap of the arms and sharp turn of the head. Us queers know, there are always remains of drag. *That's the nature of excess, baby.*⁶

To drag is to claim binaries, claim categories, claim identities, claim body--so as to induce a crisis of these ideas. Grief is our pre-binary drag Mother. She reads us and our deeply troubling behaviour in an alchemical spectacle of furious heatwaves and torrential downpours. The silence of her glaciers crack! BOOM! Deep fissures of blue ice/memory cut open. Through a busted excess of queer inflections, grief cackles at our assuredness of what it is we claim to know of a life worth living. Performing *twists* and *turns* in place of fixed orientation, her long skirt billows, suspending itself in a death drop.

Grief drags in a dramatic claim of anything she likes, often inducing a crisis of what exactly grief is believed to be. She foams and veers over the edges of delineated wakes. Splish-splash, she strikes a pose in brackish water—her long skirt caresses you. She will claim herself with a sharp conviction of both-and-, unsettling our logic, raising her eyebrows higher than mountain peaks, with a look that says, "*Really?*" Grief takes a hard fact and performs it into a curvaceous *twist*, hedonic in tone. It is not a method. There is no workshop to facilitate here.

In Anne Carson's translation of four plays by Euripides, *Grief Lessons*, she asks: "How do you overturn a cliché?" And then answers, "From inside" (Euripides and Carson 2006, 14). Grief is an unknowing of the idea of 'inside': a drag performance that turns what we think we know inside-out-outside-in. This turn activates ambivalence: 'ambi,' meaning both- and around-, followed by 'valence,' signifying an affective response of appeal and/or repulsion. These exclamatory movements are events of grief within a trans-poetics of refusal. Our drag Mother *overturns* cliché through her ambivalence, inviting grief as an event of transformation.

And if I am considering Grief as our Drag Mother, then what do I propose to be our Drag Daddy Dearest? Greek mythology's demigod Herakles comes to mind. While queens claim femininity, kings claim masculinity, both in an effort to engender a scepticism of these fervid constructs and the oppression of life they aim to serve. Casey Cep lays out this patriarchal order well when she speaks of Herakles in her New Yorker article:

No woman could get away with it. Murdering her children is all she would ever be known for—ask Medea. Yet Herakles, often called by his Roman name, Hercules, is known for everything else: slaying the man-eating birds of the Stymphalian marsh, the multiheaded Lernaean Hydra, and the Nemean lion, with its Kevlar-strength fur; capturing the wild Erymanthian boar, the golden-antlered deer of Artemis, and the Minotaur's father; stealing the girdle of Hippolyta, the golden apples from the garden of the Hesperides, the flesh-eating mares of Diomedes, and the red cattle of the giant Geryon; mucking the Augean stables in a single day; and kidnapping the three-headed dog Cerberus from Hades. (Cep, 2021)

Cep lays out the demigod displays of violence that make-up our conceptualisation of masculinity. It isn't until Herakles, grief-stricken, *turns* on this toxic performance, that his drag of grief really goes off.⁷ Anne Carson writes it well in a retelling of the story of Herakles, *H of H Playbook*: a story of our well-accomplished hero who sashays home only to be cursed by Madness, compelling him to murder his own family. This madness is a side of grief that invites (if one lets it) a queer twist in the narrative. In the final scene, reckoning with his final act of destruction in its aftermath, H of H (Carson's Herakles) confides in his friend Theseus as he considers the resolution to this crisis to be suicide:

H of H: I mean to die.

Th: Well, there's different ways of beating the treadmill.

H of H: Go back to the nothingness whence I came.

Th: That has a ring of cliché.

H of H: Easy for you to say.

Th: I've a better idea. Not unrelated. I'm thinking a T shirt. Lionskin background. You wear it, you shoot yourself, I'll sell it, say Sotheby's, bullet hole and all.

(Carson 2021, X-X)

Suicide is criticized by Theseus as cliché and he suggests the alternative of an aesthetic spectacle of conceptual performance art, sold to the art collectors—work the system, make some money, and cut out. Their conversation continues and the story itself concludes with Theseus and H of H *turning* towards each other, choosing an *unknown-together*, hand-in-hand.

Chorus:

We go in grief.

We go in tears.

So many swift and dirty years.

We've lost a man of greatest merit,

truly a devil of a spirit,

our greatest, our most legendary friend.

(Carson 2021, X-X)

The loss grieved by the chorus is the loss of a violent hero, not in his entirety but in his toxic masculinity. What remains when H of H turns to the future with Theseus is the 'too much' of masculinity that loiters about—a faggot and his friend. *That's the nature of excess, baby.*⁸

Cep points out that Carson's *H of H Playbook* understands that old myths contain long-standing patterns of our profoundly disturbing behaviour. Toxic masculinity is an old war hero and in war, families live or die according to the whims of far-off men imbued with the power of gods, pressing buttons and passing laws. The story of Herakles holds not just the ruthless acts of violence enacted by humans (framed as heroic), but also hints at the possibility of transformation, healing and repair in its wake—the forging of a life-worth-living that also carries tremendous grief. The homoerotic undertones of this final scene brings to mind the 1977 queer utopian book that *Artforum* described as a “fairytale-cum-manifesto,” *Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions* (Mitchell [1977] 2019): a collection of allegorical scenarios set in a declining empire ruled by “the men” while the “faggots” live collectively, make art, have sex, and await the next revolution. Theseus and H of H presumably join the faggots and their friends when they choose a future possibility—otherwise, *together* in their touching friendship. This twist in the plot alludes to the queer liberation that grieving-with enables. The “faggot and his friends” is our Drag Father that Herakles becomes through the transcendence of grieving-with. These queers understand that there is no hope in grief. There is play—a messy make-believe. And belief in a world is not to be confused with hope for the future.⁹ And it is not belief in *this* world, rather it is belief in making. Our grief makes worlds anew.

Part III: Grief In The Sheets and In The Streets

Larry Mitchells' *Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions* reminds its readers that within queer strategies of living-beyond-surviving, it is not only the pleasures of sex, art, and friendship that matters, but also revolution. And while sex, art, and friendship percolate in the bedsheets intimacy of interiors, revolution extends the power and purpose of that playful intimacy into the streets.

Since October 7th 2023, many of us have been coming together in our sorrow and rage to take revolutionary collective action against the Israeli siege, apartheid, occupation and oppression of Palestinians. In the spring of 2024, the student body at my alma mater, Columbia University, literally brought the power of intimacy in the sheets into the streets when they set up an encampment of tents occupying the outside lawn at the centre of campus.



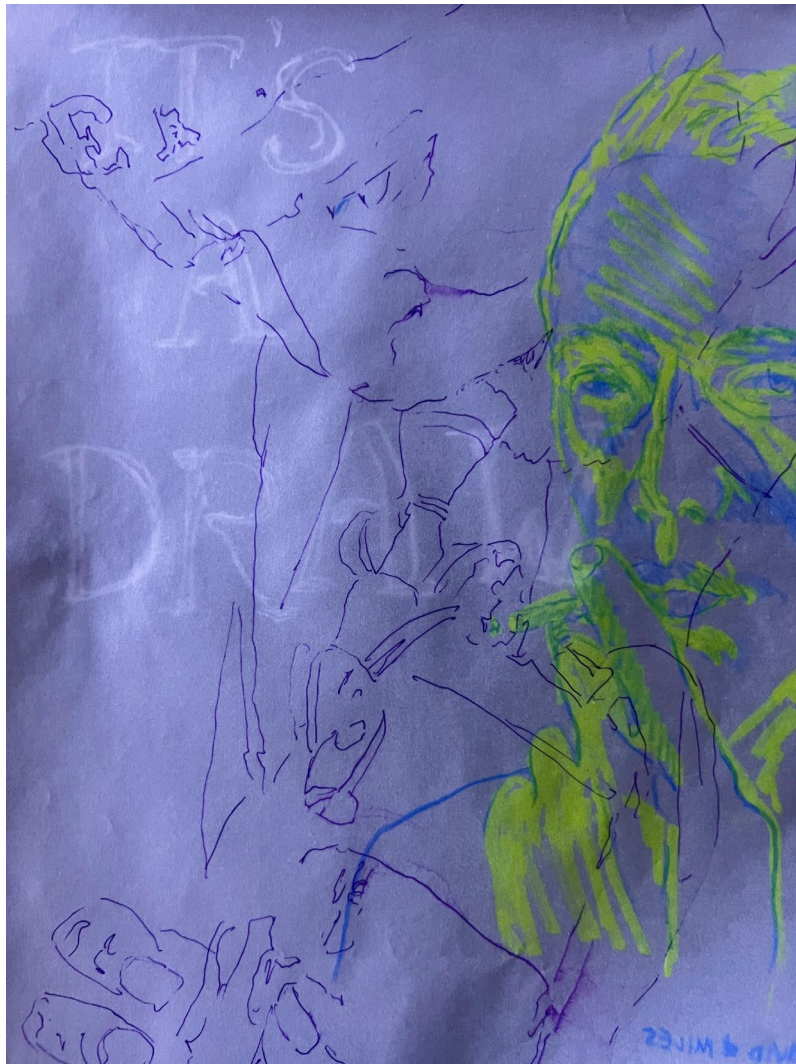
Screenshot taken from Google search, "Columbia Alma Mater re paint." posted by Quds Network News on X, formally known as Twitter.

A number of years ago now, at the end of my graduate work at Columbia University, I would take studio breaks to go outside with birdseed to feed pigeons. One particular day, I noticed a line of fifty-or-so pigeons on the ridge of a sun-kissed brick building. I strolled over and began to cast seed into the air. They quickly fluttered around my abundant arrival and, shortly thereafter, a man appeared out of the parking garage that occupied this brick building. This was Frank—an Indian man with a warm smile and thick moustache. His look was akin to Mario from Super Mario Bros., blue overalls and all. Frank joined me in casting bird seed into the air as we exchanged smiles. Over the months following, we became friends and I learned that he feeds these pigeons four times a day. Frank often expressed to me the importance of supporting life, “Because life is all the same. Their life is my life,” he said matter-of-factly. He understood that by supporting life around us, we support our own. Frank would always belt out a word that I could not recognize as he threw seed in the air. Weeks passed before I was overcome with curiosity, in which I asked, “What are you saying? Cherish? Sheryl? Sharon?” He laughed, “No no no, *Shero*. Ya know, *Shero*!” He gestured like one might embody a bulldog, curving and flexing his arms and fists around and below his chest. “Lion! That is their name. I named them Lion because they are strong.”¹⁰

Frank-and-Shero!’s pitter patter of seeds and flutter of flapping wings is a haptic reminder of our inseparability. When we gather in grief, a busted excess is enlivened, spilling out into the public sphere. Like Frank belting “Shero!” our shared Grief chants, “Free Free Palestine! Stop The Genocide!” Last spring, at the very same campus where Frank and I met, the wisdom of Frank and Shero! thrived in a flutter of tents. This grieving-with enacted a “both-and-around in a hedonic tone”: an inside-out-outside-in *overturning* distinctions of separateness as interior and exterior were entwined in a collective action towards revolution. The attempt of the authorities to shut it down only further generated a proliferation of collectives of emboldened students all across the world to organise in solidarity with Palestinians. At the Academie of Theatre and Dance in Amsterdam where I was teaching film, students occupied the lobby, held teach-ins, facilitated song and chant, invited performances, and engaged in intentional and peaceful protest. They articulated feasible changes the institution itself could take to enact their solidarity with Palestine and stance against genocide. As the board of directors dodged even the most simplistic of these acts, such as naming the genocide itself, the students’ grief formed a ‘Shero! And Frank’ logic of collective power—as inseparability across the world activated, students understood and embodied their lives to support the lives of Palestinians. They made visible the institutions’ complicity and fought for making a world anew: a world in which Palestinians flourish in safety at home and in which genocide of any kind is actively stopped by everyone.¹¹

The students in Amsterdam, New York, and around the globe protested against genocide, settler colonialism, and the neoliberal complicity that upholds these projects. This movement of grieving *together* is backed by innumerable lineages and ancestors of Franks and Shero!s—too many to name here, that’s all to say, *we are never alone*. This grief, our Drag Mother, “mater”-ialises our indissolubility through impassioned collective voices: she performs a profusion of material flamboyance, enacting a more-than-human, a more-than-one—an uncountable too much. Our voices become prostheses of vocals that may not otherwise be possible elsewhere. This is a flamboyance that extends not just out into space, but embodies the understanding that we

become through our relationship to and for one another. Liz Tricano articulates the complexity of this in her PhD dissertation when she says, “If language produces and perpetuates subjectivities, trans-poetics does political work by using language (and form) to get these subjectivities to fall apart [...] While one must typically conform to a certain discourse in order to be politically effective, trans-poetics reaches beyond these restrictions by refusing the containability of language and subjectivity altogether.” She brilliantly continues, “So while trans-poetics isn’t about being instrumental or getting us towards a particular political agenda, it can instead lay the imaginative and conceptual groundwork for a certain type of politics. One might even argue that trans-poetics generates a new form or way of doing politics, one that stretches notions of the political beyond what is typically conceived (i.e., street activism, litigation, etc.)” (Kaval, 2016, 25–26). The vocal expressions of grieving-with perform a drag of excess, extending a singular queen beyond herself into a polyphonic insistence on being-in-relation. Faggots and their friends make art in the sheets *and* in the streets, agitating the dominant structures that oppress and exploit us. *Burn it down, yeah.*¹²



It's a Draw, 2024, coloured pencil, highlighter, tracing paper, black paper, staples. 24 cm x 56 ½ cm, Courtesy of the artist, Phoebus Osborne.

I have argued for grief's important and transformative queer-tendency, ambivalence. I want to further clarify that, contrary to dominant understanding, this quality of a both-and-around affective response can carry purpose and encourage revolution, particularly in the context of grief.¹³ To engage ambivalence with intention is well thought about by process-based painter and iconic queer, Amy Sillman, who's notable interest in the power of ambivalence is reflected-on in her recent *Washington Post* op-ed:

Maybe a sense of humor won't save anyone, what with a barbaric war in Gaza going on and murders that aren't called murders; zygotes who have more civil rights than women; presidents accessorized with gold sneakers and ice cream cones; trials of faux-Vikings in moose furs who scale the Capitol; high-schoolers toting semiautomatic weapons purchased at strip malls; rapacious men colonizing the world and depositing trinkets on the moon; ice melting and volcanoes firing up while activists glue their heads to the "Mona Lisa." But maybe, in the face of all that (and more), I could respond with drawings of things teetering on the edge of recognition. [...] Perhaps legibility and sense are overrated in this mess we find ourselves in. (Sillman 2024)

Sillman understands that grief is complex and dodgy in form which makes art (and its ambivalence) powerfully capable of metabolising it. Revolution is a collective form of grief that requires ambivalence-with-a-purpose. That purpose is often that of forging new worlds in which life and land thrive. True revolution requires ambivalence as it needs to let go of total control, leap into the unknown, and resist redecorating the very world the revolution is fighting to end. Ambivalence is the messy impassioned make-believe that takes into account what is at stake if we do not move beyond what we already know.



Image descriptions: (left) The photo is of a window at Phoebus's parents house in San Diego in 2018. There is a black paper taped to the window on the inside while Phoebus's father is holding up another black piece of paper while standing outside. The two black papers allow for a mark imprinted on the window to appear maximally visible- this is a mark left by a pigeon that flew directly into the window, leaving a ghostly detailed trace of its entire body smashing into the glass, wings spread. In the photo you can see Phoebus's father's fingers holding the paper and the top of his head peaking out above the paper. You can also see part of an ornate Italian ceramic plate hanging on the wall inside the house. Phoebus's mother took the photo. (right) An autumn leaf covered ground surrounded by barren trees. In the centre of the photo, the floor has a human body-sized area without any leaves, where the wet earth is exposed and in the centre of that is a pile of birdseed. Both images courtesy of the artist, Phoebus Osborne, 2024.

Notes

¹ This is an exercise taken from Amy Sillman that she does in her essay, 'On Drawing' (2020), working with an original text by Elizabeth Grosz entitled, "Animal Sex: Lidibo as Desire and Death." Sillman replaces the words "desire" and "sex" with the word "drawing."

² I think about how this corresponds with climate change and our permafrost in its process of thawing, releasing memories into this swiftly changing ecology we call Earth. I wonder if within that libational release is precisely what is needed to grieve, enabling another world to take shape.

³ Limestone is my ancestor in that it was once liquid mineral-laden water that then drew into the skeletal structures of crustaceans, which upon their death, fell to the bottom of the ocean only to be compressed into cavernous rock we call limestone—a very trans existence from water to animal to rock.

⁴ Sylvias' Teahouse was the name given to my home from 2020–2022, in honour of the first three named in an evolving list of crushes: Sylvia Rivera, Sylvia Wynter, and Silvia Federici. This crush list and the excerpted text, Tectonic plates meeting are of a group of friends who over these years, passed days and nights together and called themselves Weme: Yasi Alipour, Vered Englehard, Maria Fantinato, and Phoebus Osborne.

⁵ Drag is 19th-century theatre slang for long skirts trailing the floor, according to the Online Etymology Dictionary.

⁶ Says our Drag Mother, Nature.

⁷ Unfortunately, this turn is where the telling of Herakles ends. A sequel beckons to be written.

⁸ She reminds us once more.

⁹ Hope is a limited function constrained by what we know and therefore prevents possibilities of worlds-otherwise.

¹⁰ Lion in Hindi is actually "sher" but from what I remember Frank would say "shero." It is likely I misheard him but something I like about this is that "shero" means female hero. Additionally, an "o" at the end of a word in other languages such as Spanish indicates masculinity. The ambiguity of all of this feels fitting to the context of this essay.

¹¹ Student bodies are of course not the only populations enacting solidarity with Palestine. Jewish Voice for Peace is an anti-zionist jewish organisation working to resource communities all over the world. JVP is a grassroots organisation working towards Palestinian freedom and Judaism beyond Zionism.

¹² Bob Ostertag, "Go To It Boy (Burn It Down, Yeah) / Tears On The Sand In The Fierce Companionship Of Thirst / Burns Like Fire / Heat Rises" (1993). This sound piece is dedicated to David Wojnarowicz who was originally a collaborator on a project All the Rage but died of AIDS before its release. Ostertag uses field recordings from an October 1991 LGBTQA+ riot in San Francisco when the Governor of California vetoed a gay rights law that had been ten years in the making. The California State Office building was set on fire.

¹³ This dominant understanding of ambivalence suggests that both-and-around equates to lacking care—that if you don't fall in line with a clear either-or, nothing radical or revolutionary can occur. This idea keeps the minds and hearts of the people in line with the oppressive terms of established consensus reality and knowledge, preventing the possibilities that come alive when ambivalence is harnessed.

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Biography

Phoebus Osborne (b. 1984) is an interdisciplinary artist, based in New York, NY and Amsterdam, NL. His practice engages material traces of ancestral, current, and future relationships through a matrix of film, sculpture, performance, drawing, writing, and sound. Extending from his lived-experience with chronic pain, he contemplates the accelerating illnesses of the planet at large and considers how modes of relating can empower resilience and enable repair. Osborne's works are invitations to slow down and move in relation to our changing ecologies in a practice of curiosity, attention, and care, crafting opportunities for relational imaginative dreaming-otherwise.

His works have been presented within the US and Europe, including commissioned works at Transmediale Berlin, La Caldera Barcelona, SFMoMA, Oakland Museum of California, and Lenfest Center for the Arts, The Poetry Project, e-flux Bar Laika, Southern Exposure, The Boiler of Pierogi Gallery. Osborne was a 2017 Impulstanz DanceWEB recipient, a 2018-2021 Hercules Art Studio resident, and a 2021-22 A.I.R. Gallery Fellow. Since 2023, his performance work has been presented online by Lucid. He holds an MFA in Visual Arts from Columbia University and an MA in Choreography from DAS Graduate School in Amsterdam. He is an adjunct faculty at Parsons, The New School, and Columbia University, and has been a guest artist at NYU's Playwright School, in Amsterdam at DAS Graduate School and the Academy of Theater and Dance. He was a 2024 Artistic Research Fellow at The Academy of Theater & Dance in Amsterdam.

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PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

HILOS/THREADS: APPROPRIATING THE PUBLIC SPACE THROUGH COLLECTIVE WEAVING AND GRIEVING IN THE CONTEXT OF FEMINICIDE IN MEXICO

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Introduction

Feminist historian Aurora Levin Morales reminds us that bodies are sites where “history is inscribed” (2013). What histories of resistance are being inscribed on the bodies of those who experience gender violence in Mexico? Can artistic interventions give account of these histories? To understand feminicide, which is the killing of women because of their gender, this work takes decolonial feminist philosopher Maria Lugones’ (2008) understanding of race and gender as categories involved in the destruction of these bodies as a colonial legacy.

Historically, there has been a disregard for women’s artistic interventions whether these occur within or outside institutions (Lopez 2017; Gunta 2017). Curator Miguel López (2017) has written about the need to “steal history” from those who have been writing it, whilst considering how their omissions have also reproduced dominant narratives and sustained the status quo. Breaking those dominant narratives has been an act of resistance (Ibid.). Indeed, Levin Morales (2019) reiterates, those who control the narrative have the power to silence those who do not.

Professor of Feminist Latin American Art Andrea Gunta points out that artistic representations by women artists make up 30% of the art displayed within institutions like museums and galleries.

For this reason, she speaks of a “systematic” form of censorship (Gunta 2017), whereby Latin American feminist artistic practices have been greatly ignored even within other feminist artistic exhibitions, publications, documentation, and research (Antivilo Peña 2015), making it relevant and urgent to add to the works centering on these practices from different fields/perspectives like cultural studies, feminist theory, Latin American Studies, etc. It is through feminist artistic interventions that the canon has been questioned and the body in its multiplicity has been explored, narrated, recreated, deconstructed through a non-dominant gaze (Gunta 2017).

Many countries within Latin America share a history of dictatorships and governmental regimes where forced disappearance became a policy of state violence (López 2017). López recounts artistic subversive practices that provide an account of the horrors of those times. These practices became interventions that made visible what state policy denied, and what more privileged sectors of society tried not to see. Such artistic interventions have also made memory, as to not forget the atrocities and the victims of those forms of violence. López refers to those systematic forms of violence as “geographies of horror” that imply the normalization of torture, forced disappearance, mass graves, etc. (López 2017, 141). A consequence of this is an interruption in Latin American feminist artistic practices in the context of repression where many were politically persecuted and chose exile (Gunta 2018).

I argue that looking into femicide as a form of symbolic and material embodied erasure (Trejo Méndez 2019) allows us to contextualize the political relevance of current feminist artistic interventions and to understand these as forms of resistance to such erasure. I am interested in practices that disrupt dominant narratives, make visible gender violence, and ultimately re-appropriate the body and the public space within the context of extreme forms of violence. Particularly the artistic practices that seek to repair and contribute to collective grieving, making memory and healing as essential parts of the process.

In Mexico ten women are murdered a day (García 2021). Since the war on drugs started in 2006, 2000 mass graves have been found and more than 61 thousand people have disappeared (Rea Gomez 2020, 25). These atrocities speak of current “geographies of horror” to use López’s term. Looking into feminist artistic practices implies unlearning the silences as well as understanding the tools, approaches and strategies used within these forms of embodied-enfleshed resistance (Trejo Méndez 2019).

For this purpose of unlearning, I explore the work of Colectiva Hilos (“threads collective”), a Mexican feminist collective that weaves in public spaces and displays their red textiles along important monuments and spaces. This collective weaving happens through a social media call for anyone to participate (no prior skills needed). The members of the collective seek to repair the social fabric through collective weaving while using this long red textile to make visible the absences of the victims of disappearance and femicide in Mexico. This artistic project and protest is called *Sangre de mi sangre* (“blood of my blood”).

The collective’s social media account has been an important way for me to gain access to their work and visual documentation. I have also used newspapers and magazines reports of these

artistic interventions. I have attended an event where Claudia Rodríguez and Alejandra Ruíz Rincón (two members of the collective) presented *Sangre de mi sangre* at the Centro Cultural Casa del Lago in Mexico City. I participated in a collective weaving session at *la Alameda* in downtown Mexico City on the 5th of March 2023. This session was organized by “*Ah que las hilachas*,” a feminist center, to learn textile techniques that responded to the invitation of Colectiva Hilos to organize this art protest in other cities. This has also happened in cities like Queretaro, Toluca, Zacatecas and after March 2023 in other Latin American countries: Chile, Argentina, Perú and Venezuela. Finally, I organized a weaving session in Germany and invited the Latin American diaspora on July 8th, 2023, and also organized a colloquium in the University of Bonn where I invited the artists who have taken *Sangre de mi sangre* across Latin America to share how they resignify the artistic protest within their own sociopolitical context.

Weaving is also part of the methodological approach of this work where personal poetic narrative is stitched throughout the text. This form of doing research is taken from previous work (Trejo Méndez 2019) where weaving allowed “bringing together different epistemologies, political positionalities, literature, critical embodied reflections, enfolded histories, conversations, emotions, ideas, insights, encounters and performance into the research process and analysis” (Trejo Méndez 2019, 25). This “feminist tool” is wielded in Latin American feminisms that consider epistemic and political pluralities in order “to cross boundaries and categories” as well as to include what is often overlooked through dominant epistemologies: the senses (Ibid.). Weaving here implies “acknowledging the colonial difference and locating it within the geopolitics of knowledge from concrete incarnated experiences” (Trejo Méndez 2019, 25). In this case, my own.



Figure 1: Documentation of *Sangre de mi sangre* by Colectiva Hilos. Image shared with the author by the artists.

Colectiva Hilos

Show me that there is hope in coming together
That we can repair our wounds under the sunlight
That it can be different
That you can teach me how to stitch hope
I dreamt that a tapestry made of belonging covered the streets
People letting their hearts melt under the fabric
My feet could feel their heartbeat.

Colectiva Hilos is an interdisciplinary feminist collective that originated in 2018 in Guadalajara, one of the three biggest cities of Mexico (Oyarvide 2020). This collective has more than ten members who are mostly based in the same city. On 7 of March 2020, after two months of collective weaving in public spaces like Parque rojo (Red park) where about 150 people participated, they placed the woven red fabric under the statue of *"la madre patria"* (mother nation). The size of the fabric resembling a net is of 240m². They also carried it in a procession towards the roundabout of "the disappeared ones" (Oyarvide 2020).

This roundabout has become an important (public) space for making memory. Also, for demanding the return of those who have been disappeared. The official name is the roundabout of *"niños heroes"* which are national historical figures.¹ In 2018 the relatives of victims of disappearance together with activists took to the monument located in that roundabout to place pictures of their missing loved ones and demand their return. Since then, it was renamed "roundabout of the disappeared ones" (El Informador 2018).

In recent years in Mexico, activists, families of victims of femicide and forced disappearance have taken several monuments and renamed them as a form of protest creating "anti-monuments." "Anti-monuments apart from being a visual alarm in a public space appropriated by citizens are a political claim" (Hijar 2021). An example of this is the previously known roundabout of Christopher Columbus in the street of *Reforma* in Mexico City. Since 2019 it has become an anti-monument. At the center of the roundabout stands the figure of a woman holding her fist high. It is now known as the roundabout of women who fight. Posing as a reminder that impunity is part of the need to make collective memory, but a kind of memory that is "alive" (Ibid.).

Researcher Laura Angélica Moya from the field of geographies of memory that looks into the traces of memory in public space, writes about anti-monuments mentioning their "symbolic and political effects in the dispute for public space" (Moya López 2021, 2). Moya López (2021) mentions there are "tensions" between the cultural historical official forms of memory found in monuments and those that come from "unresolved social causes and that rise up in the face of oblivion". Stating that:

These surprising manifestations of living memory are what give rise to anti-monuments, as ephemeral materializations of protest and representative samples of subaltern memories. (Moya López 2021, 2)



Figure 2: Documentation of a protest at the Roundabout of the Disappeared Ones. Fragments of the red net created in Sangre de mi sangre can be seen on the left side of the photograph. Image taken from Colectiva Hilos Instagram account.

Those “subaltern memories” are constantly denied through official dominant narratives. In one of the performances organized during March 2023 by Colectiva Hilos in Guadalajara, the knitters covered the statues in the roundabout of “illustrious men” with their woven nets and placed the names of “illustrious women,” those women who look for their disappeared loved ones. The signs were placed on top of each net. This action included reading the testimonies of women that fight for justice in Mexico (Franco 2023). This act of disruption of dominant narratives re-signifies who is culturally and socially worthy of being recognized as “illustrious” and publicly celebrated.

In *Sangre de mi sangre*, red is the chosen color to weave. It symbolizes the blood spilled first in that city and then in the rest of Mexico. In an interview for *Ah magazine* (Oyarvide 2020) members of

Colectiva Hilos stated, “threads have allowed us to move from the beginning. The threads are a conducting bridge that expands and unites us” (Ibid.). When speaking about the project *Sangre de mi sangre* during March 2020, they added that it became “a ritual of collective healing and accompaniment to the families of murdered women and victims of disappearance” (Oyarvide 2020).

Since 2022, *Sangre de mi sangre* has been reproduced in different cities in Mexico and outside the country. This means people and feminist collectives have come together to continue weaving and adding to the art protest that is also a giant net. In Chile for example, collective weaving happened in places where survivors were tortured during the Pinochet military regime in an intergenerational act of memory-making to mark the 50th anniversary of the coup, collectively re-signifying these locations.

This fabric has been on display at the base of important monuments in Mexico City, or in plazas in Guadalajara and in museums like the *Centro Cultural España*. The weaving continues as well as the need for healing the wounds that mark peoples in different ways, wounds that are painful experiences and marks of fragmentation. An anonymous letter sent to the members of Colectiva Hilos by someone related to a disappeared person read: “if you stop weaving, we stop searching,” thus revealing the importance of the act of coming together to weave for those who are struggling against despair. The families and friends who grieve while searching for their loved ones, these are the people that might be reminded through this weaving that they are not alone.



Figure 3: Documentation of the performance at the Roundabout of illustrious men by Colectiva Hilos that took place in March 2023. Images taken from the online news platform Zonadocs, accessed on 25 April 2023.

Fragmentation and healing

How to mend our wounds?
Thread by thread
Blood is everywhere
Like the presence of their absence
It hurts.

Social fragmentation happens through both direct violence like that described above (femicide, forced disappearance, etc.) and also more subtle forms that are no less harmful like those imposed through dominant logics, narratives and categorial thinking (Lugones 2003). When considering the colonality of gender it is possible to unpack how these forms of violence are all related since the bodies of those who have been racialized-feminized and gendered continue to be destroyed by the systematic dehumanization implied by this violence. “The curandera path” (2021) is my approach to healing as a praxis that centers life, as a form of healing that also encompass a “transformation of our understanding and experience of the world” (Vazquez 2020, xvi). In previous work, I have argued that fragmentation consequence of violence needs to become visible and named “for any healing to take place” (Trejo Méndez 2021, 2). How can we heal what cannot be seen, named, acknowledged?

The systems of oppression like patriarchy and capitalism (both embedded within modernity/coloniality),² need such fragmentation to thrive. This is because the hierarchical classifications that dehumanize some and objectify life are grounded in such dominant logics (Quijano 2008; Maria Lugones 2008). A decolonial take on healing asks to sense our wounds, those that are collective, but also experienced in our bodies and that cannot be separated from the sociopolitical context and enfolded histories. It also means to be able to sense that which is not pain, but love, care and everything that has nourished us as people individually and collectively. For healing to happen it is necessary to sense/feel this (Trejo Méndez 2021).

Philosopher Ivan Illich (1975) pointed out many decades ago the need for healing beyond medicalized and medicalizing institutions due to the dependency these institutions had created and how that dependency had negatively affected the capacity of our societies to deal with suffering. I find that *Sangre de mi sangre* provides a way to deal collectively with a type of suffering that weighs heavily on a society that continues to look for their missing loved ones. A society that needs to find ways for coping with violence while refusing to become numb or indifferent. Weaving together is not only a metaphor. There is a need to repair, to connect and relate with each other differently, to connect from a place of care and empathy. Perhaps learning how to deal with suffering collectively is a way to start healing such fracture.

During a 2012 festival in Madrid, Mexican feminist performance artist Lorena Wolffer shared her performance about feminicides in Juárez (Bustamante Mouriño 2012). That is the name of the city in Mexico that became infamous for these crimes in the late 1990s when Wolffer’s work began to raise awareness of these forms of violence. Since then, there has been a resurgence of feminist movements across Latin America. An example is the Green Tide that has been fighting for abortion

rights for everyone from Argentina to Mexico (Peker 2019). It is in this context of feminist movements and demonstrations against gender violence like “*Ni una menos*” (not one woman less), Purple tide, 25N protests and 8M marches where other feminist artistic interventions and activism against gender violence should be located. Works like that of *Lana Desastre* collective that invite people to look at that which they typically ignore through “yarnbombing” or “yarnfitti” (Revista Mira 2016).

On the question of how and if feminist artistic interventions transform the social context, feminist artist Miriam Mabel Martínez, a member of *Lana Desastre* reflected:

I don't know if we have transformed something. What I do know—because I have seen it and sensed it in the multiple knit and crochet sessions that we've held—is that the simple act of being together, listening to each other, and accompanying each other is a transformation in itself. (Mabel Martínez, 2023)

Colectiva Hilos emerges in this context of feminist activism and artistic interventions that, through weaving collectively, are not only making protest art, but are also producing space for the transformation that Mabel Martínez mentions. In an interview, Colectiva Hilos shared:

The actions of the Collective allow us to unweave ourselves to reweave ourselves in a different way. We believe that we repair by seeing each other, sharing, trusting, and making ourselves visible. We are sure that only a linked and communitarian world can resist the violence and objectification of society. (Oyarvide 2020)

Such “objectification” has meant that some people have been constructed as disposable, dehumanized. In this way they are treated like “trash,” and Elizabeth Spelman (2019) reminds us that this is telling of what “the trash-proclaimer” understands to be valuable and who/what is not. This quotation also shows that the awareness of collectivity is necessary for “unweaving” what is, and for creating something different, creating a reality where such objectification is no longer possible. I understand this as a political act of resistance that escapes the imagination, like those described by scholars Fred Moten and Stefano Harney (2013), where the focus is on creating something (weaving) instead of contesting power. Oppression and resistance, as Lugones reminds us (2003), happen simultaneously. Constructing some merely as oppressed may obscure that (Ibid). The dominant lens/logics/conceptualizations often fail to see enfolded/embody forms of resistance within oppressed communities (Trejo Méndez 2019).

Feminism, weaving and textile art

I seek the hands that wove me
The dreams that crafted my path
Where are the artists that shaped this life?
Their dark hair, their tears, and their laugh.

The use of textile art by feminist artists has been well documented. Embroidery, weaving and other techniques like appliqué or soft sculpture have been used to bring awareness to specific experiences of oppression (patriarchal, racist, gendered, class, etc.) (Henderson 2021). This medium has also been used to tell stories forged at the margins of dominant narratives and institutions. There has been a historical devaluation of these forms of art as well as an imposed distinction between what is considered “craft” or “high art” particularly when it comes to objects deemed functional (Gipson 2022). This distinction has also been part of how the work and medium primarily associated with women or thought of as “feminine” is often perceived as less valuable (Parker 1984; Gipson 2022).

What is valuable is related to who is/has been constructed as worthy. “Aesthetics,” explains decolonial scholar Rolando Vázquez, is understood as “the field in which coloniality comes to light as the power to exclude from experience” (Vázquez 2020, 23). Historically, women are those whose subjectivity, “worlds of meaning,” epistemologies, and life experiences are excluded/devalued, erased (Ibid.). The racialized-gendered-feminine is outside the modern field of representation, outside the possibility of intelligibility within this (Vázquez 2020; Motta 2018); in other words, outside the canon. Vázquez describes “the coloniality of modern aesthetics” as a form of “exclusion” from “world-historical-reality” (Vázquez 2020, 16). When such reality has been crafted by the gaze of the western white man (Ibid.).

Art historian Ferren Gipson reminds us that around the world, historically, women have engaged in practices like weaving, spinning, sewing and ceramics, which is also why these media have been called “women’s work” (Gipson 2022). This is also why it has been difficult for many artists using these media to be taken seriously within contemporary art (Ibid.). From a decolonial perspective, the contemporary implies violence. Vázquez mentions that the contemporary “has been a field of power that has been excluding and exoticizing others, putting them and keeping them locked in the past” (Vázquez 2018, 23). One can think of the ways in which the artistic contributions of peoples from outside the west are described as “primitive looking,” “authentic,” “traditional”, etc. These are also made to fit a linear historical narrative of western artistic movements that ignore the influences outside its own historical references and context.

For feminist artists, the use of media that have been devalued like textiles or embroidery, has been a conscious move to vindicate these media and claim space as artists (Parker 1984). The hierarchical divisions between what has historically been considered art or craft has not only been related to unequal gender relations but also to social class. In the same vein, in particular relation to embroidery, art historian Rozsika Parker mentions:

The art/craft hierarchy suggests that art made with thread and art made with paint are intrinsically unequal: that the former is artistically less significant. But the real differences between the two are in terms of *where* they are made and *who* makes them. (Parker 1984, 5)

Parker adds that art with a needle was primarily done by women in the domestic sphere, whereas painting belonged to the public sphere, where it could be sold. What is the role of the marketplace

in shaping who is valuable and who is not within a capitalist society? Embroidery became associated with the working class therefore, not seen as an artistic skill, but rather as a craft's job. This also contributed to its devaluation (Parker 1984, 5).

There is a need to stress the subversive use of knitting in public space by Colectiva Hilos that appropriates the streets through their work. The understanding of "subversive" I use here links to Moten and Harney's (2013) ideas on being present "in the world" with others to make something new beyond the structures and systems of oppression and beyond the pain these cause. It is in the streets where many forms of violence take place, where women who left their homes for work never made it back or where a loved one was seen for the last time. Claiming the space collectively through knitting means creating space for being together with strangers that nevertheless share the collective anger, frustration and pain caused by the violence and impunity that permeates. Can one learn to stand together in solidarity with those who have experienced violence firsthand? Can one learn to be with each other to weave together despite the hurt, despite our differences? These questions become subversive possibilities against indifference and fragmentation of the social fabric and are present in *Sangre de mi sangre*.

A decolonial take on making memory and grieving

Amnesia is to forget that we are connected, that we need each other
There is pain in unraveling the logics that hold this broken world
A world that shatters our senses to avoid feeling the loss
How are we to carve the path back to liberation if we refuse to see where we are at?

What does it imply to have to repair the social fabric? In a society that continues to deal with forms of violence and destruction that are, in my understanding, inseparable from the violence of the colonial gender system (Lugones 2008), there is a pressing need for collective acts of repair. Since the dominant system imposed through colonization has resulted in the racialization and gendering of peoples who were dehumanized through this imposition (Ibid), and since this dehumanization has been normalized and institutionalized for centuries, these acts of repair are essential. Could such acts weave together a fragmented society? How can these make space for collective mourning, and challenge hierarchies of being that make some people and expressions less worthy of existing than others?

The "geographies of horror" we see today, are not de-linked from the history of colonial violence. Violence fractures relations. This is a painful, daily experience. Where there is pain, there is loss and the need for grieving. Grieving is a journey that can manifest in many ways. Healing and grieving are not the same, but without the possibility for grieving, healing cannot take place. For decolonial thinker Rolando Vázquez (2018) there is a type of healing that has to do with: "Recovering the possibility of remembering who we are. When I say, 'who we are' I'm speaking of who we are beyond the individualized self". He adds that healing is also:

Crossing the fear of recognizing what have we become. When we can remember who we are, we are also forced into understanding 'what have we become', which is something difficult to behold. (Vázquez 2018, 46)

In that possibility of recognizing "who we are," our relationality, (weaving together) and "what we have become" (witnesses of loss and suffering) socially, I see the power of repair in the work of Colectiva Hilos. This artistic intervention that appropriates the public space also offers a way towards collective grieving. When considering the context and history of forced disappearance in Mexico,³ this is extremely relevant. There are wounds that have been caused by all these forms of violence, a painful history in Latin America which López reflects on:

The decision to make not only people disappear, but also their corpses, was part of the extermination policies implemented by military regimes. Not handing over the corpses was to determine for these bodies the condition of twice dead: the life taken away was also erased in its marks, dispossessed of the ability to be named and of the social possibility of generating spaces for mourning. (2017, 146)

Considering this, making space for collective mourning is not only necessary, but subversive, a coming together against the historical and systematic denial of that possibility. What is being fractured when mourning is not allowed or when it is interrupted? What forms of memory making are needed when official narratives and institutions downplay, ignore, or deny the pain and violence experienced? Or when these are complicit in the forging of the geographies of horror. In their manifesto, Colectiva Hilos mentioned "fabric is also a form of memory, which leaves a record of what we live and suffer, of our concerns and aspirations, of the ways in which we weave, narrate and inhabit new worlds" (Colectiva Hilos n.d.). Decoloniality implies moving away from systems of domination towards new worlds of becoming (Vázquez 2018). Worlds where collective healing is at the center.

Conclusion and final reflections

I have come seeking answers to a pain that is collective and is mine
I have searched in the hands that know about grieving
I have searched in the archives of the stories left aside
I have searched in a history that has not been ours to claim or trace
From a feminism that understands dehumanization and its own limitations
From a need to heal my own relations
Tantenado like María Lugones
Buscando (searching) a way to come home

Latin America is plural and so are the feminist and antipatriarchal movements coming from these territories. These do not necessarily agree in the ways they conceptualize gender or patriarchy and have different vindications and struggles depending on where actors are located. Such locations are not only geographical, but epistemic and political. Indigenous feminisms continue to struggle against antipatriarchal, anti-racist oppression and for the autonomy of their bodies-territories.⁴ Urban cities across Latin America continue to be shaken by feminists' protests. Feminist

Argentinian journalist Luciana Peker (2019) mentions how these are “plural revolutions” that belong to the streets and that are taking the space, deconstructing dominant narratives, but also embracing, learning and rejecting imposed roles and “social mandates.” These happen in contexts where violence and impunity give rise to different forms of collective resistance. This resistance uncovers what has been rendered invisible through dominant logics, systems of oppression and regimes by centering healing, collectivity, and the gesture of “unweaving” the violent realities that exist so as to make space for weaving something different.

Notes

¹ The heroic children, or “*niños heroes*,” were teens that were enrolled in the army and fought against a foreign invasion in the Castle of Chapultepec, Mexico City.

² Maria Lugones’s “coloniality of gender” (2008) builds upon sociologist Anibal Quijano’s “coloniality of power” (2000) that recognizes modernity and coloniality as co-constitutive. Lugones also conceptualized the coloniality of gender considering the works of other women of color that included an analysis of race in their feminist’s theoretical contributions around gender.

³ An example is the student massacre in Mexico City in 1968 by the military. There has not been an official recognition or apology to the families of victims who were killed and disappeared.

⁴ “Body-territory” is a term coming from Communitarian Feminism which is an indigenous feminism with Aymara roots, that is also plural and present in Maya regions like Guatemala with feminists like Lorena Cabnal. Cabnal speaks of defending the “body-territory-earth” from patriarchal, colonial and racist oppression (Cabnal 2019).

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Biography

Dr. Paulina Trejo Méndez is an independent researcher and artist with a PhD in development studies from Erasmus University Rotterdam, with a specialization in perinatal mental health and in expressive arts for social intervention. Their work crosses disciplinary boundaries and focuses on the politics of knowledge, healing, forms of resistance to the violence of coloniality, Latin American feminisms, epistemic justice, social justice, feminicide, and chronic pain from a decolonial feminist lens. They currently work for the Social Justice and Diversity in the Arts research lectorate at the Amsterdam University of the Arts (AHK). They have taught about Latin American feminisms and Latin American feminist art at the University of Bonn in Germany, where they are based. Their art and research projects bring together art, Latin American feminisms, decoloniality, healing, medical gaze, endometriosis, spirituality, and politics. They have worked and written for the self-managed publishing house Cooperativa Editorial Retos that brings together works by rebellious WOC, trans, indigenous, and black activists, academics, and artists; and for feminist magazines like *Volcánicas*, *Hysteria* and *Proyecto Kahló*. Their blogs/projects are [decolonize](#), [La Catártica](#), [Comalli Collective](#), [Morar](#) (to Inhabit). The latter is a virtual space for Latin American immigrants living in Germany that supports the emotional aspects of migration, like migration grieving, through art and a social justice approach. Paulina is a member of the Borregas Moradas Collective, a Latinx migrant feminist collective that centers migrant experiences. The collective seeks to build community and spaces of joy.

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PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

UNDER THE BANNER OF GRIEF

ASH WILLIAMS INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER

People and communities are currently being exposed to a profound amount of uninterrupted grief and sadness. In my work as an abortion doula and abolitionist community organizer, I bear witness to communities mourning the losses of loved ones and fallen comrades, and mourning the loss of access to people, places, and things like healthcare, land, space, and employment. The unendingness of the current genocide against Palestinians and other groups of people around the world makes for an urgent time to mourn the dead and fight for the living. As a doula and organizer, I reflect on the performative aspects of the use of grief and mourning to bring people together, incite collective action, and create portals through which loss can be noticed and held. As a result of the interminability of the loss that many of us have been exposed to and out of the duty that we have to show up for one another in these times, it's important that we find ways to acknowledge the ongoing loss and to create ways to support people we do our work with. By analyzing the ways that death workers and community organizers approach grief as a social phenomenon, we might better understand how to support people experiencing loss more effectively/supportively and we might learn how to transform collective mourning into collective action, so that we can better resist oppressive regimes that seek to swallow our grief and end our lives through control and domination.

Black and indigenous, queer and trans, and disabled death workers have found creative ways to invite people to grieve and process systemic forms of oppression together. These practices offer generative examples of what it might look like to traverse systemic barriers and violences in unison. The practices include inviting others to participate in grief rituals, immersions, vigils, and visioning sessions so that in our grief, we can feel connected to other impacted and sad people who feel moved by the grief. The practitioners, the mourning spaces, and the practices incite me to make

connections between lack of or loss of access to housing, employment, autonomy, education, and certain forms of political power; and the loss of human life through things like the genocide against Palestinians, inequalities caused by systemic forms of oppression like white supremacy, capitalism, ableism, and unending chattel slavery. I am encouraged to consider what can be learned from frontline organizers who both respond to and hold compounded grief with and for others when holding loss and action at the center. There is something unique about the spaces created by bodies who are activated by a particular set of emotions.

We live in a society that systemically marginalizes and individualizes loss. Grievors are expected to not obsess over the loss, to move past it quickly, or do something more constructive than being sad or angry. Grievors are often made to feel that they must hold their grief alone or only in private. People place a lot of assumptions on those who are navigating loss and how they should handle things as they try to live on. In general, bereavement discourse has an impact on how loss is addressed in community settings. Some of that discourse is responsible for the assumptions that people place on grievors. Since the late 1960s, the Kübler-Ross “five stages of grief” discourse has been the dominant approach used by bereavement professionals. The model was intended to highlight experiences of people diagnosed with terminal illness facing their own deaths, but the model has been misappropriated to make assumptions about how everyone moves through emotions after loss. Because of this model, it has been assumed that there is a one-size-fits-all approach to grief, which limits the imaginary possibilities of what our sadness can do. Many researchers, sad people, the people who support us, and progressive bereavement professionals have done a lot of work to undo the enclosures of discussing grief that way.

Correspondingly, I consider how much is assumed of protestors. Protestors are assumed to behave in a certain way when they condemn and decry violent people and institutions. Their movements and literal actions are scrutinized for the use of tactics that are directly confrontational and non-cooperative. The refusal of protestors and organizers is often seen as lazy, ineffective, or unproductive (which they use to their advantage). They are often given limits on how their actions are allowed to take shape, how much time they have to do them, and how disruptive they are allowed to be. Protestors do not ask for permission, however, and neither does grief. Colonization and racial capitalism are responsible for grief being regulated and remanded into the private sphere. Onlookers, settlers, and people who are not in constant grief sometimes take on a capitalist, white supremacist approach to the grieving process and what support should look like. People need access to a variety of ways to condemn and decry systemic oppression and just be plain sad or feel other emotions. Organizers and doulas invite people into portals within different proximities to loss and to each other to experience and bear witness to grieving together.

What do we have to learn from frontline community organizers about grief and loss? When a community organizer, collective, or affinity group organizes direct action, that action has the power to reverberate and multiply itself in our lives in ways that encourage mindfulness and embodiment. Out of the varying types of direct action that exist, vigils have always stood out to me due to the

great deal of emotion that they convey. I consider the vigil to be a proactive response to state violence. Vigils are among my favorite types of direct actions to organize.

People who attend vigils don't always attend other types of actions. Vigils are defined as periods of keeping awake during the time usually spent asleep and an occasion for devotional watching (OED 2023). I appreciate these literal definitions because they convey the gravity and personal connection to the watching and the witnessing. Vigils are gatherings of people held usually after someone passes away in order to offer spiritual and material relief and care for the people who are left behind. Vigils are a way to honor and remember our dead. They often take place in areas of importance to the community or the deceased person. Sometimes vigils take place at the site of death. Vigils are types of direct actions that disrupt business as usual to achieve a social and political end. They are a tool used to resist oppressive regimes.

Protestors and mourners grieve to be in connection with other people, and to honor what is important to them, to honor what was lost. When we publicly grieve, we demonstrate autonomy to live on our own terms and to mourn on our own terms (since we can't die on our own terms). Injecting a competing story into the public arena, the vigil also functions to correct dominant narratives spun by the media and police, which is really important after someone dies at the hands of the state. Vigils function in defense of the death; they show that the person is cared about and has people who know and love them, and ultimately, that their life mattered. Vigils open up space for a range of emotions including anger, despair, and hope and they have the ability to put pressure on targets like jails, corporations, or people that cause premature death. The sanctum space is about reimagining what's possible by speaking and connecting about what the death/ passing/ loss means for the people impacted—the greater community. With vigils, organizers and mourners exhibit a refusal to cooperate with oppressive systems by not letting the death or loss of access go unchecked and unnamed.

Memories are also shared, like at vigil for Tortuguita (Tort), a queer, Venezuelan environmental activist who was killed by Georgia State Patrol Troopers on January 18, 2023. The ongoing and collective mourning of Tortuguita signifies a transformative, communal experience of going through immense loss. Since Tortuguita's murder, organizers all over the world have found ways to honor Tortuguita through vigil, protest, creative interventions and sometimes a mixture of all three. Many of the spaces that have been organized to remember and honor Tortuguita have included their mother, Belkis Tehrán. At a memorial service for Tortuguita in March 2023, community members and friends lit candles, shared photos, spoke, and placed a menagerie of flowers, branches, pinecones, and stones on the ground close to the Weelaunee Forest to honor the life of their friend and family member. Out of the many memorial services and vigils for Tortuguita, this one has a special place in my memory because Belkis, other family members, and loved ones spread Tort's ashes in the forest. Many of us who continue to refuse the logics of cop cities all over the world, fight in memory of Tortuguita, and Belkis' activism certainly provides so much loving stewardship to the people and the land that I continue to learn from.

When I think about what is lost over time in the fight(s) against oppression, I consider the people, the access, the housing, the land, the healthcare, and the freedom. I do not take it lightly that some people have lost their lives while participating in social movements. It also shouldn't be taken lightly that the police are clearly willing to kill people who defend the forest in order to build Cop City. It is important that we remember those folks, and that we find ways to honor them for what they have ultimately given so that we can continue to undermine oppressive systems and structures.

In a *Youtube* video dated March 31, 2023, Belkis Tehran, Tort's mother spoke to a crowd of Tort's friends and comrades, Stop Cop City supporters, and the media. She said:

Be happy. Enjoy that we can continue his legacy. Enjoy that they gave us a legacy. They gave us (an) example. My wish from all my heart is that this example is alive-alive with everybody! Alive with actions, not just talking. I... I am happy. I am happy that I was blessed with such a wonderful person. Don't be sad. Don't be sorrow(ful). Because we have a life. We can give them a life. And I hope everybody all over the world knows about them. (Unicorn Riot 2023)

From watching the video it's clear that Tort's mother, Belkis, knows that the friends who gathered under the raindrops that day are consumed by sadness and love for Tort. She offers the mourners solace by saying "be happy." She says Tort provided us with an example. Having met Tort only once, I knew that they were an example for kindness and love. From the stories that I've listened to, Tort has had a profound impact on so many people's lives. They have immensely impacted people they met and people who only know them through death. Belkis wants the example of her child to be alive in a substantive way, a way that is about that action and "not just talking." She reminds the crowd that we are still living and that living implores us to give them a life through our actions and what we continue to fight for and against. Indeed, Tort's life does give an example of how to be in grief and action, and their life mattered. The way that communities all over the world mourn Tortuguita are proof of what we know. The reminder she extends about us still being alive, and still being able to enact change and struggle is inherent to the resistance against oppressive regimes. Through the performative demonstration of mourning those that we have lost, and the things we have lost access to, we can honor those people and things, and we find creative ways to keep coming together to struggle in their memory. When we struggle with our loved ones in our hearts and minds, we are connected to their commitments of disrupting state violence and we honor the lives they lived through our actions. As we mourn together, and lose people, we grow in our support of the people who are still here.



Figure 1. Unicorn Riot. Jan 21, 2023.



Figure 2. Tortuguita Vigil. Photo by @micahinat1 (Jan 24, 2023)



Figure 3. Remembering Tort.
Photo by Ash Williams. February
26, 2023.

Reintroducing ourselves to the lives our fallen loved ones have lived is a grieving practice that can give us information about how to keep fighting and showing up for one another. It also allows for griever and strugglers to strengthen the solidarity amongst one another by reminding us of the shared goals or ideas of the person who passed away. At a time when it seems like there are so many diverging needs or interests and a lot to get on the same page about, that kind of affinity is important. Our memory and our love for a person is often the only thing connecting the people who gather to mourn. Making a conscious and relational decision to grieve should be essential to organizing and activism.

Building altars together is another way that vigil spaces spiritual, creative, and emotional relief after a loss. Community altar builds can include gathering loved ones and community members to literally build an altar together. Community altar builds often take place in public spaces and or the place near where the death occurred. When bereaved people gather, they bring altar supplies, and throughout the time of the build, anyone who wants to can place a special item on the altar. Mourners often remember more than one person at a time at these events, and folks take time to speak their loved one's name into the space. Memories, favorite colors, and happy and sad times also get spoken into the space. With each word, we breathe memory and life back into ourselves so that our people are not forgotten. Working with others to collectively build an altar is another opening for emotional and creative relief. The lives lived by our dead comrades come back to life as we place sacred and meaningful items, arranged like a collage of memories. Emotional relief is essential to resisting oppressive regimes because folks are having to traverse grief and show up for those who are still here, including ourselves.

In this practice of grieving out loud, we become more and more comfortable with losing important people, places, and things. We learn what to do to take care of each other after the losing. We learn about what people need in order to take a break or keep fighting. We remind ourselves that we keep us safe. We keep us safe is a reminder that communities get to determine what safety looks like for them, and that those communities do not have to rely on carceral logics or the state to co-create our visions for what safety and protection from different kinds of threats looks like. During these sacred events, people share food and bring photos, flowers, trinkets, sacred items, flags, candles, water, dirt, incense for burning, crystals, stones, clothing items, sign-making materials, and other things to write on and write with to put on the altar and have at the vigil.

When we approach grief as a social phenomenon, we can begin to extend the exploration of new opportunities that lend themselves to informing us about increasing access to grief/loss and grief/loss support. From there, we can create support infrastructures for ourselves and others. Often, organizers and care workers support with collective grief. Collective grief happens when a community, society, village, or nation all experience extreme change or loss. Collective grief can manifest in the wake of major events. Communities can experience collective grief after the passing of abortion bans and restrictions. Communities can also experience collective grief when a comrade is murdered or jailed by the police or when there are wars and genocides continuously and actively occurring at home and abroad. The ways that these types of actors show up to respond

to loss and grief might be helpful for supporting people outside of the political communities that I have mentioned.

Like community organizers and death doulas, abortion doulas are careworkers who understand that grief and loss can be experienced individually and collectively. We even go so far as to establish support infrastructures like abortion doula collectives, made up of multiple doulas with a wide range of skills and abortion expertise. With the consent of abortion seekers, abortion doulas provide informational, physical, and emotional support before, during, and after abortion. We help abortion seekers navigate the many barriers to abortion care including cost, childcare, and of course abortion restrictions and limitations on bodily autonomy. We offer emotional processing and deep listening as a way to combat abortion stigma and shame. We believe that abortion seekers deserve gender-affirming care, tailored to their individual lives. We hold space for the variety of emotions that can arise when making a decision to have an abortion or simply having an abortion. Some of those emotions include grief, excitement, confusion, and anger.

Grief and loss are not the only emotions that can be present when a person is considering or having an abortion, and it is worth mentioning that abortion doulas are extremely helpful with offering non-judgmental support, listening, and increasing options for pregnant people. While grief and loss are not the only things people experience after having abortions, anti-abortion narratives and logics often lift up the impact of this emotion within a person's abortion experience. For myself as a doula and as a person who has had two abortions, I experienced loss sure, but overwhelmingly I experienced joy, satisfaction, relief, and power. As an abortion doula, I do not assume what the people I support will feel after they have an abortion or when they are deciding. It is our undertaking to pause, listen, ask questions, and take the lead of the person I am working with. White supremacy and capitalism make people feel like they cannot grieve and that they must "power through" or "move on." White supremacy and capitalism as world-building systems rely on individualization, quickness, and disremembering. As abortion doulas, our role is to help create space for folks to feel all of their feelings. Our role is to offer relational and slowed-down support that prioritizes what is important to each person. Abortion doulas are interested in busting binaries and bridging the gap between abortion and birth and life and death. We understand that each person's experience is unique, and that no person lives a single-issue life. Grievors deserve this type of approach as well.

The expansive approach by abortion doulas to offer non-judgmental support and deep listening, increasing options for people who are undergoing major transitions, and not making assumptions about what people need, is essential for showing up for people who are grieving and experiencing the complexities of loss. What would it look like to approach each person's grief experience this way? Each person's experience with loss should be valued and honored. Assumptions about how long it will take for a person to get over a death or move past a loss can be unhelpful to the people we want to support in our communities. By connecting with others through doula-care and direct actions, organizers and doulas explore what caring for ourselves and others can look like under navigating white supremacist capitalist violence.

The tender approaches that I have shared have been developed out of struggle as well as out of the love that always already exists inside each one of our dynamic communities. How we show up for one another in the face of destruction and loss says something about the impacts we made along the way. Expansive approaches to handling people's experiences with care are becoming more paramount within and outside of movement spaces. When we pause to consider what can be gleaned from death doula activism and organizing within the movement to stop cop city, we realize that we have an array of strategies for addressing and helping our folks move through loss. Grief is a common denominator. It is a connective tissue that holds within it the power to transform hearts and minds. What will you learn under the banner of grief?

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Biography

Ash Williams (he/him) is a Black trans person from so-called Fayetteville, North Carolina. Since 2012, Ash's work has included theorizing dance and performance art as tools for understanding bodies and corporeality within The Movement for Black Lives, leading rapid response and guerilla actions, particularly as an architect of Charlotte Uprising, which followed the murder of Keith Lamont Scott. This work has included co-leading a successful statewide campaign (#EndShacklingNC) to end the practice of shackling pregnant incarcerated people in North Carolina, as well as a successful campaign (#TransferKanautikaNow) to transfer Kanautika Zayre-Brown, a Black Transwoman, from a correctional facility designated for men to a women's facility in 2019.

Making headline news in 2014, Ash disrupted business as usual at a private fundraiser for presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton, demanding that Clinton apologize to Black people for mass incarceration, and for her racist use of the word "superpredator."

He holds a Master's degree in Ethics and Applied Philosophy, and a Bachelor's in Philosophy and a Minor in Dance from UNC-Charlotte. He served as an Adjunct Professor in the Women's and Gender Studies Department at UNC-Charlotte from 2018 until 2021. From 2022-2023, Ash served as Project Nia's Decriminalizing Abortion resident. For years, Ash has been vigorously fighting to expand abortion access by funding abortions and training other people to become abortion doulas. Ash is also a disabled dancer, choreographer, and dance teacher.

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PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

AN ELONGATED SHRIEKING SONG THAT ENVISIONS GLIMPSES OF LIBERATION THROUGH OVERWHELM

RAONI/MUZHOSALEH INDEPENDENT ARTIST

I greet you in the soft fire of the guts
I greet you in the solidity of freedom dreams woven into the skeleton
I greet you in the fluorescent red of blood uselessly shed
I greet you in the tender soft black lying gently in the corner
what haunts us or what lingers in this space,
what needs our greeting?
before we can attempt a moaning dance with one another

I started writing this text right after October 7th, 2023, in the first days of the heinous successive bombing of Gaza by the Israeli forces, aided by the West. My heart deeply shaken by the amount of dead bodies that were enshrouding my phone and this was just the beginning, before the Israeli Occupation Forces started its precise and genocidal attacks on hospitals, refugee camps and UNWRA schools. My beloved partner, a Jerusalemite, is glued to his phone, a blankness veiling his face masking the unimaginable disastrous tumult plunging through his body. Each time I lean in close to him, my body responds with shivering sighs as if a cold breeze swept from her flesh into mine. And on top of all of that hurt, the news of Afghanistan being hit by a disastrous earthquake was sitting like a heavy wet blanket on top of my heart, a heart numb and too familiar with the suffering of my own people.

Since my practice of moaning is intertwined with both the personal and the inter-communal urgencies striking onto our flesh, onto our bodies and our subject-hoods, it felt only right to start with firstly addressing the status quo of my immediate lived experience. It is from this spirited place that I will try to retrace how the moan, like a gentle elder, is present these days hushing me to come closer to the pounding ache of the heart. During the times when our collective wound opens wider and further, it is crucial to attune ourselves to the practice of moaning, to listening, hearing and receiving the shrieks of maddened hearts. It has become clear to me that moaning is my way of witnessing the ongoing genocide in Gaza, the onslaught of massacres live-streamed on our phone screens, without letting that cold numbness take over my heart, the kind of non-feeling that inevitably leads to normalisation of mass killing and destruction. Moaning has also become my elder in refusing respectability politics and grounding myself in a rage-fueled love for an unknown future on this beautiful blue globe.

In this text I will explore my artistic practice of moaning through the lens of “traumatophilia” and “overwhelm” as proposed by Avgi Saketopoulou, a Greek psycho-analyst practicing in New York. I also want to do this in conversation with Saidiya Hartman’s question in “Venus in Two Acts” that has been delightfully haunting me, which is: “What are the kinds of stories to be told by those and about those who live in such an intimate relationship with death? Romances? Tragedies? Shrieks that find their way into speech and song?” (Hartman 2008, 4).

Lashes’ Endless Moaning Performance

I stumbled on the moan as a performance practice at a pivotal moment in my life six years ago. While in my third year of a bachelor’s degree in Choreography at SNDO (School voor Nieuwe Dans Ontwikkeling in Amsterdam) I had just started taking testosterone and was transitioning slowly from “female” to “male.”¹ My relationship with my parents and siblings was already waning at that time and the decision to start hormones and undergo top-surgery stained me as the wayward that I have always been perceived to be. My family used to call me عجيب و غريب, which in Dari reads as *ajib wa gharib* and translates as strange and wondrous. With my decision to become “male” I had fully accepted my destiny as this weird and wondrous creature devoted to bringing misfortune to fascist logic. Choosing to transition meant the end of these blood ties, and that end left me swimming in a sea of grief. Everything was marked by a two-fold loss; on the one hand, I consciously entered an overwhelmingly tough yet deliciously joyful process of transforming years and layers of socialisation as a Hazara woman in order to become someone and somebody whom I could not fully envision yet. And, on the other hand, those who taught me courage and loved me in the ways they could, the two people who gave up their land and all their dreams to safeguard a future for their children, stubbornly held onto ideas and projections of me and rejected this transformative process.



Fig. 1. Performance Whining Wailing Lashes as part of Simon Wald-Lasowski's background evening performances at 1646 Experimental Art Space. Photo taken by Helena Roig.

In this period, I carried my broken heartedness, as if a seed, in my hands everywhere I went. My heart was an open wound and I planted the seeds of my grief in the form of moaning prayers at bodies of water or in the corners of the parks. The dance studio became the estuary where the moan guided me through the hard labor of birthing another self, transforming memories of my past self into new visions of a future self. Choreography became the medium and the art-form through which I attempted to find soil for these bemoaning seeds as an ongoing performance practice. In one of my studio sessions, a character came into vision. She was dressed all in white, with dramatic nails protruding from her gloves and there were tears in the form of strips of hair draping from her cheeks. I decided to call her Lashes, as a way of honouring my birth-name in Dari. Lashes kept appearing in my daily life everywhere with a nagging presence. She constantly demanded my body and my voice as a site to come into existence. In the beginning Lashes did not have any words, she simply moaned: *uhhhh uuuuuuhhhh uuuuuuaawwhhh* When I tended to the nagging in Lashes' voice I was struck by the depth of grief pouring into the world through my own voice. Through her nagging grief I heard the song that needed to be sung and when I meditated with Lashes' moaning, I was struck by how this moaning song held many stories of dispossession. As Lashes, my body seemed to be hypersensitive to grief. The moan confirmed itself as a sonic membrane connecting the song of my open wounded heart with that of (imagined) others. I started to hear the moan as a grieving song in the howling wind, I read it in the folds of an

elderly man walking down the street and I would feel the grief present in my lover's moaning orgasm. And as I learned to lean into the presence of the moan around me, it was Lashes who offered herself as a guide, a mentor, and taught me how to listen to the subtleties of the ancient songs of grief.

To be held in the mob's embrace, in the wound and blessing of their shared, accursed sensorium, is to be made unaware of one's own invisibility—to feel, to feel more, to feel more than, to feel more than I feel, I feel. Can you hold one another tonight in the blur, so that one and another are no more? (Moten 2017, 218)

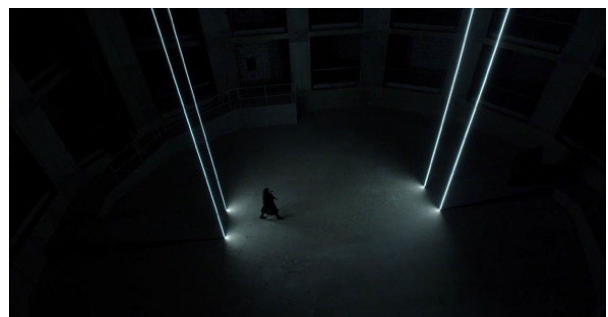
Cloaked as Lashes, dressed in the white layered garment that is beaded with plastic pearls and strands of hair flowing down my cheeks, I lent my voice to the moan as an elongated mourning song on repeat that treats the performative space as a palpable space of loss. It is through Lashes' performance, swaying in an unbalanced way while repeatedly hitting the chest, that I aim to honour and preserve this dying tradition of professional mourning. By using the transformative capacities of the performance space, my body activates the loss that is naturally present in the space. As Lashes, my body moves ambiguously between spectator and performer. Dressed as Lashes I lent my body and my voice to an improvised moaning song on repeat that filled the space with an affective load and dragged both spectator and performer into the immediacy of feeling more than one feels capable of, "to feel more than I feel, I feel."

To Attune to an Aching Beyond the Self

As I embarked on a journey with the moan, with Lashes as my mentor, I soon touched upon the global tradition of professional mourners, who in many cultures serve as choreographers of grief in times of loss. For example, in southern India and in Sri Lanka it is the role of the Oppari who sing in an improvised manner, wailing eulogies to honour the dead (see Grover 2015). It is important to emphasise that the professional mourners do not perform these bemoaning songs as a way of fixing the grief in the community or to grieve for the bereaved. Instead, it is the role of the professional mourner to make the loss palpable and experiential for the bereaved. As Taryn Simon notes in her published interview with Homi K. Bhabha (Simon 2017) on her work *An Occupation of Loss* (Simon 2018), where professional mourners from multiple cultures perform their mourning



Screenshot of Oppari practitioner
▶ <https://youtu.be/lqrf3LKwwXc>



Screenshot of Taryn Simon's *An Occupation of Loss*
▶ <https://youtu.be/kbmNdqwVSNg>

songs in the giant columns of the work, professional mourners embody the abstract space that opens up after loss. Through high-pitched shrieks and dramatic gestures such as pulling of the hair, throwing the body on the ground and beating the chest, professional mourners embody this abstract space that one is submerged in after loss. By dramatising, exaggerating, and repeating these performative and sonic gestures, the professional mourners enact a grieving state and guide their public through the opaque but visceral state of grief.

I spent my early childhood in Peshawar, Pakistan, as a religious and ethnic minority, namely Shi'a Hazara amongst the majority Sunni Pashtun refugee communities. Each year when the first month of the Islamic calendar, the month of Muharram, arrived on our doorsteps we, as Shi'a, would mark our difference by gathering in public squares dressed all in black, performing lamenting melodies in the hundreds.² During this month Shi'as commemorate the heroes of the historical battle of Karbala that stands for resistance: political, ideological, embodied. It was at Karbala where Hussain ibn Ali, the grandson of prophet Mohammed, and his party consisting of children, men and women and the elderly, were starved, captured, dismembered and brutally murdered because they resisted the rule of the caliph Yazid. These ten days are spent consecutively in a collective state of mourning through various ceremonies, processions and gatherings in designated spaces of mourning called *takiya-khana* and finds its culmination on the tenth day called Ashura. In Shi'a tradition, the public lament, which is rehearsed and fine-tuned over more than thousand years, is a form of resistance against oppression (see [Ahwaz Media 2](#)). Gathering collectively in hundreds while swaying on the melodies of the repetitive wailing songs is a magnificently powerful charging experience. To be amidst a huge mass of people whose chest and head have become a collective drum and whose voices resound with dramatic elegies that have a heart shattering effect, can be incredibly transformative.

In "The Distance from Karbala and Gaza: Collective, connected grief. 20th of Safar, day 322 of the genocide in Gaza", Aleeha Ali (2024) writes about the Shi'a collective gatherings called *majalis*: "I truly learnt the contours of collective grief from Shi'a epistemology, and the practices my mother would take us to when we were young. Majalis were spaces of storytelling and social mourning, textured with uninhibited emotional arousal and come-downs." My own memories of the annual rituals during the month of Muharram and Ashura also marked me with the "emotional arousal and come-downs" that Ali accurately describes. My yearning to be immersed in the lamenting songs of the collective was lit up during the global uprising that followed after the brutal killing of George Floyd. I proposed to practice moaning by way of being together through collective gatherings framed as "Mourning Sociality," initiating a togetherness that holds space for personal and communal grief through the practice of moaning. It was my attempt to give back to the inheritance of knowledge that comes from the legacy of black, anti-colonial liberation struggles. I wanted to create a space where we found strength and guidance through the differences of our suffering. As a social space, "Mourning Sociality" centered the sorrow, rage, and despair that comes with being subjected to the brutality of the settler colonial psyche. In this space, wailing and lamenting rhythms are encouraged by other trembling voices so that we do not have to suffer in loneliness and numbness. We perform a wailing call and response with one another through which we practice listening to the moan with sustained attention. During the "Mourning Sociality" we

become a groaning mob that unitedly carries the responsibility for the task of weaving together a whining nagging sonic web. Each time one of us gives expression to an elongated moan through their personalised *call*, the rest of the mob embraces the individual's call through a collective wailing *response*.

Moaning as Language and Moaning as Storytelling

truthspitters are crazy talkers
offenders of public amnesia

truthspitters they bounce their chest up and down
on the melodies transmitted only to them from faraway lands

truthspitters dance and sing until dawn
they bundle together and speak in strange tongues
twisted tongues
words not meant for the average joe

truthspitters see with their hearts on their tongues
licking the air sensitively for wisdom that's hidden

truthspitters have a furious taste for work
for sweating and swaying in truths

truthspitters smile when the sun sets
it's time for them to get to work

In my practice I play with the moan as a sonic membrane which connects the performer's guts to the audience's guts, back and forth, weaving affective threads that plunge everyone into feeling, sensing and imagining possibilities of the unimaginable. In my ongoing study, with the moan guiding me as would a patient elder, I've become infatuated with moaning as a way of storytelling. I consider the moan's way of sensorially interweaving from gut to gut as a form of speech. That is to say, each moan is a sonic poem weaving the wailer's voice and body into the fabric of the world. When we learn to listen to the moaning song of another, it might speak back to us a revolutionary thought about how our hearts' suffering and our hearts' joy can put us into radical poetic relations with one another.³ How is our imagination about ourselves, about the other and about another world challenged, nourished and extended through the whimpers expressed in what Moten calls "the mob's embrace"?

TYPES OF MOANING

- Sigh
- whimper
- wail
- heavy breathing repetitive
- stutter in back of throat (guttural)
- high pitched wail
- sexual
- laughing moan
- moaning crying
- scraping the throat
- nagging moan
- gagging moan
- squeaking
- low growling
- ghost moan
- rumbling moan
- demon groan
- nagging moan #2
- stretching sighing moan
- angry throat moan
- expressing physical pain (adw)
- singing wail
- bratty moan

AFFECT?

release

broken sounds low crying
express pain (dogs)
release of grief

release weight off
shoulders / hyperventilate
sustaining moan in throat

self-pity
wetting / lubricating
sense of hysteria

resistance

self-pity

makes eyes tear, vomiting
lubricating mouth

witchy

expressing effort / low
voice coming
cartoonish / cynical

low belly monsterlike
unpredictable / big eyes
childlike

relaxing / relief
release of anger
express physical pain release

lament grief

bratty

WHAT'S THE SPECIFICITY OF MY MOANING?

Fig. 2. Types of moaning and their affect.

When I speak about moaning as a form of storytelling, I mean that attuning ourselves to the moaning songs in ourselves and in our surroundings can bring us closer to the stories of suffering, of madness, of pleasure and of stories of liberation that is carried through the flesh and bones of another. Each time we express the hidden textures of our internal landscape through our moaning we gift the world a piece of ourselves. When we extend ourselves through our moaning, a piece of our affective membrane trembles within the flesh of the listener. This is the gift of the moan. And in daring to let go of control and let our hearts shatter as an aftereffect of listening to the wailing of another, we show the courage to be present with the shrieking of a mother screaming for her dead child. It is attending to these wild screams longing to be heard that we become revolutionised.

The moan is the soundscape that connects us to our living environment and can therefore teach us how to live more fully. Everything that is alive, everything that carries the breath of Life moans, wails, groans, shrieks, sighs and whimpers.⁴ If we listen carefully we can hear the wails of the sea crashing against the shore and perhaps it tells us the tales of black and brown bodies that lie at the bottom of the Mediterranean sea, pushed into death by the border guards of Fortress Europe. In [this YouTube video](#) (Banna 2012, from 12:20 onwards), the belated Palestinian singer Rim Banna performs a song that Palestinian mothers sang when they would visit their kin in prison. This song would send a message to those imprisoned that the youth in resistance would free them in the night. They would add a shrieking kind of lelele-sound before the words to confuse the prison guards and ensure their misunderstanding of the lyrics. I propose that if we attune our listening to the wind, then perhaps we can hear in its howling the words of solace that a mother sung, as a prayer, released into the wind in the hope that it reaches her kin turned fugitive, forced into hiding from the clutches of the Occupation.

With moaning as a form of storytelling, I'm proposing that if we attend to the wind's howling, perhaps we can hear the howling elation of Gazans breaking free on 7 October 2023 through the fences of the open air prison and [touching for the first time with bare feet their ancestral land](#) (Al Quds Al Bawsala 2023)? In "The Principle of Return: the repressed ruptures of Zionist time", Adam Hajyahia (2024) describes this moment as an image of return that ruptures the settler colonial capture of time by the Zionist State. Hajyahia writes:

The Gazan man's words reach us through his mobile phone. He pants, his voice cracks, muffled, he cries, reiterating: "These are our occupied lands, these are our occupied lands." Around him, a flock of Gazans appeared to be scattering, seizing the moment to roam without limits, while others kneeled to kiss the soil that birthed them.

With a cracking voice, this man repeatedly whimpers: "Beer el Sabe 'oh my homeland, it is within you where the falcon sang," calling out the name of the historically largest town Beer el Sabe in the Naqab desert that was captured and occupied in 1948. Leaning in closely to the soft wailing in the man's voice, I can almost see the historic town of Beer el Sabe coming alive through the emptied wilderness. While listening to the wind's howling, perhaps we can wail along the prayer "Beer el Sabe, it is within you where the falcon sang" and reinforce this temporary moment of return, of land being kissed by her loving custodians.

The moan as a storyteller urges the listener towards the provocation that sharing one's mourning with others through moaning songs and daring to surrender oneself to the unknown in the other's mourning, is a radical form of solidarity and camaraderie. To give expression to the heaviness and the joyfulness of our lived experiences through the moan makes one more perceptive to the wailing in the hearts of others. I want to live in a world where solidarity is practiced through fondness, through listening, through pushing against what is presented as fixed or stable. I want to lend my voice, my shrieks, my moans, as a way of amplifying the voices of all of us who are brutalised on the daily.

to make such painful sounds that the stones want to weep

to practice hearing the weeping in everything *uuhhhmmmm*
the wind weeps. the lake weeps. the flags weep *oeheoeheooeoe*
the dutch boy delivering food weeps *mehhemehemehhhmm*
listening to this common weeping is to move away from atrophy and apathy
from de-pression *aaarrghghghghg*
from a state of dis-attachment *neeehheeneehhhneehhhh*
a state of being, from which one can no longer hear the weeping of
whales/winds
how those groaning whales and howling winds tell the tale of another future
yuuwahhwuaahh
a thundering noise of whining so deep, so disastrous, that by producing
such sounds *aaaarruuuaaghhhh* future stones *UUUGGHHHAHAUAHH* in
future hearts are prevented

Imagine one's comrade sighing deeply and offering a challenging afterthought as they breathe out. What does it mean exactly to offer one's breath as a form of solidarity? In cultures that lack embodied knowledge on ways of dealing with conflict, discomfort or tension, breath that expresses a complaint of the status quo, is interpreted as a threat to social comfort and therefore often received with rejection, refusal or neglect. For example, in Dutch culture the word *gezellig*, loosely translated as "cosy," is at the heart of the dominant culture. Every gathering concludes by affirming how *gezellig* it was. On the other hand, the word *gezellig* can also be used to silence conversations that feel uncomfortable. When for example one complains about the racist, anti-black Dutch cultural tradition of "Zwarte Piet," a way of silencing that protest is by framing it as *ongezellig* or not-cosy. The inability and unwillingness to be present with social discomfort or conflict by rejecting, hushing, or neglecting and thus finally rendering the complaint nonexistent, is at the heart of Dutch *gezelligheid* culture. So to embrace the social tension that a sigh or a moan may produce, is to offer one's comrade an exchange of breath. How can we learn to listen to a mother shriek when the Israeli soldier kills her child in front of his classmates as a way of setting an example for any resistance? What of "the self" does one have to destroy in order to let the wild shrieking of another enter the body, rattle the bones and offer back a wailing song?

"To make such painful sounds that the stones want to weep" is a sentence by Martín Prechtel, a spiritual practitioner from New-Mexico who served for more than twenty five years as a spiritual guide of the Tuzutujil people in Lake Atitlán, Guatamala. In a live lecture on YouTube entitled "Grief

and Praise” (Prechtel 2015), he engages the listeners with the Mayan cosmological understanding that grief and praise are two limbs of the same body. Prechtel speaks about how in order to truly honour our loss we ought to make sounds that make the stones weep. Martín explains that when we are grieving by way of wailing loudly, pulling the hair, thrashing the body on the ground, we are actually praising the life that was lost. Hence, when we are truly praising someone or something, we are struck by the mortality of life, and therefore our praise becomes the expression of our grief. Weaving my practice with the Mayan cosmology on the inextricable relationship between grief and praise, I’m proposing that each moan is an extension of our grief *and* praise. Each moan, as a sonic symbol, transmits data about our lived reality in order to claim a witness. When this wailing inner space is shared with others, through a sonic utterance, the room thickens with the multilayered fabric of grief. So, to speak of a space that honours grief is to speak of a space that does not shy away or is not fearful of the heart-wrenching materiality of praise.

The Task is to Train Ourselves to be with Overwhelm

squirmy notes
the scooping out
of micro/macro sufferings
what landscapes, hidden by neglect, need watering?
what textures, stained with pain, need greeting?
what of our chaos do we offer back to the chaos?
my guts are here to be taken
take these testimonial guts
may these bowels be an offering to the altar of liberation

The idea to surrender to “the overwhelm” as a psychic experience is inspired by New York-based psychoanalyst Avgi Saketopoulou, which I’ll explain further below. The task is to train ourselves personally and collectively with “ego-shattering” processes, so that we may become creatures not afraid of overwhelm and the schizo-frantic energy produced by expanding into the unknown. The task is to continuously lean into feeling the edges of the psychic fabrics that define us as individuals and as a collective. The task is to become invested in training that muscle of expanding into the edges of what and whom we think we are and the transformations we are capable of.

Traumatophobia, we’ll see, is concerned principally with an unconscious that warehouses repressed memories, painful inscriptions, and intergenerationally transmitted trauma, whereas traumatophilia is hospitable to conceiving of the unconscious as an enduring opacity that cannot be organised by memory or symbolisation. (Saketopoulou 2023, 1075)

By thinking about moaning through Saketopoulou’s lens of “traumatophilia,” I want to speculate how moaning can undo the immobility of symbols and meanings aroused by one’s traumatic experiences and perhaps support one to transform the physical realities of our wounds. By moaning, one is attuning to the psychosomatic body. Through imagery and or imaginative narration, one can learn how to somatically retrace the hurt (the micro/macro suffering) of the

singular and collective experiences. Saketopoulou writes that a “traumatophobic” attitude in the field of psychoanalysis considers the unconscious as a warehouse for the symbols of our wounds and applies psychoanalytic tools as a way to “understand” or “grasp” the symbols that lead us to our traumas. Saketopoulou juxtaposes this norm within psychoanalysis with the idea of “traumatophilia.” That is, she refuses that the unconscious can be understood and organized, and introduces, instead, an approach to the unconscious through Glissant’s concept of opacity ([1990] 1997), the refusal to “grasp” the experience by pressuring the understanding of it and therefore undermining the poëntial (poetic potential) of the unconscious.

it is madness to let ourselves be so close to the edges of falling apart
but I've always thought of myself as someone fond of edge-play
the no-go-zones that are the peripheries
reaching for Bhanu Kapil's *Ban en Banlieu*
playing in / with / around the edges produces emotional highs
that excessive excitement that arouses from the banlieu
strengthens the cardiac metabolism

When tending to an open wound of trauma by way of moaning, it can guide us closer and even help in touching the wound without attempting to “know” it. We do not need to organize the meaning of our wounds by categorising our memories into neatly branded identities in order to give expression to the sonic textures of the wail that is wrapped in the sensations of the flesh. Tracing the moan inside one’s own internal landscape and folding it into the sound of the howling wind, is a somatic way of activating and expanding the imagery of our suffering through an improvised song in collaboration with our living surrounding. When professional mourners wail, their moaning songs do not only speak about a particular loss, even if the lyrics of their song refer to one specific instance. It is the opaque nature of the mourner’s improvised song that touches the moaner and the public beyond the specificity of loss that the community has gathered around. As a matter of fact, attempts to solidify the meaning and or origin of our open wounds can distract us from the energetic power of the poëntial of the moan. That is, the fixation of explaining the mytho-symbols of our open wounds through consequential logic is based both on the simplification of our traumas and also on the premise that they can be solved or “fully healed.” As Martín Prechtel wisely notes: “There’s nothing to fix, you just have to let it [it being the grief] rock.”

Attending to a specific kind of image and/or feeling, whose pain holds a threatening tension, and then translating this psychosomatic touching of the open hurt into a long slow wailing exhalation, leads to the experience of a traumatophilic repetition. Saketopoulou writes:

Traumatophilic repetitions can effect a psychic blow (a traumatism) that, working like the second coup in the psychic mechanism of the après-coup, stands to unfreeze the meanings originally engraved in traumatic experience (translations). Such blows are often misread as retraumatizing, but what they may sometimes effect, instead, is a *rebooting of psychic energies*, putting in motion forces that can be psychically transformative. That such kindling is not anodyne and may even be painful or court abjection does not mean that it is necessarily traumatic: such

traumatizations may motor psychically transformative work enlarging the field of experience. (Saketopoulou 2023, 1071)

Each moaning utterance is the poetic, sonic translation of the attempt to touch the wound. Each moaning utterance is charged with the energetic potential of the open hurt. Listening to wailing utterances of others can for some be extremely unsettling when having been raised in a culture deeply saturated in emotional apathy or repression. For example, after I had performed a lecture in which the moan was woven into the talk, an audience member asked me: "Why did you have to do that to us? Why did you have to make us so uncomfortable?" I was grateful for these questions because these questions reflected precisely upon the unsettling nature of the moan. That there is something at risk for our ego's so-called stability when we become passable or permeable to our neighbours' disastrous shrieks. That by listening to the raging groans of a mob gathered to oppose an ongoing genocide, orchestrated by our governments, we open ourselves up to that affective world and become undone by the reverberations of the mob's raging chants. To dare to sit in the overwhelm while we listen to the screams of people who are being chased like cockroaches by U.S.-made bombs, fired by the Zionists, to dare to sit and lean into the shrieks that come bursting through our screens, we become affectively stained, coloured, or dirtied by the wild bemoaning utterances of humanity.



Figs. 3 and 4. These are images of the Moaning Choir research residency I did in 2020, at WORM, Rotterdam, programmed by James Arnell. Photos taken by Julia Gat.

To Bear Witness to the Ongoing Nakba by Way of Moaning

ooooooooeeeehhhhhhhhhhhhh
ooooeehhh ooooooooooooooooouuuuuuwwwwwhhh
aaaaaaaaarrrrrrggggghhhhuuahahahauuuu
uuuwagahhh uuwwagagagahhh uuuuuuuuuuwaaaaagagahhhhh

We live in unprecedented times wherein we witness the slow but certain collapse of the Western hegemony in the global community. The leaders of the West can no longer hide the intrinsic brutal nature of their so-called “civilisations” behind a veil of morality and continue to impose its death-

driven mania upon the Global Majority without the massive uprising and armed backlash from the global community.

What are the kinds of stories to be told by those and about those who live in such an intimate relationship with death? Romances? Tragedies? Shrieks that find their way into speech and song? What are the protocols and limits that shape the narratives written as counter-history, an aspiration that isn't a prophylactic against the risks posed by reiterating violent speech and depicting again rituals of torture? How does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence? Is the "terrible beauty" that resides in such a scene something akin to remedy as Fred Moten would seem to suggest? (Hartman 2008, 4)

During the course of this year, I have continuously engaged with “the stories that are told by those who live in such an intimate relationship to death” by frantically tracing “shrieks that find their way into speech and song” in the stories and video fragments of the ongoing genocide in Gaza. I have been using my practice as a way of bearing witness to these stories, these images of mass destruction, these horrifying scenes of genocide. On the duty and dilemma of bearing witness to the mass slaughter of her people, Sarah Aziza published an online text called “The Work of the Witness” (Aziza 2024). In it she explains that the Arabic word for witnessing shares the same root as the word martyr شهيد, *shahid*, namely شهد. The martyr is the one whose death is marked, touched and stained by bearing witness to oppression. Aziza remarks that: “To be a witness is to make contact, to be touched, and to bear the marks of this touch.” For me the protocol for bearing witness to the shrieks of Palestinians live-streaming the onslaught of their people, is through a continuous practice of the moan. In order to “revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence,” I turn to translating my witnessing into an ambiguous but affective wailing speech that refuses to grasp at the piercing imagery of death.

For example, I notice the moan in [a small fragment on Instagram](#) (Middle East Eye 2024) of a 1973 documentary, *Scenes from Under Occupation in Gaza*, by Mustafa Abu Ali, that shows a Palestinian woman throwing her hands frantically towards the camera. She is standing in front of her house that has been struck by an Israeli bomb as she looks at the rubbles that was once her life. She repeatedly pulls her arms towards her head, to throw them back into the air in the viewer's direction. Her hands become a raging mantra, her face twisting and pulling into deep groans that express her desperation over the destruction of her life and that of her people. This repeated choreography of thrashing arms, hands and contorted facial gestures becomes a curse, a seething curse. A curse enacted onto every person who watches such a devastation with a sense of apathy and disinterest. A stretched-out groan dances through her face translated by each facial muscle that shrieks and reflects the pain and suffering she feels inside her body. We see a woman whose whole body becomes the wailing utterances of her heart. Her body's gesturing is totally in sync with that deep groaning wound inflicted by the Zionist airstrike on her house.

[illegible]



The Moan as the Shared Thread of our Collective Grief

a shattering moan dismembers everything fixed
a shrieking moan ruptures the tightness of the skin
a singing wail becomes the undoing of fear
a sighing whimper collaborates with the denseness of the flesh
a thunderous roar spreads wings of furious metal
a wet silent sigh slips into the cracks of your crevices

Interweaving the holy battle of Karbala with the genocide unfolding in Gaza, the brilliant Aleeha asks a vital question: “What is our grief, if it isn’t collective?” What is our grief, if we don’t braid our cries and our shaking guts with the stories and songs of others in suffering? What happens to the power in the shared experience of oppression, if we fail to listen to a mass groaning for liberation and fail to perceive the poetics of this collective call? To say that our grief is collective is to join with our voices the wailing calls of those deemed “less than human” or simply as “human-animals” and to show up to this comradeship with an undeterred and anchored stamina. Embodied practices of grief that invoke the collective nature of grief unambiguously push one’s solidarity with the Palestinian liberation struggle and that of All Peoples who fight for liberty from sadistic and narcissistic tyranny. Needless to say, an individualistic world ruled by apathy and disinterest is a disastrous threat to the future of our kind on this beautiful earth. I am dumbstruck by how many people continue to look away from atrocities, remaining silent in the face of a genocide and settler violence, and devilishly ignoring how each of our singular lives is complicit in a war industry that gleefully sacrifices the sacred bodies of innocent civilians. I am flabbergasted that many people are bringing up all kinds of reasons to excuse their lack of engagement with what happens “over there.” The mass destruction of precious life is one thing, but to observe non-feeling and the non-affectedness and the catering towards individual needs above collective liberation is extremely terrifying.

Now at last I want to make a return to the sound of حق, *haqq*, the justice principle, that Hajyahia brilliantly writes about. I want to lean in closely to the sound of images of freedom and return that he draws for us. I want to listen to the excessive sounds produced by Palestinians, the occupied, as they continue to tug, tear, scratch, slit and rupture the Zionist settler grip that aims to encapture Palestine in a death-driven mania. Hajyahia writes how the principle of return for Palestinians has to do with a justice principle where Palestinians continuously choose how to live instead of surrendering to capture. I want to lean in and listen to these acts of living through which Palestinians envision a future time, a free time, their own time. Hajyahia writes:

With every shattered fence in Gaza, bombarded checkpoint in Jerusalem, clandestine escape from Tulkarm, surreptitious break out of the Gilboa prison, stealthy act of smuggling out of Jenin, and annual activations of *Iqrith or Bir'im*—physical, literal returns to places of dispossession despite military, legal and carceral prohibitions—we have been returning time and again, accumulating negative spells of time, no matter how short or fleeting they are, as returned beings. (Hajyahia 2024)

I come closer in order to listen to the deep exhalations that the dispossessed make when outsmarting the so-called “most advanced military in the world” with just a spoon. I close my eyes and imagine the groaning whispers of a clandestine escape, and how the earth momentarily held her breath in an act of solidarity with the escaped. I focus and hear the moaning in these accumulated negative spells of time and listen to the musical piece that is composed by a dignified people who dream up liberation within every act.

As I braid together the last thoughts in this piece, I want to whisper in some words of Hartman’s from *Lose your Mother: A Journey Along the Trans Atlantic Slave Route* (2007) that I have memorised almost as holy scripture.

Freedom is the kind of thing that required you to leave your bones on the hills at Brimsbay, or to burn the cane fields, or to live in a garret for seven years, or to stage a general strike, or to create a new republic. It is won and lost, again and again. It is a glimpse of possibility, an opening, a solicitation without any guarantee of duration before it flickers and then is extinguished. (Hartman 2007, 169–170)

Freedom is won and lost. Again and again, freedom is won and lost. Freedom cannot be given; freedom has to be taken. Each time we let out an elongated shriek as our singular and collective refusal of death-driven culture, each moment we listen to our siblings’ bemoaning bodies sacrificed on the altar of extractivist and colonial logic, each delirious and utopic gesture we manifest into the world, through our bodies and voices, is a glimpse of a possibility for liberation. It is through these daily attempts of feeling, feeling more, feeling more than, feeling more than we think we can feel, that we crack open the normalization of atrophy and apathy-ridden societies. And when we experience that glimpse of an opening, may we be able to hear the spirits in the wind’s howling, the earth’s sighing, the waters wailing and the mountains’ singing, rejoicing and celebrating alongside us this momentary gift of liberation.

Notes

¹ I don’t believe in gender, just like I refuse that there is a logic called race, caste, class etc. Yet our material realities, our sense of belonging or non-belonging, our identities and our livelihoods are defined by these social constructs. This is my way of acknowledging that. As much as I refuse the logic of these identifiers, they are also constantly projected onto us and therefore mould our sense of self and relations.

² A good resource to start from is Wikipedia. And also Dabashi (2011).

³ In my practice, the politics and spiritual urgencies of this is a way of honouring and braiding onto Édouard Glissant’s cosmological understanding which was generously proposed to us in *The Poetics of Relation* ([1990] 1997).

⁴ I like to think of the moan as an umbrella sonic expression for these other sounds that express the affective state of grief.

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Biography

Raoni/Muzho Saleh is a Hazara Afghan artist using performance, installation and the sound of mourning moaning to twist and reshape narratives of (cultural) becoming. His work's focus is to play with fugitivity, by not settling on a rigid form. Applying movement and sound as a transformational kind of poetry, he searches for how to continuously be something else, something strange. His practice is engaged with the entanglement of body, spirit, politics and love within art. Through the use of materials such as movement, voice, text and textile he makes works that temporarily immerse both audience and performers in otherworldly thinking, feeling and relating.

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PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

HOW TO WASH A BODY

STACIBU SHEA INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER

For Lotte

Caring for the dead includes a wide range of culturally and materially informed practices that deal with parting from the spirit of life as well as the physicality of the body's natural decomposition toward burial or final disposition. The washing of a dead body has held great significance across cultures and histories as a dignified rite connecting the living and the dead in support of the journeys ahead for both. While there are an array of religious perspectives for this ritual, I am interested in a secular approach that emphasizes practice-based skill training, death wellness, and intentional grieving as part of care for the living, and subsequently, the dead.

While this is something that has long been outsourced as a practical and cosmetic procedure in preparation for ceremony in many parts of the world, the washing of a dead body by loved ones or even members of a community has the power to bring the dead closer to home—both in place and in hands—for a connected and compassionate experience in death and grief. On one side, it holds generative possibility for griever to recognize *this* death through the senses and help to rearrange the current reality around the truth of death. On the other side, this practice also provides us with agency to resist any interest from the commercial funeral industry to profit from this act over and above consumer education and empowerment. The washing of a dead body is part of practical skill-training in holistic deathcare and, coupled with understanding about the laws and regulations related to caring for the dead in one's specific context, the practice reaches further possibilities that are both personal and political, including the ingenuity and connectedness in ritual design as well as reclaiming death from bureaucracy and capital. Further, in the washing of a dead body, the living bodies are reminded of their finitude through their encounters and performances of this ritual.

As a holistic deathcare worker for a few years, death is never far from my thoughts and experiences. In an earlier stage of training, when I had not yet washed a dead body, I practiced on my partner, someone whose aliveness challenges my real inability to fathom how I would cope without her. This is an example of a *memento mori* (“remember death” or “remember you must die”) performance, a rehearsal in preparedness and sinking more deeply into death awareness.



On the floor in the living room, you lie on your back atop a white sheet on our carpet. It's evening in cold January and we have only the soft warm light of the standing lamp. With all the curtains closed and our dog sleeping on her mat nearby, we are safe, protected and calm. I am a little nervous. With my thumb and middle finger, I close your eyelids and remind you not to speak. You are playing dead, and I am practicing how to prepare a body for washing and dressing as part of my death-doula training.

Kneeling at your side, I try to gently roll your body with one hand on your hip and the other on your shoulder, pulling you toward me. I can feel your lively resistance, muscles flexing, yet I know you are leaning into your dead weight. There's only so much I can do by myself, but I want to see if I could roll you to one side and place a disposable pad underneath you. This way I could press on your abdomen to encourage any bodily fluids to escape, and then replace the pad. You laugh because I look so serious. We are doing our best. It would be far easier to have four people, two on each side, at each junction of the hips and shoulders. To move you would be better with six to ten people, making sure to have at least one holding your feet together and another—god forbid it would roll—your neck and head.

I would have cut your shirt open to make it easier to remove, but we pretend that you are naked already and I cover your body with another white sheet. As the fabric rests over you I think about the countless times I have seen this image of you draped in sheets while you slept. How fondly I regard a material simply because it gets to be so close to you. Your chest slowly rises and falls.

I place a candle on the floor above your head. Next to me are an assortment of items: scissors, incense, hydrogen peroxide, a trash bag, extra towels, the book *Rose: Poems* (1986) by Li-Young Lee. Not that I would use all these materials, but I want to see what it is like to have some of them around me, prepared. I could arrive at any scene with my doula bag and be ready. From the kitchen I grab a bowl of warm water, and then add rose essential oil. In our shared silence, I light the candle.

One of the most practical and profound acts of death care is that of physically, materially caring for our dead. For the last hundred years in North America and Europe, with the medicalization of death and death-care industries, this act has been outsourced. This means that as soon as someone dies of expected death, the funeral home is contacted to come collect the body of the newly deceased, and then there's embalming, dressing and the addition of make-up, all at an eerie distance. We have enlisted their help because we believe that this is what we are supposed to do, but we are also disenfranchised by fear. This is fashioned as a loop without a clear beginning or

end, similar to other dilemmas in holistic death care, wherein our fear of death limits us in accessing alternative options. The funeral industry has taken over the tasks that we already anticipate as challenging to bear or think we aren't allowed to do safely or legally. We have intuitive knowledge of natural death care, since it is as old as human time, but we have to be reminded of what we know. There are many funeral practitioners who support family and community involvement, but not always. Most natural death care takes place at home, but it is still possible to arrange something at a hospice or hospital. With good collaboration between medical and funeral establishments, you can make many things happen. Having a holistic death-care worker nearby or on call, someone with whom you are already bonded and whom you trust, means having a personal advocate, one who will support you in being present for this process, and remind you that you're doing it "right," that all of this is normal. I wish for everyone to have this kind of experience directly after their loved one's death, if this feels right to them and the cultural context allows. And for those who haven't, to have grace for themselves for what they didn't yet know, or just simply wasn't possible. Any future moment in which you can be present with a dead body can be time used to acknowledge and grieve for all those others who you couldn't be with before.

Now, with everything prepared for the bathing ritual, I begin at your head and I explain what I am going to do, imagining that in the future I would be guiding loved ones in these actions while I was at their side, the highest honor possible. My role is to support and empower families, caregivers, and loved ones to care for their dead. But my role is also to hold the space with thoughtfulness and intention, help give structure, and slow things down. Often there is an impulse to act (as if an emergency?) but right after a gradual death it is important to do as little as possible and in no rush. Now's the time to connect with the profundity of it all in this sacred space—and experience just how very alive you feel. There will be plenty of actions and decisions to take. For now, just wait. Intuitively and with support, you will know when it's time to do the next thing.

With you, I will only rehearse this once. I wasn't going to wash your curls with shampoo, but I gesture as if I did, rubbing your skull with my fingertips. I know this feels good to you. While I narrate my actions, I think about how healing can be spurred in the act of saying what is materially happening. I say how I would clean your mouth, as you lie there quiet and motionless, then I use the washcloth to clean your face.

Gliding the cloth across your forehead and brow, I whisper to you, "for all that you have known and seen," and think about how you have known and seen me in ways I can't and won't fully comprehend.

My erect finger within the cloth runs down each of your cheeks, along your nose, and encircles your mouth. "For all that you have smelt and tasted," I say, and I think about your body's unique fragrance—it changes but it doesn't grow old to me—and then I think about most of you I've held in my mouth.

I remind myself to breathe as I follow your jawline. "For all that you have spoken and heard." I think about how I can't fathom living without you, but how I would learn to figure it out. You've had to figure out how to grieve a former version of yourself, now that long COVID has fundamentally

altered your life. There will be so much that we figure out together. I sail down from the nape of your neck to your collarbone and shoulders.

Then I wrap a silk, floral scarf around your head to keep your jaw closed (before rigor mortis would set in), and then I slowly move down your body like a meditative scan. I bathe one uncovered limb at a time.

I place my hand between your legs and motion as if I were to wash you here. This is what I would likely do for families in case they didn't feel comfortable doing so themselves. But in this instance, I glance over to find your smirk. With my hand I have loved you. Your love for me comes from a well that I help dig.

How we interact in the hours after a death can serve us very well. Touch helps us to understand. We witness and start to accept the beginning of cascading losses as the body begins to change. We see ourselves in each other, humbled by the miracle of life and death. Here we were, very alive, softening a fear, playing pretend. Emotional boundaries are paramount when doing this work. "Soft front, strong back," as Zen Buddhist teacher Joan Halifax says. But when it is someone that you know, that you love, all sides are soft. You will never be fully prepared. Ritual—some physical practice enmeshed with an idea or feeling—helps to acknowledge a transition, to mark reality, and steward a reclamation. I trust that it will be there when I need it.

Sitting next to you, I pick up *Rose: Poems* by Lee, and end the ritual by reading the poem "From Blossoms." The last stanza reads, "There are days we live as if death were nowhere / in the background; from joy / to joy to joy, from wing to wing, from blossom to blossom to impossible blossom, to sweet impossible blossom." Your body begins to wiggle as you wrestle out from under the sheet. You reach for me as I help to lift you up.

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Biography

Staci Bu Shea (Miami, 1988) is a curator, writer and death doula based in Utrecht, the Netherlands. Broadly, Bu Shea convenes with others over aesthetic, critical, and poetic practices of social reproduction and care work, as well as its manifestations in interpersonal relationships, daily life, community organizing, and institutional practice. Bu Shea's debut publication *Dying Livingly* is released in 2025 with Sternberg Press as part of the Solution Series edited by Ingo Niermann. Bu Shea was curator at Casco Art Institute of *Working for the Commons* (Utrecht, 2017–2022) and co-curator with Barbara Hammer of *Evidentiary Bodies* at Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art (New York, 2017). Bu Shea holds an MA from the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College (Annandale-on-Hudson, 2016). stacibushea.info / stacibushea.care

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PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

THE PERSON HOLDING THE PHONE: MOBILE PHONES AND MEDIATED GRIEF-WORK

NATALIA SÁNCHEZ-QUERUBÍN UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

In 2018, I attended my aunt's funeral virtually from my office in The Netherlands. The ceremony took place in the United States, where she lived. Like me, several of our relatives, scattered across Europe and Latin America, could not travel, including my grandfather, who was already over 90 years old. He said goodbye to his daughter through the Internet.

The church live-streamed the mass, showing the coffin, the guests in the front rows, and the podium from which the priest spoke. He acknowledged the remote viewers several times, thanking us for joining from home. I texted and shared photos with my brother, cousins, and parents throughout the ceremony, using our regular WhatsApp channels.

Five years later, my grandfather's life came to an end, and once again, digital communication played a crucial role in uniting distant relatives and friends. Nurses held a mobile phone to his ear when people living abroad called. I texted with my father constantly, and he shared photos of my grandfather in his final days, which are now stored on my phone and cloud service. The family arranged for the funerary mass to be accessible online. I joined from a distance, once again. After the live-stream stopped, being 'present' during the procession to the cemetery and the burial depended solely on the images and texts my brother, who was there, sent through his mobile phone.

In this paper, I revisit these events and draw inspiration from Bruno Latour's writings on actor-network theory to reflect on transnational families like mine and the integration of digital media into our death and grief experiences. I want to challenge the tendency to become overly fixated on the role of technologies such as messaging apps and mobile phones when discussing these experiences, often overlooking the human actors at the forefront: *the people holding the phone*. These individuals are on the ground, sharing images, ensuring that the camera is optimally positioned for the video call, sending the correct link to the streaming site, answering questions, and filling in the gaps (often at the expense of their own ability to fully engage) so that those of us who are physically distant can more fully partake in end-of-life and death rituals. The person holding the phone—in my experiences with mediated grief, this has been my brother—emerges as a novel and often underrecognized participant in the socio-technical assemblages that emerge around care and grief.

Reassembling family in times of grief

Actor-network theory explores the interplay between human and non-human entities, the groups (or assemblages) they form, and the ties that hold these groups together. The continuous performance of these ties defines and maintains the boundaries of what we call a group. Or, as Bruno Latour states, "there are no groups, only group formation" (2005, 27). To further explain this idea, Latour uses the analogy of a newspaper, where traces of group-making activity appear every few lines. One article, for example, might quote an anthropologist disputing distinctions between two ethnic groups, juxtaposed with a story about a CEO discussing corporate culture and an impending merger. Elsewhere, a summary of EU regulations might outline the policies that sustain economic ties. Each of these statements is surrounded by evidence supporting different perspectives and expert opinions. These are all traces of individuals and institutions navigating and negotiating their affiliations (and the affiliation of others) with various categories of being. In principle, "relating to one group or another is an ongoing process made up of uncertain, fragile, controversial, and ever-shifting ties" (2005, 28).

Latour's concepts of 'group' and 'assemblage' can also be applied to the experience of *being* a family. A simple dictionary definition might describe family as a unit composed of parents and children, often living together, or people with common ancestry. During my childhood in Colombia, these definitions sufficed for me. I lived with my parents and brother and had extended family nearby. I saw my grandparents and cousins weekly; my parents visited their siblings, and we vacationed together. Sharing the same physical spaces was part of 'doing' family.

However, the definition of 'family' is mutable and situated. Social aggregates, including families, if seen through Latour's writing, "are not the object of an ostensive definition—like mugs and cats and chairs that can be pointed at by the index finger—but only of a performative definition" (34). Migration has transformed how families like mine perform and maintain ties. A 30-minute drive was enough to see each other, but now most of my cousins and several aunts and uncles are based in Europe and North America. I, too, have lived in the Netherlands for over a decade. Moving beyond simple definitions—which I recognize have never applied to many people—I turn to

Latour's concepts to reflect on how geographical distance compels us to re-imagine what being and acting together means, especially in times of crisis and grief, when absence is felt most deeply.

A death in the family unsettles normalcy and initiates rituals, bureaucratic processes, and actions designed to help us cope. Death re-assembles human, posthumous, and non-human entities into new formations. Latour's hypothetical newspaper would also include obituaries, which are traces of a different kind of group-making. Announcements in newspapers and on social media inscribe death socially, with the length and detail of an obituary indicating perhaps something about their social status, resources, and community ties. Cann (2014) also notes new forms of inscriptions, such as memorial tattoos or roadside shrines marking the sites of fatal accidents. Mundane objects (e.g., photographs) become precious mementos after people pass, and labels such as 'orphans' and 'widows' are employed. Yet corporate bereavement policies might deny some people their belonging to such a group, as many only recognize parents, spouses, and children, thus having free time for bereavement becomes dependent on "one's status in society [...] one's relationship with the bereaved, and one's relationship with one's supervisor" (Cann 2014, 10).

In Colombia, Catholic funerary rites, including masses and burials, are central to how families manage death. According to Red Funeraria (redfuneraria.com), an information resource for professionals in the death industries and bereaved people, preparations begin with notifying the authorities and obtaining a death certificate. Simultaneously, communication with family and friends is essential. If the deceased had a burial plan, contacting the insurance office and selecting a funeral parlour are the next steps. The architecture of the parlour tells a story and becomes also an actor in the assemblage forming around a family death: close family members sit at the front, while acquaintances tend to occupy seats further back. The funeral director helps with decisions regarding the body, such as whether to have an open casket, a cremation, or a burial, and with finding flowers, planning speeches, and selecting music. Transportation to the cemetery should also be arranged and guests must observe proper etiquette. Mourners dress in subdued attire and wear black, with a Colombian etiquette expert advising against loud accessories and high heels and against posting about a person's death on social media, especially if you are not an immediate relative. Photographing the deceased is also considered impolite.

When families are geographically dispersed, rituals and protocols need to be adapted. Hybrid funerals, like my grandfather's, are held in person and streamed online. These events sometimes involve detailed planning. For example, *A Step-by-Step Guide to Support Funeral Directors Working with Families During Social Distancing* advises that when existing traditions need to be modified "technology actually opens up new opportunities to support your families in entirely new ways" (Live Web 360 2021, 4). The guide suggests creating a dedicated account on platforms like Zoom or Skype to have 'calling hours' for people to offer condolences virtually. Ideally, live-streamed events also include creative ways for helping the family feel the support of those absent from the room, such as having the officiant read statements or tie balloons to the backs of chairs with notes from people watching at home (Live Web 360, 2021, 35). Hybrid funerals, as I expand on in the following section, also involved personal rather than professional interventions, that respond to the needs of the moment.

Overall, for transnational families, integrating media into rituals may not be an anomaly but an extension of their performative practices. As Tanja Ahlin notes in *Calling Home* (2023), “in many countries, overseas and interstate migration has disrupted predictable rhythms of care, how care is defined, and the pathways of its delivery” (xi). For many, calling, video chatting, and texting are essential ways for caring for each other at a distance. In these transnational assemblages, “mobile phones, smartphones, and social media are much more than tools that passively channel communication. Rather, digital devices and online platforms participate in transnational care collectives as active members, shaping what care comes to mean and how it should be done to be considered good” (Ahlin 2023, 9). These hybrid rituals expand the range of actors (both human and non-human, such as WiFi, cameras, and mobile phones) and challenge traditional notions of attendance and participation.

In the following section, I reflect on my grandfather’s funeral by highlighting the role of a specific actor in the network: the person holding the phone after the official live-stream stops, acting as a lifeline for the people who participate remotely.

The people holding the phone

Unlike the meticulously planned hybrid funerals in *A Step-by-Step Guide to Support Funeral Directors*, my grandfather’s service only included a live-streamed mass. Watching it on my laptop allowed me to feel somewhat present. However, upon reflection, it was my brother and his mobile phone that truly made a difference in creating a sense of togetherness.

On that day, my foremost concern was for my father and his grief. I struggled with how to be *there* for him, given the physical distance between us. Normally, we would stand beside each other, holding hands and offering encouraging words. Yet, our physical separation rendered these gestures impossible. It became crucial that my father knew I was watching him online, following the events closely, and bearing witness to his emotions. When he stood on the church’s podium to deliver the speech we had prepared together the night before, I took screenshots and immediately sent them to my brother. It was my way of saying: I see you; I’m here. Throughout the ceremony, I messaged my brother via WhatsApp to share thoughts on the speeches delivered by other family members and the venue’s atmosphere. Once the church ceremony concluded and the live-stream stopped, my brother took it upon himself to share images and updates of the procession to the cemetery and the burial. I constantly asked him about my father’s well-being to ensure that they both understood I was still closely following the service. To an outsider, my brother might have appeared distracted, rudely texting during the ceremony, when in reality, he was acting as a lifeline. Taking photos might also seem to contradict the etiquette guidelines mentioned earlier.

My grandfather’s funeral was an assemblage of various (living and dead) human and non-human actors, including communication devices, data, and architectural elements, all interacting and exerting influence on each other. While accounting for actors, Latour distinguishes between intermediaries and mediators. The camera that streamed the mass, one could say, acted as an intermediary, transporting meaning or force without much transformation—like a window into the

church, defining its inputs was sufficient to explain its outputs. Conversely, my brother was a mediator. In Latour's theory, mediators transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or elements they are meant to convey—they *matter* differently. My brother's photos and texts enriched my understanding of the event, adding layers of interpretation and emotion for my benefit and allowing me to experience the funeral more profoundly. My brother was on that day—as he has been on so many other days—the actor who counted the most and made the greatest difference.

I'm not alone in these experiences. They resonate with broader trends observed in how transnational families manage end-of-life and death experiences and their evolving communication habits, in and beyond rituals like funerals (Sánchez-Querubín 2023; Baldassar 2014; Bravo 2017). These practices come from people repurposing everyday media devices and platforms, for example, when videoconferencing with ill relatives, caring for aging parents from a distance, or, indeed, attending a funeral virtually. Mediated grief practices also came to the forefront during the COVID-19 pandemic, when public gatherings, international travel, and hospital visits were severely limited (Alexis-Martin 2020), preventing families from being with their gravely ill and dying loved ones. In response, healthcare professionals harnessed technology and improvised ways to bridge the gaps between patients and their families.

For example, a Colombian newspaper reported on how nurses at a local hospital used their phones to facilitate calls with families just before a patient's intubation: "When they are conscious, we explain that they will be intubated and sedated until they recover, but we also talk about the risks: that the probability of recovery is 50%. That is scary, and many ask to speak with family members. Video calling was the only option" (Monsalve 2021, n.p.; translation is mine). A US newspaper also recounts the story of a nurse who spent two hours holding a tablet so that her patient's children and in-laws could bid their farewells and find solace in the knowledge that he was comforted during his last moments (Vanderbilt Health 2022). When one of our family members succumbed to COVID-19, a nurse also orchestrated a video call, affording my mother and others the opportunity to say goodbye. For each person who has been able to be present at a distance, someone on the ground is holding up the phone for them.

Uncertain content

I saved the texts and images exchanged during my grandfather's funeral. They are on my cloud storage and phone's photo gallery, alongside other digital content related to illness and death that has accumulated there over the years. For example, I have a video a friend shared of her father's funeral, a photo another friend sent of their parent in a coma, and images I took while visiting my mother in the hospital. Taking 'funeral selfies' has become somewhat common too, suggesting that they are "a means of reassurance when faced with the reality of death" (Guntarik 2022, 167).

These images and data have become a form of 'digital remains,' namely, "online content on dead users" (Lingel 2013, 191), and "digital traces that will remain even after we die" (Wright 2014; Maciel and Pereira 2013; Stokes 2012; Gach and Brubaker 2021). As time passes, I wonder what I'm

supposed to do with the digital objects I created and received during my grandfather's funeral. Should I print the images? Should I leave them on my devices until they become inaccessible and obsolete?

Using our phones to create and share images during times of sorrow seems to strengthen our social bonds; however, there is also uncertainty about how to put this content to rest, so to speak, and integrate it back into the world in ways that feel meaningful. Literature on earlier traditions, such as Victorian death photography, may ground contemporary practices in media histories, where "photographs were regularly taken of and with the deceased; the photographs were seen as keepsakes and special mementos to the family of the deceased" (Guntarik 2022, 165). Yet contemporary images and, more generally, our mobile devices feel uncertain and "can become haunted, digitally and materially" (Cumiskey and Hjorth 2017, 19). Images from my grandfather's funeral act now spectrally and 'count' also in the sense that my photo gallery automatically tags, classifies, and suggests them to me, making them retrievable. They also have an afterlife as data for the machine learning models and algorithms that power my photo gallery.

'Digital remains' may become objects of intense affect acting on people. For example, bereaved parents come to value previously unknown online photographs of their children "because they allowed [them] to learn something new about their child" (Widmaier 2023, 32). Mundane texts also hold significance: "It wasn't the profound or purposeful WhatsApp and text messages the people I interviewed found most comforting, but rather the everyday messages—such as 'I'm ringing the doorbell', 'speak later' and 'I'm with you in spirit'" (Bassett 2019, n.p.). People also keep texting to the mobile phones of their deceased loved ones while social media profiles evolve into digital memorials, living an afterlife within the web's vast machinery, where they also face issues of erasure and misuse. As Kneese notes, when it comes to the place of death in digital culture, there is plenty of tension "between platform ephemerality and digital persistence, and between short-term gains and long-term futures" (Kneese 2023, 14).

Today, memorialization, prayer, and observing anniversaries are usually considered 'healthy' ways of maintaining ties with the dead, but newer practices, such as sending a text message to a dead person's phone, remain more uncertain. How we may relate to the 'lively' digital remains of our loved ones is an open question. It sits at the centre of an emerging area of inquiry into how digital and networked media support death-work and rituals of passing, enabling forms of presence and participation with the human and non-human.

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Biography

Natalia Sánchez-Querubín, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of New Media and Digital Culture at the University of Amsterdam and a member of the Digital Methods Initiative. Her research explores the intersections of digital media and pressing social issues, with a particular focus on migration, health and end-of-life care, and transnational family dynamics.

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PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

HEALING THE WATERS

OMILEYE "OMI" ACHIKEOBI-LEWIS, DACM, MAOM, M.ED, LCMHC, LA.C
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*Figure 1: Memorial Heads, Kwame Akoto-Bamfo. Nkyinkyim Museum.
<https://nkyinkyimmuseum.org/>*

In this paper I put forward the African and Shamanic belief of the Daoist tradition that ancestors and their memory are real, passed on from generation to generation. This memory includes the traumatic memories of enslavement and post slavery.

This understanding becomes important in the field of trauma and grief healing, as the transmission of ancestral trauma and grief memory from one generation to another is not fully understood. This transmission and our understanding of it has wide implications for those of African descendants who have suffered from ancestral, historical and continuous trauma. And for all who have suffered harm to the body, mind, and spirit resulting from loss of land, home, culture, and torture in its many forms.

I present and examine the images of Kwame Akoto-Bamfo's Memorial Heads installed in water as a visual guide through this discussion. Understanding the transmission of ancestral trauma especially in relation to African descendants is like climbing the Mount Everest of the Trauma field. If this trauma can be understood more fully, recognition that such trauma exists can open the field of trauma to profound exciting ways on how to effectively shift these sort of trauma memories up and out of the memory of the waters of the body. Above all, we give dignity to those who suffer from ancestral traumas of this magnitude by acknowledging that their trauma is real.

African and Daoist Perspective

Before delving into the subject of transmission of ancestral trauma from generation to generation from an African and Shamanistic belief of Daoist tradition, I would like to help readers understand my methodology for delving into this topic in this way. My own trauma experience stemming from feeling strangely disconnected from the land in which I was born, England, from my experience of a series of repetitive dreams of being welcomed to Africa as though Africa was my "real home," and from often feeling the presence of my great, great grandmother during that whole period of my life, led me as a late teen to wonder what is this feeling of disconnection and sadness I feel, and what is this ancestral presence that I can feel but cannot see. The only explanation I ever received was from my mother, born in Jamaica, who would say, "you are a child of the ancestors." Her explanation piqued my imagination and pushed my self-inquiry further.

My interest led me to study African Studies with International Law and Politics at School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). My major was in African Spirituality. During my class on African Spirituality, I remember my mind often drifting into a land where there were drums playing and I would be dancing with others in the middle of a circle. Like my dreams it was a repetitive incident. Sometimes I did not know how long I had been daydreaming. Each time it happened, I felt shaken, the experience felt so real. It was through studying books such as John Mbiti's *Introduction to African Religions* (1975) that I began to realize I was having an ancestral experience. Mbiti calls ancestors Living Dead and refers to them as those who had died over just a few generations ago. He posits they are considered part of the family still, and will often show up in dreams, and visions with messages to aid the family or individuals' lives. During the course of this essay, I mostly refer to the

term ancestors, as it is the one that most readers are familiar with and that is still widely used within Africa and African diaspora communities.

It was my further studies in Clinical Mental Health Counseling and my subsequent trauma-focused counseling experience, that made me further realize that the sadness, aloneness, and feeling of not being Home I have felt and continue to feel is part of a common trauma response for those who are part of the African Diaspora, along with other black and brown bodied people who have experienced colonization. In the many experiential conversations I have had with those of the African Diaspora, and other colonized people, there is often a feeling that “something within me is calling me to return Home.” Especially among those who feel bereft of Home. Often, that something calling the individual Home is stated to be ancestors, and Home is often the place of ancestral origin. These conversations about returning Home and the ancestors calling the individual Home have led me even deeper in my journey to understand the generational ancestral trauma that black and brown bodied people carry, how it is communicated to us, who communicates it to us, and where in the body it lives.

After falling sick for almost a year, I was led into the field of acupuncture. Acupuncture made me feel better physically, but it also made me feel better emotionally. I was astonished because this is not an area of acupuncture that is often mentioned in the mainstream research papers on the practice. As if by some strange serendipity, I had a local acupuncture school just fifteen minutes from my home, rooted in Daoist traditional medical practices. The word Daoism meant nothing to me at the time, but as I delved into my studies, I became fascinated by the fact that Daoism is the oldest religious and medical practice in China, renowned for its Shamanistic ancestral and generational trauma healing treatments. The Eight Extraordinary Channels was the channel system treatment that gripped my imagination the most. Here was a channel that was the underground water reservoir of our bodies that held and could release all epigenetic traumas, generational gifts, and one’s destiny. It seemed too good to be true, until my personal clinical practice and application of this Channel treatment bore the claimed functions of this channel out to be true.

I felt an ancestral connection to Daoism because of its many unspoken connections to the African spiritual systems, such as that of the Yoruba. Familiar with the Yoruba divination system of Ifa, I became inquisitive about the Daoist I Ching’s uncanny similarity to it. The I Ching is the basis of the Chinese medical system and meridians. My many findings of the similarities between Daoism and African spiritual systems is best suited for another paper, but it is worth stating that I have often wondered if these seeming connections between Daoism and African spiritual systems means that I have the ancestral lived wisdom of both that rise and lived half submerged within the waters of my Eight Extraordinary Channels. As my husband put forward,

We make the mistake to disregard our progenitors. What they learned and what they practiced is in your DNA. When we talk of epigenetics we usually focus on the trauma, but there is a very useful part of epigenetics is the passing down of traditions and wisdom of the past. As a result, you are a living breathing evolving prodigy, of all I have been giving epigenetically, intellectually, and experientially.

The Ancestor in the Water

Kwame Akoto-Bamfo, multi-media sculptor, offered his artwork of African heads rising out of land and water as part of his African Project to honor the memory of enslaved Africans who suffered the horrors of slavery. The heads are installed on land in Ada Foah, a major slave market in the early nineteenth century that Kwame Akoto-Bamfo himself transformed into a museum. The idea of sculpting heads emerges from his Akan tradition of Ghana, where sculptured heads are made of the dead. The heads are known as Memorial Heads, *Nsodie*, carved upon the death of an individual as a form of commemorating their spirits, and becoming an object in which the spirit of the deceased may be invoked by their ancestors. The tradition of sculpting these heads began in the late-sixteenth century. These sculpted portraits were traditionally made of royalty.

The heads in the lake emerge ghost-like from shimmering water, each at a different level of submersion. The heads look in all directions with various expressions of astonishment, shock, and sadness. The central figure, with bandage wrapped around face, is emerging up out of the water while also looking into it with an expression of deep misery. In my eyes, the bandage speaks to the concept of woundedness and harm. When I see his eyes looking towards the waters, I wonder if he is seeking a way for the water to release him, but his sad expression speaks of a knowing that he is trapped.

I see Kwame Akoto-Bamfo's final cause to be that we really notice these figures, feel their pain, and then rescue them from the waters. When I look at the Memorial Heads, it appears they need our help, they need our honoring. By carving these heads as Memorial Heads, a form preserved for deceased royalty, the figures in the water, all in various states of degeneration, sorrow, and exasperation, call upon us to recognize them beyond their surface appearance toward the dignified people they are. The male figure in the middle has ascended out of the waters more than the others, and despite his wounded, dejected state, I see a person who appears to hold his body strong to denote "I am not this dejection, but I am dignity." Even though he has dignity, he is still trapped by the water, and the figures in the water appear to need the viewers' help to be released.

In the Akan tradition, the Memorial Heads are buried in a sacred area within the cemetery known as *Asensie*. At specific times of the year, the *Asensie* was the center of prayer and libation, ensuring the support of the ancestors. It is as though, if the viewer looking on at the Memorial Heads in their sacred cemetery of water indulges in some form of rescue, the figures will come out of the waters and fulfill a different role from that of captured Africans trapped within the water. Now they will perform the role of blessing those who pulled them out of those waters through their rescue efforts made through witnessing, acts of honoring, and in the case of these Memorial Heads physically pulling them out of the waters.

In the African tradition, ancestors retain a role in human affairs. They are tied to the welfare of the living and are part of the Kin group which is seen as comprised of the living and dead. They can bring good fortune and also misfortune to the living. Ezenweke's article (2008) reveals when the deceased die they are asked not to bring problems to those living relatives. They interact with the

living through dreams, visions, animals and other media. They live in a place that is unknown to the living. The ancestors can become angry when their instructions are not carried out, bestowing calamity on their descendants, and ancestors cannot be ancestors until their descendants do the proper honoring. If the proper honoring is not done, it is said they wander as ghosts (Ezenweke 2008, n.p.).

The viewers of the Memorial Heads are most frequently African diaspora descendants who descended from the figures in the water. Kwame Akoto-Bamfo modeled the Memorial Heads on the faces of Africans across Ghana and the African Diaspora. On viewing, honoring, and allowing our tears to fall into the waters where these Memorial Heads are installed, members of the African Diaspora help to end generational curses, pain, and negative familial issues that pass on from generation to generation. Many members of the African Diaspora from the Caribbean, United States, and Brazil, speak of family curses they have; many believe these curses come from generational trauma. I even ponder upon the one my own family members say they have. Does the curse come from not pulling the figures in the picture out of the waters and, by distinction, willfully or unconsciously neglecting them?

Viewer or Participant of Ancestral Trauma: What Water Teaches Us

The Memorial Heads remind me that I am not a viewer of the pain of the ancestral figures in the water, but a participant. This understanding is embodied within John Mbiti's declaration,

In traditional Africa, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. Whatever happens to the individual is believed to happen to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual [...] The individual can only say: 'I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.' This is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man. (Mbiti 1990, 101)

But this understanding is also memorialized in the African belief in water. In the Yoruba tradition, water is the most powerful medicine. It heals various conditions from infertility, lack of money, and emotional ails. If you pray into water and drink the water it will heal you. I look at the figure emerging out of the water with eyes cast towards it and reframe them not as a sign of defeat but as a sign of reverence to the power the water has to save him.

In Yoruba tradition, water is anthropomorphized as the Goddess Osun. Her characteristics and appellations include magnetism, birther of life, healer of nation, basis of all life form, healer of all, changer from solid to liquid to ethereal form. In an article from 2023 in *Nature*, Harrellson et al. reveals that there is no material more mysterious and unusual than water: "the character of many biological materials is actually created by the water that permeates these materials. Water gives rise to a solid and goes on to define the properties of that solid, all the while maintaining its liquid characteristics" (Harrellson et al. 2023, 500).

Ozgur Sahin, on whose research the paper is based, is clear: "When we take a walk in the woods, we think of the trees and plants around us as typical solids. This research shows that we should really think of those trees and plants as towers of water holding sugars and proteins in place. It's really water's world" (see Harrellson et al. 2023, 504).

The water the Memorial Heads rise and sink within is the same water that forms them, and holds their prayers, hopes, sorrows, pain, and memories.

The medium of water that the spirit of the Memorial Heads, stand, drown, and rise within are shared within my own body, as one of their descendants. I am like the tree that is not a tree but a water tower. I am the Memorial Heads, the figurines in the Water. I am like the characters standing under the pool of the exhibit in The 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa, Japan. The exhibit called Swimming Pool, created by Argentine artist Leandro Erlich, has been one of the museum's permanent exhibitions since 2004. The pool is not a pool filled with water. It is a mere optical illusion, achieved by layering two transparent sheets of glass at the top of the pool, and filling the space in between with about 4 inches of water. The audience can go under the pool, and, to those viewing from above, those below become mysteriously part of the water, no longer audience, but participant, figures *of* the water.

The figure of the enslaved African male staring deep into the waters speaks to me of a knowing of this fact.

In Classical Chinese Medicine, the water is, likewise, not just water; it is Mother. Like the Yoruba Goddess Osun, water is the great healer of all that ails. Water is our universal medium, all things are suspended within it and made of it.

Ancestral Memory and the Waters of the Eight Extraordinary Channels

In Daoism our body is made up of waterways known as the meridians. Most people are familiar with these waterways or have at least heard of meridians. However, most have not heard of the Eight Extraordinary Channels, which are the deepest water reservoirs of the body. They are also the oldest channels. There are Eight of these Channels and all of them hold epigenetic material, which in Daoism is monumental, connecting us to our sense of true identity and life lessons. The waterways originate from the Kidneys and form a matrix through the body consciousness. They contain within them unresolved ancestral and lineage pain. Every eight to seven years unresolved events of our lives are stored and surface from within these channels. The Eight Extraordinary Channels are also called Ancestral Channels which underscores their importance in terms of lineage and ancestral trauma healing.

The First Ancestry of the Eight Extraordinary Channels consist of the Chong Mai, Du Mai, and Ren Mai, and connect us to our life's Blue Print, and helps us to answer the existential questions of Who Am I? Why Am I here? Do I have a purpose? How is the "Who Am I" lovable and worthy of nourishment? In the view of Daoism, the Memorial Heads whose identities are submerged, half

and fully covered by the events of the transatlantic Slave Trade, can, by the miracle of water, have those questions answered by the waters they are trapped within. The same waters hold fast to and produce their identities: Who am I? How am I to unfold in the afterlife? How do I become remembered by my ancestors? How do I bestow my blessings onto them?

The Second Ancestry of the Eight Extraordinary Channels stores Heart Pains of our current and past experiences, which would include those experiences that go as far back as hundreds of years of enslavement. They consist of the Wei Mai vessels. The Third Ancestry breaks the chains of not being able to move forward. These channels are known as Qiao Miao, The Heal or Stepping Vessels.

Kwame Akoto-Bamfo had some of the Memorial Heads installed at Cape Coast Castle, a notorious slave dungeon complex. I did not see them, but I walked through the grounds, dragged myself through Slave Dungeons and participated in an ancestral release ceremony where an almighty scream, cry, and a world of grief flew out of my body, spun open its head and flew out of the room. The invisible presence of my ancestors was there, I could feel it and them. The Western trauma field has no explanation or even recognition of the lived ancestral grief and trauma that exist in my body as an African descendant. The beauty of Kwame Akoto-Bamfo's installments gives visual representation to that which is hidden deep in the underground reservoir water world of the Eight Extraordinary Channels, and that which is inside and lives within me, which is colossal, but unrecognized in the therapy room or world in which I exist.

In Shamanic worldviews and Daoist philosophy alike, trauma is understood as the Soul scattering. It is not just my soul, but the soul of those who live within me. The waters of the Eight Extraordinary Channel absorb these scattered pieces until the time comes to effectively deal with them. Epigenetic trauma continues to pass from original person to descendants. It continues until it is resolved. In Daoism, this emotional spiritual material can leak to the surface when current events in life trigger it or, in African traditions, when the dead are no longer happy at it being ignored. Because of the African tradition of ancestralization of the Living Dead, it is important to have this type of trauma acknowledged and effectively helped. When the dead within do not become ancestralized they become the Gui, ghost, that haunt the deceased. Kwame Akoto-Bamfo Memorial Head emerging out of the water with eyes cast downward, and slightly covered by a dirtied cloth, in my eyes, recognizes that the enslavement process is scattering his soul and yet wills the scattered pieces to be absorbed by the waters, which will then become the medium through which those pieces become the substrate of libation and through which his descendants will restore him. His peace may come from the African knowing his voice as it calls for attention in dreams, and through life events that will travel through the waters and catch their attention. Sound moves at a faster speed in water (1500 meters/sec) than in air (about 340 meters/sec). His voice will be heard.

Time, Space, Waters, and Memory

In Daoist tradition, the Eight Extraordinary Channels are the weavers of events that we have passed on from past to present. The Second Ancestry of the Eight Extraordinary Channels comprises the Wei Mai Channels. The character of Wei—偉—has two parts. For the purpose of this discussion, it

is the left side I would like to mention. It is a thread of silk, reminiscent of a net, a network, and the ability to link or bind something. The character Wei also means “tie, to hold fast; to attach with a rope, or to hold in a great net. The great net has a very firm and solid main string, which attaches all the smaller parts of the net” (Larre et al. 2015 [1996], 187). I believe that this net is the stream of ancestral consciousness that exists in/as the waters and holds ancestor and descendant memory together. The net that binds, in regard to the Eight Extraordinary Wei Mai channels, is also the trauma that has passed on from generation to generation.

In Daoism, the Wei symbolize and actualize time as a continuous stream-like thread of consciousness. This continuous thread of space, time, and consciousness is recognized within African society as Hantu.

The African (Bantu) speak of Han-Ntu, which is the concept of space-time. They use this expression to mean that space and time come together; they merge to form one mass of time and space fused into a single continuum. The Bantu concept of space-time, as one entity, has been around for a millennium, even before its discovery in the Western world. (Lokanga 2021, 8)

In “The Concept of Space and Time: An African Perspective,” Ediho Lokanga posits that “Africans have a holistic, whole, conceptual view of space and time and believe that we are all interconnected, an idea which is similar to the holographic universe theory.” This view of space and time may “connect our sense of wholeness” (5). In Bantu,

[the concept of] space and time is [channeled] through the knowledge of consciousness. They [the Bantu] insist on the paramount role of consciousness as the source of everything, the fundamental entity. During sleep, our sleeping consciousness can move freely in a spaceless and timeless universe. There is, in a sense, no such thing as space or time, and we live in a spaceless and timeless universe. (8)

The Western concept of time and space has colonized all areas of our existence including the trauma field. To share Ediho Lokanga’s research again, the Western concept of time and space is where the “past is the past, and the present is the present.” Time and space are “linear and sequential,” and consciousness has no fundamental recognizable place. This differs from the African Knowledge System of time and space where, “The past, present, and future are intertwined” and “under certain conditions, the past enters the present and future,” and “consciousness is fundamental” (7).

The two varying views of time, space, and consciousness have a profound impact on how we recognize ancestral trauma which passes from one generation to another, especially in the case of the monumental ancestral pain of African descendants. Which time we choose colors the solutions we offer or don’t offer to shift and release the pain, and even determines whether we give dignity to it or don’t. The time we choose further affects how we view the concept that the pain we see and sense is in any way, shape, or form connected to that of the individual’s ancestors and lineage of suffering. The white and even black therapist trained in the Western therapeutic paradigm will

often tend to mislabel their African-descended client's condition within a framework that pathologizes the client and strips them of dignity, not to mention prevents them from healing. That paradigm gives wrong labels such as schizo-affective, bi-polar, ADHD, anxiety disorder, and more. Followed by wrong solutions.

Therefore, we need a radical shift in how we deal therapeutically with the trauma of African descendants who occupy the pinnacle of the epigenetic trauma mountain that has grown higher and wider over four hundred years of enslavement and continuous racialized traumatization. Our new approach will then help descendants of Native Americans and others who have suffered from epigenetic ancestral trauma. The trauma memories are not in broken brains, but in the memories of our body's waters, which Dr. Jennifer Muller, author of *De-Colonize Therapy*, refers to as "amniotic memory" in reference to water as memory keeper. Her full statement is worth sharing: "I believe our bodies and amniotic memories know memories way before us, [they] are just like purging, and sick." These ancient African and Shamanistic beliefs are echoed in the words of Credo Mutwa, South African Zulu Wisdom Keeper. When I interviewed him years ago, I asked how we are to heal the ails of the world. He responded, "when there is a deep issue, that seems insurmountable in the community, we go to the waters, and we call on the water mother who lies on a bed of water, and we pray to her for healing. She answers our prayers. She is the only one who can answer them in dire times. She is the only one who can solve the issue."

Rescue from Within the Waters

Somatic Experiencing is a mode of therapy first conceptualized by Peter Levine in the 1970s and that is now considered a leading-edge therapy in the field of trauma and healing PTSD. Somatic Experiencing focuses on how traumatic symptoms and emotions express themselves in the body. It views the key to healing traumatic symptoms as existing within our physiology. Peter Levine developed Somatic Experiencing from his observation on how animals in the wild recover from the traumatic experience of being attacked by a predator. When an animal like an impala is attacked by a cheetah, it tends to fall into a state of altered consciousness, as though it is dead. It is a state known as "immobility" and "freezing."

Peter Levine puts forward three primary responses that occurs when a mammal is attacked: fight, flight, and freeze. He posits that of all the responses the immobility response is the most important in uncovering what he calls "the mystery of human trauma." The Impala's state of immobility is a survival strategy. If a Cheetah drags the Impala to its den as food for later, the Impala can awaken from its immobilized state, and escape. Out of danger it will shake, release the trauma, and regain full control of its bodily functions. In the state of immobility, no pain is felt, which means if the Cheetah decides to eat it, it will not feel the pain of teeth sinking into flesh and being torn to pieces (1997, 33).

The ability to become immobilized during a traumatic event, as proposed by Peter Levine, is the key to avoiding the dire effects of trauma. Both animals and humans use the involuntary immobilization response when faced with a threat that feels overwhelming or inescapable. The

Instinctual aspects of the brain and the nervous system beget this immobilization. The key to healing trauma for humans in Peter Levine's Somatic Experiencing model is to mimic the impala and other animals as they shake through and out of the immobilization state.

For the Impala and other animals facing danger the instinct to become immobilized is natural as is the shake through their trauma. However, Peter Levine concludes that this is not so for humans whose brains override their natural, instinctual impulse. We may freeze in fear but fail to move to the other stage of resolving the freeze by moving and shaking it off.

In Western therapeutic language, trauma is the distressing response or group of responses to stressful events that exist outside of our normal human experience. For Levine, this definition is vague. What is outside of the range of the usual human experience? (1997, 24).¹ Levine declares that we don't need a definition of trauma; rather, we need an "experiential sense of how it feels." Traumatic symptoms are caused by frozen residues of energy that remain trapped in the nervous system and that have not been resolved or discharged. Unlike us, animals tend to discharge all their trapped energy, and therefore do not develop traumatic symptoms from life threatening events. We need to regain this ability (1997, 20).

When we go back to Kwame Akoto-Bamfo Memorial Heads in the water in various states of submersion, I postulate if at the original time of experiencing the traumatic event of being enslaved they had been able to move through the energy trapped in their nervous system, they would be free and there would be no trauma. However, we can see those Memorial Heads are trapped in the waters. They can not move through their experience. Cape Coast Slave Castle guide shared, "the men's punishment dungeon was designed with no windows, and two double doors that closed. The enslaved men who were sent there were being punished for resisting their enslavement. They were put there as a warning to any other men trying to escape or resist. Once the door closed, they received no food or air. The door was opened three days later, and all the men would be dead." The extra fortified design of the Cape Coast Slave Castle, is symbolic of the structures of the enslavement process, designed so very few could escape. The lucky few threw themselves into the ocean when the slave ships crossed the Atlantic. Their freedom was in the waters.

For those who were trapped, where does the monumental pain, sorrow, disbelief, and disgust go? As stated earlier, in Daoism it goes into the water reservoirs of the body, the Eight Extraordinary Channels, and is passed on from generation to generation. The Eight Extraordinary Channels stores unresolved trauma memory until the right time and the space is available to make it safely accessible to be released. The storing of trauma in this way allowed the enslaved African trapped in their circumstances to function.

The epistemology of the Eight Extraordinary Channels first appears in the oldest two medical books of Classical Chinese medicine (also referred to as Daoism), the *Su Wen* and *Ling Shu* of the Han Dynasty, 202 BC. This way of knowing, its theory, clinical practice, wisdom, practical application, and effectiveness, has been well documented through several dynasties, including the Han, Yuan dynasty of 1196 AD, the Ming Dynasty of 1368, and then on into current times.

As in Somatic Experiencing, there is a shaking that occurs with this healing to help release the generational trauma experience. But it is not the shaking of the body; it is the shaking and vibrating of the needle. The Daoist practitioner with the intention of implementing the Eight Extraordinary treatment determines the treatment strategy through discussion with the client, clinical intake, and pulse taking. The presence of the vibrating pulse is a strong indicator that the Eight Extraordinary Channels would be appropriate for use and also points toward and which channel is most ideal to treat. When the vibrating pulse is not present, the client's story may still indicate the appropriateness of treating the Eight Extraordinary Channels.

Once the Eight Extraordinary Channel has been indicated, the practitioner will typically use the opening and closing points of the chosen channel, which act as gate openers to the Channel and allow for the release of unresolved generational trauma. (Further points along the Channel may be utilized.) When the treatment begins, the client lies on the bed, and the practitioner begins the insertion of the needles. The needle technique is to vibrate the needle, to send a message to the body that the Eight Extraordinary treatment has begun, to match the energetic rhythm of the deep underwater reservoirs of the body, and to let the body know it is safe and can release damaging traumatic generational material. The treatment is administered over a period of three months, once per week, though one week of each month passes over the treatment. Daoist acupuncture students are trained to also know how to administer these treatments with no needles and, instead, to use the energetics of healing items such as essential oils and medicinal stones.

I witnessed the effective application and results of the Eight Extraordinary Channel treatments for those of African and African descent suffering from generational trauma when I organized a free pilot program, *Acupuncture for Diverse Moms and Children*, as an acupuncture student intern at the Daoist Traditions College Student Acupuncture Clinic. The program consisted of up to ten women, with one African woman, eight African-American moms, and one Asian-American mom. Eight women reported they were suffering from generational trauma with various levels of physical, emotional and life suffering. I asked each client to fill in a survey after each treatment. After the first treatment, ninety percent of the women reported a fifty percent improvement in physical and emotional conditions. By the second treatment the percentage of improvement had increased to seventy percent. Most of the women only received some Eight Extraordinary treatments as their sessions were not as long as others. In the clinic room, I witnessed the reduction of many women's generational psycho-physical-emotional trauma symptoms such as stomach pains, neck stiffness, back aches, insomnia, depression, negative thought patterns and behaviors. It was common during and after treatment to hear the women say, "I feel like a load has been lifted of me;" "I feel lighter;" "I feel more hopeful;" "my heart feels at ease;" "I feel ready to live more fully."

Centuries of usage up to current times has revealed the Eight Extraordinary Channel treatments to be successful at releasing the generational trauma material, including that of the African diaspora and other BIPOC people, and those who have suffered from various forms of colonial oppression.

I posit that Somatic Experiencing cannot effectively help release generational trauma, such as the juggernaut of Diaspora generational trauma, which is contained within the waters of the body. By the very definition of Somatic Experiencing, it helps the individual move through and complete a nervous system response of real or perceived threat. In terms of the Africa Diaspora, Somatic Experiencing can help regulate the nerves that jangle, jar, freeze, and spin from the ongoing racial experiencing. It can even help with the jangling of nerves from generational trauma, but it cannot heal generational trauma. This is also true for the cognitive based therapies such as Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) and Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing therapy (EMDR), which believe trauma is connected to how we store information in the brain. These therapies have merit, but they cannot heal the Memorial Heads who find themselves trapped in the waters. Water is what traps them, but in the true tradition of the African and Daoist belief system, water is what can liberate them.

Peter Levine himself set himself apart from therapists that only viewed trauma as psychological. His more than twenty-five years of work taught him that trauma is also physiological and led him to state, “until we understand that traumatic symptoms are physiological as well as psychological, we will be woefully inadequate in our attempts to heal them” (1997, 32). I would like to repeat the same sentence by adding, “until we understand that generational trauma symptoms are in the waters, as well as physiological, and psychological, we will be woefully inadequate in our attempts to heal them.” Peter Levine also states that unresolved trauma can keep us in an “ever tightening circle of dangerous re-enactment, victimization, and unwise exposure to the danger. We become perpetual victims or therapy clients.” He feels the “solution to the problem lies in increasing our knowledge about how to heal trauma” (32). Agreed. In this discussion I share an expanded paradigm on how to heal trauma, one that has been passed on through the generations. I am hoping that the male Memorial Head half sinking and half rising in the water knows I have heard his voice, and secret message uttered low beneath his breath, that his healing is in the waters.

Ritual and Ancestral Healing

As I gaze some more upon the image of the male Memorial Head sinking and rising out of the waters, with eyes looking downward, I know through the ritual enactment in the male slave dungeon of Cape Coast that he and those other ancestors half sinking and emerging out of the waters with him could see me and the other three people present for the ceremony. We have already established the African world view on space and time as being interconnected with the presence of consciousness.

Our ceremonial guide placed a finely carved wooden boat in the middle of the male dungeon floor. In the boat sat a carefully crafted female figure steering the boat. He called her, “lady of the light.” He revealed that she was steering those Africans who had been captured and enslaved across the waters and back to safety. She was their rescuer, liberator, and guide. Next to the boat he placed an implement of chained stones. The stones were medium sized with holes in the middle, they were bound together by metal links that looked like the chains made of solid iron with a simple twist lock that had been used to restrain the feet or ankles of slaves. Placed by the boat and chained

stones was a calabash, otherwise known as a gourd in America, filled with water. The water represented that which holds our memory and was a medium of our messages.

The air was deathly silent as our ceremonial guide spent time to arrange everything in the right order and direction. Once everything was ready, he explained that when we participate in the ceremony, we are acknowledging our ancestors who were carried across the North Atlantic Ocean through the transatlantic slave trade. One by one we would each come forward to the center and offer a prayer into the water and cut the chain for at least two of the bound stones. We would each hold onto our released stones and cut chains until we had all finished, and then we would put everything into the ocean, representing the liberation of our enslaved ancestors and Self. The lady of the boat will guide the whole process. The final touch would be the vibration of drumming, which would penetrate air, earth, and the waters of the Eight Extraordinary Channels.

As we each went forward to do our prayer, a different bodily experience occurred. I cried, my husband stared numbly into the air and played the drums, our ceremonial guide started to quietly shake. Whatever occurred, we directed our prayers and release into the waters. In that moment the chains connecting the stones felt like the heavy iron chains that connected enslaved African to enslaved African, and the boat seemed like a big ship, and the lady rowing the boat appeared to be a true savior. Afterwards, we each reported we felt the presence of the ancestors, something released from our body, and a feeling of deep peace settled upon us.

Were our ceremonial experiences fantasy or imagination? Julian Scot puts forward,

Fantasy, no; imagination, yes. For imagination is the capacity to symbolize and to connect with what the symbol (image) represents – its Being. The sun in this world represents another sun in the invisible world: God or the Great Spirit.” He further reminds us, “A ritual or ceremony is a re-enactment of the creation of the world, an opportunity to connect with the creative forces of the origins and so to begin again, to regenerate oneself and to emerge renewed. An example of this is the rite of baptism, which is to be immersed in the primordial waters, to suffer the Deluge and to re-emerge on the primordial mound of a new creation. (Scott 2020, n.p.)

And what of the ritual objects used? Again, Scott helps us to understand that in ceremony, “ritual, material elements play an important part. They are the vehicles through which the invisible can become manifest and the consciousness can ascend to a more exalted state than its usual mundane condition” (Ibid.).

Our ceremonial host finished the ceremony by guiding us to the ocean that had carried the many boats of the transatlantic slave trade across its broken body and became the water burial site for thousands of unnamed ancestors who believed that throwing themselves into the water was their final liberation. Such was the case of the seventy enslaved Igbo people of Nigeria who walked into the marshy waters of Dunbar Creek and committed mass suicide. Locals say those marshy waters are haunted by the souls of those who died in them (Momodu 2016, n.p.).

Conclusion

In conclusion, I posit that ancestral lineage harm, trauma, and grief is real. It is passed on from generation to generation through the memory of water. Until the pain is resolved it continues haunting its descendants and doing harm. The pain is connected to the ancestors, who in African tradition are seen as members of the family who bless but can also cause disturbances in the mind, body, and spirit if unhappy. Acknowledging this African and Daoist concept of trauma can help us understand more fully how to heal the elephant standing on top of the highest mountain of trauma and in our deepest waterways, thereby allowing a transformation and expansion of how the therapy fields deal with the trauma of those whose ancestors faced enslavement and colonization. I believe that the Daoist Eight Extraordinary Channel treatments can play a fundamental role in the epigenetic trauma healing field, as they have the ability to release generational and ancestral trauma material from the waters which harbors it.

Notes

¹ The Somatic Experiencing website describes the modality in this way: "Somatic Experiencing (SE™) aims to resolve symptoms of stress, shock, and trauma that accumulate in our bodies. When we are stuck in patterns of fight, flight, or freeze, SE helps us release, recover, and become more resilient. [...] The SE approach releases traumatic shock, which is key to transforming PTSD and the wounds of emotional and early developmental attachment trauma. It offers a framework to assess where a person is 'stuck' in the fight, flight or freeze responses and provides clinical tools to resolve these fixated physiological states" (Somatic Experiencing International).

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Biography

Dr. Omileye Achikeobi-Lewis is a former graduate student of London University School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) where she studied African Studies and International Politics. At SOAS she fell in love with studying ancient healing practices. She deepened her studies of trauma healing as a student of Winthrop University Counseling and Development program, and eventually began to hone her knowledge of how to shift ancestral trauma while studying Classical Chinese Medicine as a doctorate student at The Daoist Traditions College of Chinese Medical Arts. She has spent many years of her life following what she now calls the Black Trauma Trail, and an intensive year in Ghana understanding what she calls the Mount Everest of ancestral trauma caused by the transatlantic Slave Trade. She is the author and illustrator of *My Heart Flies Open* published by North Atlantic Books, distributed by Penguin Random House, and is currently working on her next book, *The Stories in the Blood: Alchemy of Healing the Ancestral Trauma Body*. Dr. Omileye has a deep belief that the ecology of our Earth and Waters is affected by the lineage wounds we carry collectively. When we heal, the waters and Earth heals too.

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PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

D.E.A.D.¹ LINE

STËFΔ/V SCHÄFER AMSTERDAM UNIVERSITY OF THE ARTS

From a designer's background with a performative approach in a mountain environment, what could mountains want to tell us about life and death, within the context of (future) ecological grief?



🎥 zipped open, ripped apart" hochvogel, all over print jacket, stëfΔ/V schäfer, 2024.
Watch: <https://vimeo.com/1060526333>

Introduction

The last few years, the so-called “glacier funerals” phenomenon has appeared and spread globally with the most famous one happening in Iceland (Ok-glacier) in August 2019, followed by, amongst others, funerals in Switzerland (Piezol glacier), Mexico (Ayoloco glacier) and the United States (Clark glacier). The funeral is one way to cope with ecological grief, an emotional response to the (future) impact of so-called anthropogenic climate change. The funerals differ in execution, but they remain rituals usually performed for humans and are “projected” onto glacial beings. This works powerfully for creating awareness of glacier loss and climate change as such. The declared deaths of the glaciers are defined as the loss of the status as a glacier by scientists and are measurable. In this article, I am in search of a way to merge rituals *with* mountains and glaciers as collaborators, motivated by a rather personal, partly autobiographic, artistic, and poetic approach, which leads to a better understanding of caring for a mountain and a glacier while also bridging the gap between abstract measurable knowledge and a public so as to make the impact of anthropogenic climate collapse sensible. I am interested in how rituals can emerge in collaboration *with* the mountain or glacier by spending time with them, attending to them in a way not measured by human/general Western standards of seeing, but, rather, to sense them as glacial mountain beings, living beings, moving beings. Towards the end of this article, I will put emphasis on “rituals which operate at a subjective level of transformation” (Pitches 2020) based on my own personal (future) mountain hikes. This article operates then as a soft guideline for how to approach a mountain in order to let emerge (a) ritual(s) together with, in my case, the slowly breaking apart Hochvogel mountain, which I visited in the Summer of 2024. The action take(s) into account that mountain rituals “contribute to and are provoked by the characteristics of mountainscapes: remoteness, danger, prominence, sacredness, local devotion” (Pitches 2020).

Pre-views on mountains

When you ascend a mountain, your view on them changes constantly: from the moment of first sight in the distance, when they slowly step out of the horizon, unmerging; then nearing, until you arrive at their foot. Then, with every altitude difference, until you reach the summit, your view keeps on changing. You move your own body on, in, through, and with the body of the mountain. While standing still, you can zoom in on details or zoom out to view the surroundings, perhaps sharing the view with the mountain for a bit. The same applies when you are at the summit. Then, descent, back to their foot, and finally leaving the mountain behind until it merges back into the horizon from your perspective, or until you merge back into the horizon from the mountain's perspective.

Since I started my Professional Doctorate² on working with dying mountains and dead glaciers in relation to anthropogenic climate change in May 2023, my views on mountains and glaciers have changed constantly. But it has also changed, and added to my views on, life, death, (ecological) grief, mourning, end-of-life care, and what mountains and glaciers could mean in relation to them. In addition, ideas of relationality, co-existence, interdependency, ritual, speculative design, the so-

called Anthropocene, and anthropogenic climate change³ appear differently at this point, at various distances. It feels like hiking towards and through mountainous and glacial bodies, zooming in and out. In this text I will use this idea of hiking as a format and a method for writing with, (literally) on, in, and through mountainous and glacial bodies.

My research started from a fascination and admiration for mountains and glaciers, and a curiosity of what “death” and “dying” could mean in relation to them. I quickly recognized that my perspective and thinking in relation of the two terms has been quite Western and even taken for granted in terms of “they are dying, thus disappearing,” “dead, thus gone.” But who declares a glacier or a mountain dying or dead? Is it losing a status of being a mountain that is defined by a certain height?

Hochvogel



View of the gap, from the gap, at the top of the Hochvogel Mountain, stëfΔ/V schäfer, 2019.

In the summer of 2019, I visited the dying Hochvogel mountain for a field trip. This mountain is breaking apart due to its type of rock combined with an increasing amount of heavy rain events caused by anthropogenic climate change. A growing crack is splitting it in half at the border between Austria and Germany. The peak was and is still held together by wires and monitored by several measuring devices. The scene resembled a palliative care setting. This perception might have been inspired by a documentary on this mountain on German TV in 2018. One person working on and around the Hochvogel described her work as “end of life care for the mountain.” This was the starting point for my trip.



Trying to catch the heartbeat of a dying mountain, stëfΔ/V schäfer, 2019.

Now I know that the devices belong to the Technische Universität München, Lehrstuhl für Hangbewegungen (TUM School of Engineering and Design, chair of hillside movement) and are measuring the mountain's movement. The increasing crack moves at this point 1mm per week, according to geologist and leading professor Michael Krautblatter. Measurements include seismic measurements, UAV-surveys, dGNSS, Ultracam, Sentinel automatic geotechnical, geodesy, and photogrammetry and are now part of

a three year test project called AlpSenseRely, a three-year reliability and potential study in 4 Alpine regions (Bavaria, Tyrol, Salzburg and South Tyrol) on highly available remote sensing-based early warning systems for natural hazards in Alpine areas that are particularly sensitive to climate change. AlpSense makes an important contribution to risk reduction and, due to its preventive nature, to reducing the costs of climate-related natural hazards. (Lehrstuhl für Hangbewegungen, n.d.)

The purpose is clear: safety for the people in the community of Hinterhornbach, on the Austrian side of the border, to ensure they can be evacuated in time. Data-driven control about the mountain foresees its moment of breakage. The dying mountain is a case study. This all sounds very clinical and distant; and, of course, this is scientific knowledge, analysis, calculation. But is the “most iconic” mountain in this region not also more than this? The Hochvogel appears to be seen as merely inanimate matter. There is a sort of maintenance of the mountains, being held together by wires to slow down the landslide, from a scientific point of view.⁴ What about the mountain itself? The vegetation? Animals?



Warning sign at the Hochvogel Mountain, stëfΔ/V schäfer, 2019

Care can be seen as an expression of reverence, gratitude and “love” of the mountain. These ideas derive from Indigenous ways of life and thinking that I encountered through a conversation between performance artist Amanda Piña and ethnologist Alessandro Questa about the Chignamazatl,

located in the Northern Highlands of Puebla, Mexico. The Chignamazatl Mountain has been revered and embodied by Masewal populations, Nahuatl speaking, for 4.000 years. [...] We are there benefiting from the rain, from the earth, of animals and plants, but we are not the lords and masters nor the divine heirs of any place. We are simply the ones who benefit a little from it all, as long as we keep offering

and giving them maintenance, thanking them, asking them, and making visible all these forms of interdependence. So it's a model of humanity and environmental relationship model. That takes thousands of years of success that is not gratuitous. And we have to learn from it. (Piña and Questa 2021)

The Masewal populations live in and with the mountains in close relation on a daily basis. The Hochvogel by contrast is rather isolated. The closest community is Hinterhornbach with around 87 inhabitants, none who live on the mountain but close to it. They are apparently far enough away to not suffer from landslides directly, although depending on certain weather circumstances, the rocks might actually reach the village, according to Hochblatter.

On the German side, there is the mountain shelter Prinz-Luitpold-Haus (1846 m altitude 2,8 km away from the Hochvogel with 2592m altitude): a hut and a hub, where mountaineers and hikers can rent a bed in a shared group room and get food. The ice-cold water comes directly from the inflow of the lake behind the hut. Usually, people stay for a night to continue a bigger tour through the Allgäu that can take several days. The hut operates as a hub for short time stays. Most of the people I spoke to there when I arrived in the evening planned their visits to the Hochvogel very early the next morning, as did I. Their relations with the Hochvogel were of course different from somebody living with the mountain daily. But nobody described the mountain merely as inanimate "material," rather as a friend or companion. A sportive couple who almost ran to the top described a feeling of security when they arrived. This feeling came through a combination of the view towards the mountain's upper shape from below: shoulders and arms opening for a gentle beckoning or an invitation for a hug. Its top appearing as if it is bowing for a greeting, welcoming, and when arriving at the top itself, the mountain shows you a 360-degree panorama view of surrounding mountains and valleys. A group of young people in their mid-twenties enthusiastically held a picnic close to the crack, each pouring a bit of the white wine they brought up there, to greet the mountain. Apparently, they come here often, to visit and say "hello", as they said, and they mentioned small changes like traces in the ice, shrinking of the ice, newly arranged stone-piles on their way up. One person I met said he wanted to "meet the mountain in real life, as it breaks apart and he had seen it on photos only" (author's fieldnotes). The general visitors are there temporarily, but they are devoted to the mountain even when the mountain itself is remote and quite dangerous due to its condition. The temporality and devotion of the visitor, and the remoteness and danger of the mountain, are aspects to take into account for the emerging mountain ritual at the Hochvogel.

When I came back from my Hochvogel visit, I met a friend, Icelandic artist Styrmir Örn Guðmundsson who knew about my trip. He told me in Iceland they just held a funeral for their deceased glacier Ok, which I might find interesting, and I sure did. News about this funeral had spread across the globe. What I mostly came across was the "before-after" slider, "an easy (online) tool to compare two frames" called juxtaposeJS by Knight Lab, a community of designers, developers, students and educators of the Northwestern University in Illinois, US (Knight Lab n.d.; Duner 2014). The slider works as follows: Two images are layered on top of each other. A vertical bar with arrowpoints directing left and right is placed on top. With your cursor you can drag this

bar left and right and it reveals the image atop/below. In the case of Ok-glacier, one image was a satellite image of the glacier taken in 1986 and the other one in 2019. By moving the cursor and thus the bar left and right, you could see the glacier's shrinking in this period. In relation to (a Western view of) death's representation, this movement from right to left reminded me of the movement of death as the grim reaper, swinging its scythe, mowing down the living, with the difference that the juxtaposed movement could be done back and forth on the same image/position, a loop. Although I had never been to Iceland, I felt sorry for the glacier. A similar feeling to when I visited the Hochvogel mountain. I decided to make a memorial shirt for the glacier including the idea of the juxtapose tool. I found this medium suitable, as memorial shirts "have the ability to act as conversation pieces, which is one of the essential functions of the memorial T-Shirt—to allow death to enter the conversation" (Cann 2014). In addition, this shirt lets death enter the conversation on climate collapse. The conversation piece is a medium typical for speculative design, which "anticipates a reality, and uses that as a critical device" (van der Velden 2010). In addition, and contrary to the common idea of the designer as problem solver providing short-term solutions, speculative designers "imagine and visualize future scenarios that do not produce new products [...], but act as discussion pieces to help long-term strategic decision-making" (Pater 2021).



Ok<|>jökull Memorial Shirt, stëfΔ/V schäfer, 2019

The shirts are self-initiated and without any funding, but I got the chance to exhibit them at Museum de Fundatie in Zwolle during the group exhibition “Van Wie is de Wereld?” (Whose is the World?) in 2021. Instead of having the shirts as conversation pieces, hanging on the wall, we agreed that they would be worn by the museum staff who wanted to, in order to start a discussion with the audience. The staff had been given some information, but mainly it was about their personal relation to the topic. In the end there was a fruitful exchange on climate collapse, death, and disappearing glaciers, as I was told after the exhibition ended.



Ok<|>ökull Memorial Shirt worn by two staff members at Museum de Fundatie Zwolle, stëfΔ/V schäfer, 2019.

I figured out the feeling I had when visiting the Hochvogel mountain and hearing about the glacier, and apparently others had this feeling as well, which is coined as ecological grief, and glacier funerals are one way to cope with it.

Ecological grief

Ecological grief is an emotional response to the devastating impact of human-caused climate change, “including the loss of species, ecosystems, and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change” (Cunsolo and Ellis 2018). Grief here is associated with physical, ecological loss (species, landscapes), with the loss of environmental knowledge (farmers’ local seasonal knowledge), or with anticipated future losses (future culture, livelihood, way of life) (Ibid.). Generally, grief and loss is associated with human losses, while more-than-human “losses are traditionally seen as outside the realm of the grievable” (Craps 2020). Instead, the circle of the grievable should be expanded and include more-than-human beings in order to “disrupt the dominance of human bodies as the only mournable subjects” (Cunsolo and Landman 2017). While Judith Butler wrote that some lives are more “grievable” than others, ‘grievability’ remains predominantly a privilege for humans. One reason might be that Western cultures are mainly “treating the planet and nonhuman beings as inanimate matter” (Craps 2023). As Lisa Sideris observes, there is “a kind of defensive humanist posture that privileges human civilization and seeks to insulate it, to fortify it, against the shocks of climate change and related disasters. Wittingly or not, this defensive stance implicitly renders Earth and nonhuman beings as something less than animate and living, and in doing so, disavows nonhuman nature as truly mournable” (Sideris 2020). It is about ways of care. We mourn what we care about: other humans, pets, flora, fauna and mountains and glaciers. An example is given in an interview between artist Amanda Piña and feminist glaciologist M. Jackson:

One person I worked with [...] would drive hours and hours twice a year to visit their glacier, update the glacier, how is he doing? Update the glacier about what was happening in their lives. Found the sense of livingness, mentality that ice could have a relationship with you and vice versa. Brought a sense of care, when we know each other, we care for one another. When we make friends, when we marry [...] we extend our circle of care. (Piña and Jackson 2021)

Having a relation with means to care.

Glacier Funerals

Glacier funerals provide one way to counter views of mountains as nonliving and even encourage action. “Glacier funerals expose and counter this striking omission, calling on us to go beyond approaches to mourning that privilege human bodies. They dramatically scale up the magnitude of the kinds of losses to be mourned, both spatially and temporally” (Craps 2023). The phenomenon became increasingly global since August 2019 when **Iceland’s funeral** for OK(jökull) took place. This was followed by a funeral march in Switzerland for the deceased **Piezol glacier** (2019), and then another in the Pyrenees for the **glacier d’Arriel**, and the **Ayoloco glacier** in Mexico, and on and on.

On Sunday, 18 August 2019, Iceland held an official memorial ceremony for their glacier called Ok, formerly known as Okjökull, which means Ok-glacier in Icelandic. Ok had been declared dead in 2014, as according to glaciologist Oddur Sigurðsson: “we made the decision that this was no longer a living glacier, it was only dead ice, it was not moving.”⁵ During the ceremony a plaque was revealed, saying

A letter to the future—Ok is the first Icelandic glacier to lose its status as a glacier. In the next 200 years all our glaciers are expected to follow the same path. This monument is to acknowledge that we know what is happening and what needs to be done. Only you know if we did it.

The plaque also exposes the record level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere measured in May 2019: 415ppm CO₂. Scientists call Ok the first glacier that died because of climate change.



Image taken from the official website of the Not OK movie. The documentary is made by anthropologists of Rice University, Cymene Howe and Dominic Boyer, and premiered in 2018. <https://vimeo.com/269936225>

While in the dominant Western view, grief and mourning are still mainly related to human losses (Cunsolo and Landman 2017), “the funeral for Okjökull undid this separation between entities that can and cannot be mourned, which appears to be taken for granted by famous theorists such as Sigmund Freud and Judith Butler” (Craps 2023). Freud’s theory of mourning “propounds an anthropocentric mode of responding to loss” that “constrains the emergence of environmental mourning based in connectivity and interdependence” (Ryan 2017). Butler’s work *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War* question how some lives are “grievable” while others are not, but it does so exclusively for humans and thus “fails to transcend human parochialism” (Craps 2023). Glacier funerals are one way to overcome this. But how? In the case of Ok, anthropomorphism is the key. In the movie *Not OK*, the mountain got the voice of former mayor of Reykjavík and now comedian, Jón Gnarr, speaking English and being humorous. The mountain Ok was given human features. This in combination with comic elements made it powerful to mediate through “10.000 news

outlets worldwide" (Boyer and Howes 2018). People commonly relate more with humans than mountain beings or glacial bodies and that is why humanizing works, or as anthropologist and death scholar Sigurjón B. Hafsteinsson puts it "The possibility of mourning Ok involves [...] the personification, the humanisation of the glacier" (Hafsteinsson and Árnason 2020). In terms of speaking to a large global audience, this works very well. But it remains human-centered, as well as the idea of the funeral, a ritual done for and by humans.

This is even mentioned in a humorous note by the glacier himself in the trailer: "... you know, with humans, even, when they're talking about glaciers, it's still all about them." In an interview in the documentary, Cymene Howe asks geologist and glacial expert at the Icelandic Meteorological Office, Oddur Sigurðsson, "How do you think Ok mountain feels about all this?" and he replies, "Hehe, it couldn't care less." Glaciers and mountains change all the time. At another moment in the movie, Howe asks Sigurður Árni Þórðarson, pastor of the Hallgríms Church in Reykjavík, if he was "to create a ritual or memorial for a glacier that has passed, that we might say is dead, what sort of memorial would you imagine, or is that something that we would even want to do, is that even appropriate?" He replies:

Ja, I think it is very important that we start to attempt to understand that everything is connected, and life is interconnected. It is also the question who attends a ritual like this? Is it just for the sky, for God? Or is it for the ground, or nature, or is it for the memory of the glacier? I think it's very important that it should be also for humans who think the loss of a glacier is a real loss and people who kind of have deep understanding and awareness interconnectedness of life, really feel the necessity of expressing the grief. And it is very important to remember that funerals and rituals of grief are not for the dead ones specifically, they are for the living.

Ok mountain also replies: "Wait a minute, I just want to point out, because everybody keeps talking about death and funerals, that I'm still here. I guess because you humans don't live very long, you are always worrying about death and making a big deal out of it. Just saying." A mountain's timescale is larger than the human one. Slowness of mountains lets people, just like myself for a long time, describe them incorrectly as "rigid, still, immobile" (Denny 2022), while they are "shuddering, shaking and swinging" (Moore 2022). Jeff Moore, associate professor of geology and geophysics at the University of Utah, did research on the movement of the Matterhorn in Switzerland and "scaled the mountain's timeline down to a human timescale" by speeding up. Movements became visible: the Matterhorn is constantly moving. Describing the mountain as being alive and vibrant, their findings "also provide important research implications for tracking and monitoring rockfalls and landslides during earthquakes." Rituals must take into account the fact that mountains constantly move, that they live on different timescale, and that we arrive at them at a specific moment in order to mourn.⁶



Miniature sound experiment of two stones hitting
each other original speed, stëfan schäfer 2024

Performance Philosophy



<https://soundcloud.com/performancephilosophy/schaefer-sound-experiment-original-speed>



Miniature sound experiment of two stones hitting
each other 80 times slower, stëfan schäfer 2024

Performance Philosophy



<https://soundcloud.com/performancephilosophy/schaefer-sound-experiment-80-times-slower>

As described by place name specialist of the Árni Magnússon Institute in Iceland, Halgrímur J. in the Ok documentary, Ok mountain has the shape of an “O” with a “C” in its center, which is the old manner of writing its name: “OC.” OK wrote its own name. Ámundason also mentions it resembles the copyright logo. In the documentary, Ok adds, “This shows you once again what mountains are capable of.” They have something to say, and any ritual must take this into account as well, whatever it might want to tell.



Detail of a NASA satellite image of Ok, August 1, 2019.
https://eoimages.gsfc.nasa.gov/images/imagerecords/145000/145439/okjokull_oli_2019213_lrg.jpg



Copyright symbol via Vecteezy.com

Descent

Being a designer I am only too familiar with what a deadline is: a fixed moment between at least two (human) parties that is agreed on to deliver something. For the fixation it is relevant that all parties are on the same timescale.

What could the mountain want to tell us? The Hochvogel's crack resembles a black line that grows continuously. This line will transform into a gap, into a void. By measurements and speculations scientists try to predict the moment that will happen, but it remains impossible. This deadline is not fixed. Maybe the Hochvogel also wants to tell us in its own language to slow down, with its crack being a "designed void rather than an absence, an invisible correlative to the visible sounded letter" (Hill 2023). Ok mentions that mountains even write a lot of poetry, then it was writing poetry *about* glaciers and mountains, but what if the mountain writes itself? From a typographical view, it can be seen as "a 'non-visible symbol', denoting a period of silence or 'non-sound', just as a letter denotes a sound. This becomes particularly significant for the poet or playwright, as these spaces can be multiplied [...] to typographically represent controlled measures of silence" (Ibid). This silence can mean different things. It could indeed mean that the Hochvogel is in its end-of-life, breaking apart, transforming into a different shape. But it could also be seen as an invitation to mourn. When in 2023 the Fluchthorn broke apart, it left behind piles of rocks that had been a solid summit before. The Fluchthorn (Escapehorn) got its name because chamois were hiding there from hunters. This result of a land- or rockslide resembles the ritual of cairn building. "Cairn making is a performative physical process, individual stone placed on individual stone, its overall shape a negotiation between the interaction of people, animals, slope processes, weather and weathering" (Maddrell 2009). The rockslide could be seen as an act of mourning, a ritual by a mountain, as "the deaths of prominent climbers are also marked by cairns" (Pitches 2020) and thus have a "commemorative function" (Ibid). But what about when the cairn is not built by a human but by the mountain itself? What deaths would then be mourned? And to or with whom? Cairns "communicate in a timeless language. Their layered meanings may not be transparent to people who aren't local, but they still tell the visitor, you are here, you are not alone" (Williams 2012). And a rockslide might just be a way of one mountain to tell other mountains, its surrounding fauna and flora, humans they are not along with their mourning and grief.

Next Ascent

In *Performing Mountains*, Jonathan Pitches states that mountain rituals "contribute to and are provoked by the characteristics of mountainscapes: remoteness, danger, prominence, sacredness, local devotion" (2020). In the case of the Hochvogel mountain, remoteness and danger are present as it is far from human communities and its condition of slowly breaking apart. Its prominence becomes clear already from far away due to its height and shape. Sacredness and local devotion are less present, as I found out when emailing municipalities, Alpine societies, and tourist centers closest to the mountain. There is apparently no ownership of the Hochvogel, neither from the Austrian, nor the German side. There is no ritual considered when the mountain breaks apart.⁷

What is more present is visitors ascending the mountain in temporary, short visits, some only once, others repeatedly. The largest part of this visiting community will never see each other, especially not at the top of the mountain. It is a rather a scattered community, with everybody having their own reason to visit the mountain. Maybe this requests also a more subjective approach for a ritual with the Hochvogel, more individual in the beginning but emerging overlaps after time when being shared and exchanged. 'Mountainness,' or what makes a mountain a mountain, is "in the eye of the beholder" (Pitches 2020) and it might thus differ from the eye of people living close to a mountain as opposed to the eye of a temporary visitor. But both then might also define their grief, and what to mourn, differently in a way that is appropriate to the one mourning. In addition, a mountain's death then might as well be in the eye of the beholder. What somebody defines as a dying or dead mountain might be just as diverse. This links to what is called lyrical design "What is it you really want to have said? What is it that you would like to tell, express, maybe even to an audience of one?" (van der Velden 2020). Maybe even to an audience of one being a mountain or a glacier?

What is it that makes your heart beat faster? Lyrical design seizes the day like it's its last. Lyrical design forgets about looking good or cool. [...] it does not care about winning debate. [...] It has in common with care that 'believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things'. No rationalized, strategic, or aestheticized design proposition can make one forget lyrical design's disarming, heartbreakingly simple tunes; sincerity is what remains truly unforgettable. (Ibid.)



Watch: <https://vimeo.com/1036385284>



Watch: <https://vimeo.com/1036385417>



Watch: <https://vimeo.com/1036385490>

For my next visit to the Hochvogel in July 2024 I spent my time at Prinz Luitpold Haus, the closest Alpine hut to the Hochvogel.. It takes approximately 2,5 – 3,5 hours from the hut to the top, which gives me the opportunity to visit the summit often in a short period. There are many ways to approach a mountain repeatedly and be prepared for emerging rituals *with* a mountain, “by repetition of a few simple acts [...] performing actions that [...] finally become rituals” (Pitches 2020).

One way is to investigate spontaneity in relation to ritual, as it happened during the Ok funeral: "Somebody just started singing a song, and others joined. Spontaneity is an aspect of ritual that people don't always talk about. People find what is important about the moment and they perform it" (from an online conversation with Dominic Boyer in September 2023). Spontaneity lets work emerge in the very moment.

Levels of transformation

In the chapter "Eine Nacht auf dem Hochvogel" by mountaineer Hermann von Barth from his book *Aus den nördlichen Kalkalpen*, he beautifully describes his ascent to the Hochvogel mountain: a poetic orchestra by the wind through and with the mountain. He is listening to the collaboration of wind and mountain. He also describes staying in a crack to avoid the harshness of the cold wind, a feeling of security. The orchestra and the feeling of security occurred spontaneously. Written down, it describes an appreciation for the mountain, as will the time that I aim to spend there plus the record of the event in several forms: visual, audio, image, text, ritual. Partly, my ritual can be described as an adapted re-enactment of van Barn's visit in various aspect.

The visit included a future memorial hand poke tattoo. The tattoo was done in in the Hochvogel's crack. The motive is not a complex one but rather symbolic: the shape of this crack and summit at the moment I was there. Its crack is held together by wires and measurement devices to slow down its collapse. The tattoo has been done by myself in the depth of the mountain and operates as a (future) memorial tattoo. Hand poke is a traditional way of tattooing before electric machines were invented. A repetitive poking with the needle in the body following a path, forming a line. The intervals between the single pokes are short. On a scale, the intervals expand to a yearly event by annually visiting the mountain and do the tattoo over again, in the crack that then will have increased and its form shifted, until the inevitable rockslide will happen. The tattoo is a permanent wearable that will probably slowly fade away, being refreshed in a slightly different line. It is a very intimate ritual between the mountain and me. Ultimately, it will start discussions about this relationship and in the bigger picture about caring for mountains and glaciers and their lives and deaths. The act of hand poke self-tattooing, piercing my skin with a needle and ink, leaves a trace on my body, on my left forefinger to be precise. I found traces of poking the mountain on my daily visits in the rocks and stones: left by hiking sticks with metal points, crushing rocks and stones. I decided to leave my hiking sticks at home after I observed that.



A rock at the Hochvogel mountain with traces of hiking stick poking, stëfA/V schäfer, 2024.



Hand poke tattoo Hochvogel, gap view. Watch: <https://vimeo.com/1036399178>



■ Hand poke tattoo Hochvogel, close-up view. Watch: <https://vimeo.com/1036399308>

I took this idea with me to Iceland, where I visited the dead glacier Ok. This memorial tattoo is placed on my left middle finger, next to the Hochvogel tattoo.



■ Hand poke tattoo Ok-glacier, overview. Watch: <https://vimeo.com/1036390678>



Hand poke tattoo Ok-glacier, close-up view. Watch: <https://vimeo.com/1036401248>



Hand poke memorial tattoos of the Hochvogel and Ok-glacier. From the perspective I set the tattoo, the highest point of Ok, its shape rather resembles a copyleft symbol (see clip above), which resonates more with me on a personal note and comes back in the tattoo. stëfΔ/V schäfer, 2024.

Discussion pieces have been a crucial part of my practice as a designer.



Every Day is Earth Day when — You're Dead, stëfΔ/V schäfer, 2022.



Every Day is Earth Day when — You're Dead, Hochvogel version 1, stëfΔ/V Schafer, 2024.



Every Day is Earth Day when — You're Dead, Ok version, stëfΔ/V schäfer, 2024.



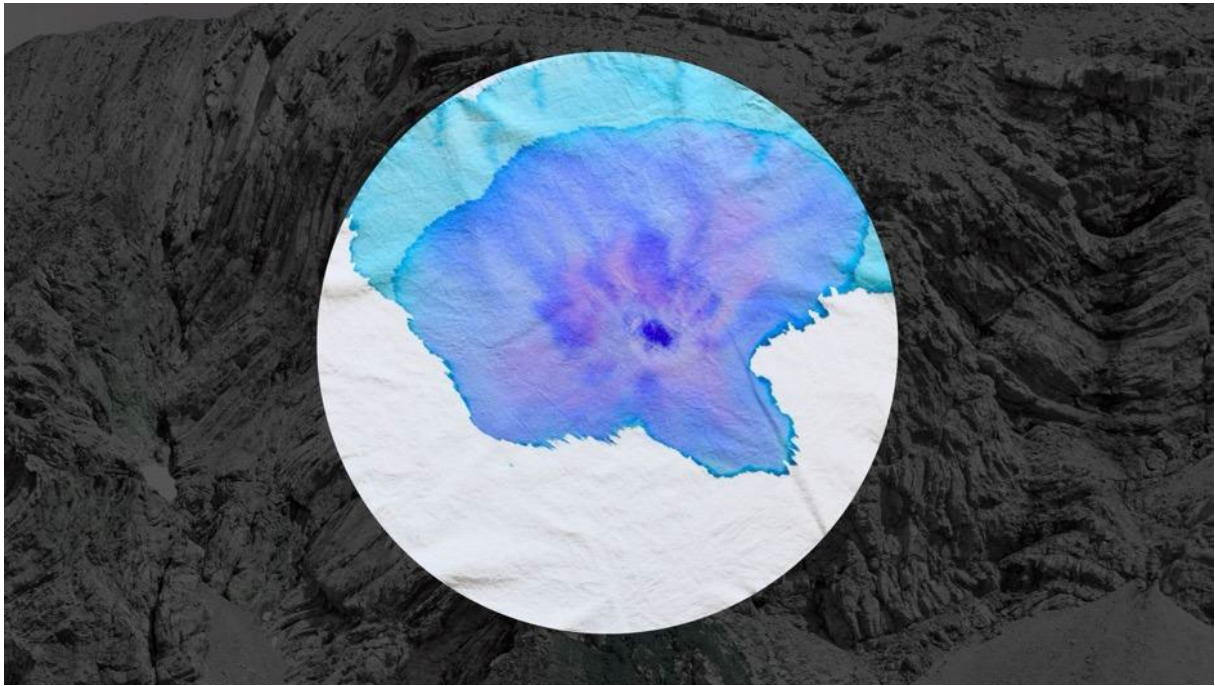
Beheaded Kronplatz mountain, MessnerMountainMuseum. Form and Counterform wearable, stëfΔn schäfer, 2024.



Beheaded Kronplatz mountain, MessnerMountainMuseum. Form and Counterform graphic, stěfΔ/V schäfer, 2024.



Beheaded Kronplatz mountain, "dear MessnerMountainMuseum, what happened to the 4000 m³ of rock after beheading the mountain." Form and Counterform graphic and cairn miniature, stěfΔ/V schäfer, 2024.

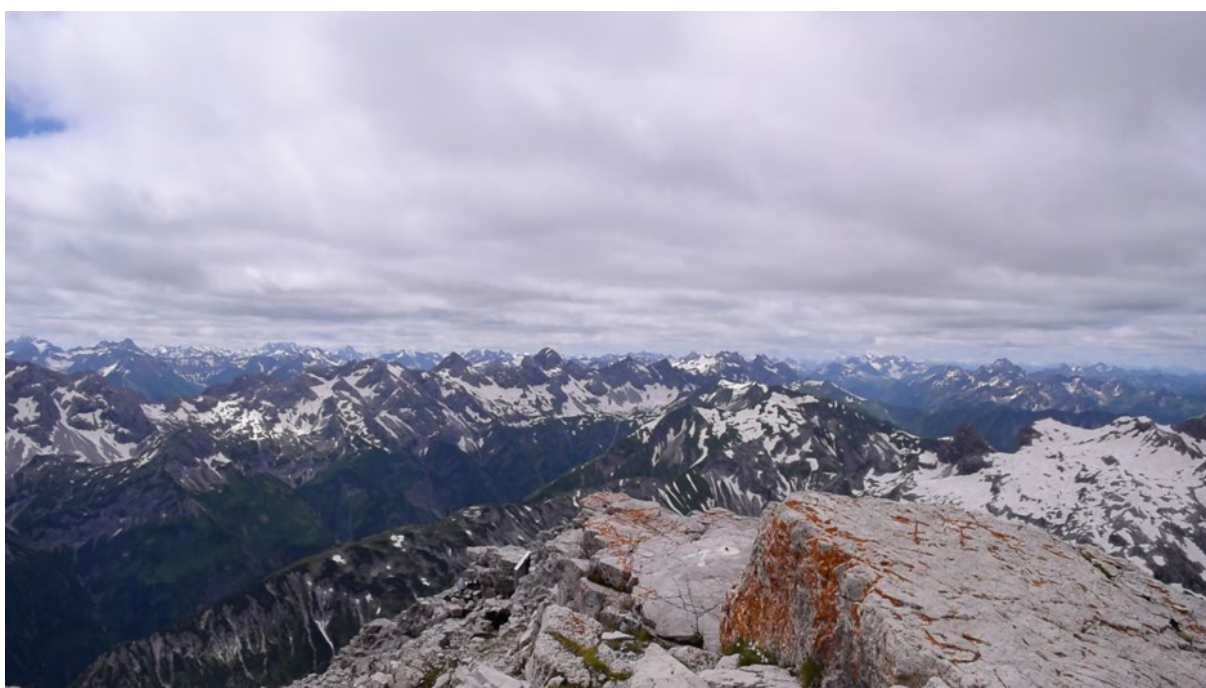


What if glaciers talk view back: Humboldt glacier, La Corona glacier I Venezuela (R.i.p.) 1, miniature glacial melting, stěfΔ/V schäfer, 2024. Maybe the glacier died already when it was named after a German explorer, or when its original name got replaced by a Spanish one?

My latest visit included the design of discussion pieces with the mountain on location. This can be seen as an adaption of both, “contextually (as places for training to occur), or formally (as inspiring shapes, figures and metaphors)” (Pitches 2020). By making the pieces on location, dust, water and other particles will become part of the pieces. As wearables, the pieces provide a transformation to become the mountain for a certain time. This idea links to what Johannes Neurath: “to transform, one simply has to put on a skin, a fur, feathers leaves, clothing, masks that correspond to a specific species or ethnicity” (Neurath 2021). I am aware of the fact that Neurath describes a complex concept of multinaturalism based on traditional shamanist exercises with a long history of the Wixárika people. In my case, the wearing of something designed on location and together with the mountain makes me (or whoever else is wearing it) part of the mountain and vice versa. The image becomes participative, ritual, performative, alive and steps beyond a representation. In the case of the Hochvogel mountain, the increasing crack is an interesting one to investigate and become, or be part of. Therefore, my clothes will only be made of cotton, canvas, felt, and linen that transform by wearing them during the hike. At the same time the material is convenient for working with threat, environmentally beneficial paint, to draw on, folding it, layering, and more. These are, amongst others, parameters to work with spontaneity in a mountain surrounding.

Ghost Mountains

In the book *Allgäuer Bergnamen*, a collection of the history of mountain names in the Allgäu region where the Hochvogel resides, there are names that have a “†” behind them. In some of the cases it remains unclear which mountain is meant. There are historical documents that hint at a region or a small selection of which of the mountains is spoken about. But it remains unclear. They are there, but not in a physical shape. Also, the re-naming of the mountain can be seen as a transformation, maybe even a rite de passage, declared dead with the end of one name, brought to a new life after being renamed. Calling names of the deceased is an act of remembrance and mourning and can either be done singly or collectively. In both cases it is about showing respect and remembering and keeping the deceased among the living in a non-material form.

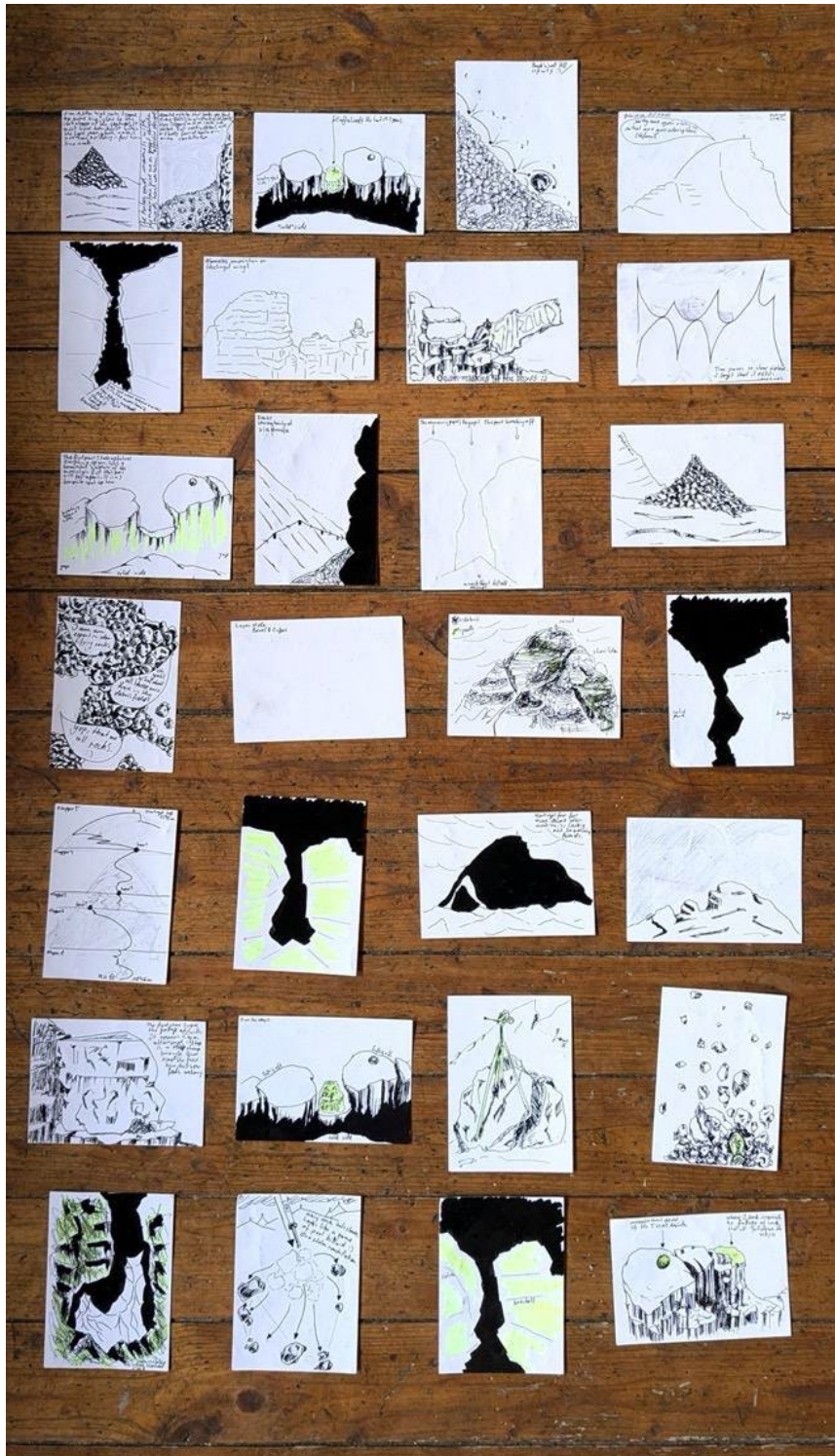


■ Calling their names, one out of a series of five. stěfΔ/V schäfer, 2024. <https://vimeo.com/1036401207>

Slowing down

Desolation and slowness are mountain characteristics that I translated into a mode of communication. For example, sharing personal experiences and research in written and visual form in opposition to real-life sharing of images and text on social media for a large, random audience. Creating images and texts for postcards while being on the mountain, and partly with the mountain (by frottage), to be sent to selected audiences, each consisting of one person or family. The postcard's front usually has a picture perfect view of, in this case, a mountain, mostly a single view or a small selection of different ones. The backside bears handwritten greetings, wishes, experiences or other personal notes, sent to family and friends. The act of writing, going to the

post office to get a stamp and sending it takes time and effort. In my case, selecting a card had been replaced by making the card on location with the mountain. Facing the end of a glacier or mountain, the postcard transforms into a card announcing their deaths. The postcard has an autobiographical aspect, as I used to write and send them every time when visiting the mountains. Also pen-pals relationships started there.



Set of 28 postcards designed at the Hochvogel mountain (front sides). Each of them has a text on the back that relates to the research of the addressees, stēfΔ/V schäfer, 2024.

The examples mentioned above are a selection of how to develop and perform rituals accompanied by participative images when ascending and spending time with a mountain, considering hiking as a performance already and related movements and objects being already part of it. Grounded partly in personal and autobiographical experiences, I share my personal relationship with the mountain as an ethnographic approach in addition to scientific definitions of a glacier's and mountain's life and (future) death, in order to exchange my experiences with others to generate a multifocal view on care and love for mountains and glaciers.

Notes

¹ The acronym D.E.A.D. started some years ago to help me position my own design research practice and then stood for Death. Environment. Anthropocene. Design. While now, I see it more interchangeable. This started with the term Anthropocene, which I find problematic, as it is not clear or fair who is meant by the "anthropos" in relation to climate collapse. For now, A. could also be "affective". Or: Dying. Environmental. Affective. Design. It is a transforming acronym.

² "PD stands for Professional Doctorate and it is the equivalent of the PhD for the Dutch Universities of the Applied Sciences. The difference is that a PhD programme at a university trains a professional researcher, while the PD programme at the Universities of Applied Sciences trains an investigative professional". <https://pd-arts-creative.nl/about-pd/>

³ From conversations with Chilean-Mexican artist Amanda Piña and her work on mountains and water, bodies, I learned that a lot of mountain mining and drilling is caused by capitalist interests and transnational corporations. According to Oxfam, the world's richest 1% pollute more than the poorest two thirds (Oxfam 2023). This changed my view on the concept of the Anthropocene; treating all human beings equally responsible for anthropogenic climate change is not suitable.

⁴ At least that is how it appears. Up to this point I got no reply from Mr. Krautblatter or the team. In interviews he and his team speak from a scientific view only. I am curious if there is another view of him or his team. In the documentary *Not OK (A little movie about a small glacier at the end of the world)* (Boyer and Howe 2018), geologist and glacial expert at the Icelandic Meteorological Office, Oddur Sigurðsson, who declared Ok-glacier dead in 2014, says, "it felt like a good friend has left us. And I did care about it. [...] It has some feeling. [...] It is sad, yes. But at glaciers as a scientist, I really cannot be sad. There has been enormous change of course through geological rimes in the earth. There was no Atlantic Ocean hundred million years ago, but we, mankind can affect these changes for some time".

⁵ Requirements for holding the title being a glacier are described by Sigurðsson as follows: being thick enough to collapse under their own weight. This requires a minimal thickness of 40 to 50 metres. Then it starts crawling and overtaking the earth underneath (Boyer and Howe 2018).

⁶ If one is mourning a certain moment within a long process of transformation, this moment might be seen as the "normal" condition. Each generation has their own "normals" and only the view on this certain "norm". A shift occurs with each generation and a new "norm" appears., This is coined by marine biologist Daniel Pauly (1995) as "Shifting Baseline Syndrome".

⁷ This I got from an email conversation with the German Alpine Society. "There is no ritual, but we could develop something and discuss it, on the top of the Hochvogel" (November 2023).

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Biography

stëfΔ/V schäfer is an Amsterdam-based designer and researcher investigating the power of death and commemorative ritual in relation to environmental devastation. All projects result in various media and are declared D.E.A.D. (Death. Environment. Anthropocene. Design). They have been internationally exhibited and are close collaborations with people and institutions of different fields: for instance anthropology, poetry, music, hacking, dance, theatre, music-theatre artists, end-of-life care, funeral industry, green funeral activism.

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PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

WHALE GRIEF: EPISODES I + II

LAURA CULL Ó MAOILEARCA

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I: Barnum's Whales

To begin

Let me tell you a story:

Barnum's American Museum—owned by the famous showman, P. T. Barnum, located at the corner of Broadway and Ann Street in New York City, United States—opened on January 1, 1842. Among the museum's many attractions, visitors could enjoy dioramas, panoramas and "cosmoramas," a flea circus, a loom powered by a dog, Ned the learned seal, "Native Americans" who performed traditional songs and dances, and two beluga whales in an aquarium (Saxon 1989).

"Native Americans" who performed traditional songs and dances, and two beluga whales in an aquarium.

In 1861,

Though he had never seen a live whale before, Barnum prepared the basement of the museum as a "small ocean" to receive two belugas captured from Quebec's St. Lawrence River. He settled on a tank made of brick and cement, 40 by 18 feet...and oversaw the belugas' fitful capture and

journey by train to New York City in boxes filled with just enough salt water to periodically sponge their blowholes and mouths.

Two days after Barnum moved his “monsters” to his basement, they died.

The museum had accommodated the subarctic whales in tepid, noncirculating fresh water, and they had to breathe air permeated with gas lamp fumes. But the short-lived attraction bolstered Barnum’s reputation so much, that he declared in his autobiography: “Thus was my first whaling expedition a great success.”

Still, Barnum wasn’t satisfied with his all-too-brief experiment and tried again. This time, he bribed City Hall to rig the water system to route sea water from New York Harbor to the museum. “Having a stream of salt water at [his] command at every high tide,” Barnum created the world’s first functional oceanarium.

He moved a new set of whales to the second floor, giving them what he figured was adequate fresh air. “I am sorry we can’t make him dance a hornpipe and do all sorts of things at the word of command,” Barnum told his visitors.

The water in the tank was unfiltered and dark. The whales usually remained at the bottom, hidden from the visitors, but could be seen for a moment when they surfaced to breathe.

One day, a woman attending the museum with her daughter got several quick glimpses of a whale after watching for a half hour, then marched to Barnum’s office and declared: “Mr. B., it’s astonishing to what a number of purposes the ingenuity of us Yankees has applied india-rubber.” She insisted that the whale was actually made of india-rubber, powered by steam and machines, allowing it to surface at regular intervals and blow air through a bellows. Barnum let her believe she had cracked his secret, even telling her he was impressed that she was the only visitor shrewd enough to uncover his trick. His priority as a budding oceanarium director—as with his other amusements—was to give visitors what they came for.¹

On July 13, 1865, Barnum’s American Museum “burned to the ground in one of the most spectacular fires New York has ever seen. Animals at the museum were seen jumping from the burning building, only to be shot by police. Many of the animals unable to escape the blaze burned to death in their enclosures” (Anonymous n.d.).

As fire consumed the building, the salt water in the beluga whales’ tank started boiling. Someone broke its inch-thick glass wall in hopes that the cascading water would quench the flames. Instead, the two beluga whales—captured in Canada only one week before—were beached on a scorching floor before falling to the street below as the building began to collapse. The carcasses lay rotting for several days on Broadway, far too heavy to dispose of quickly.²

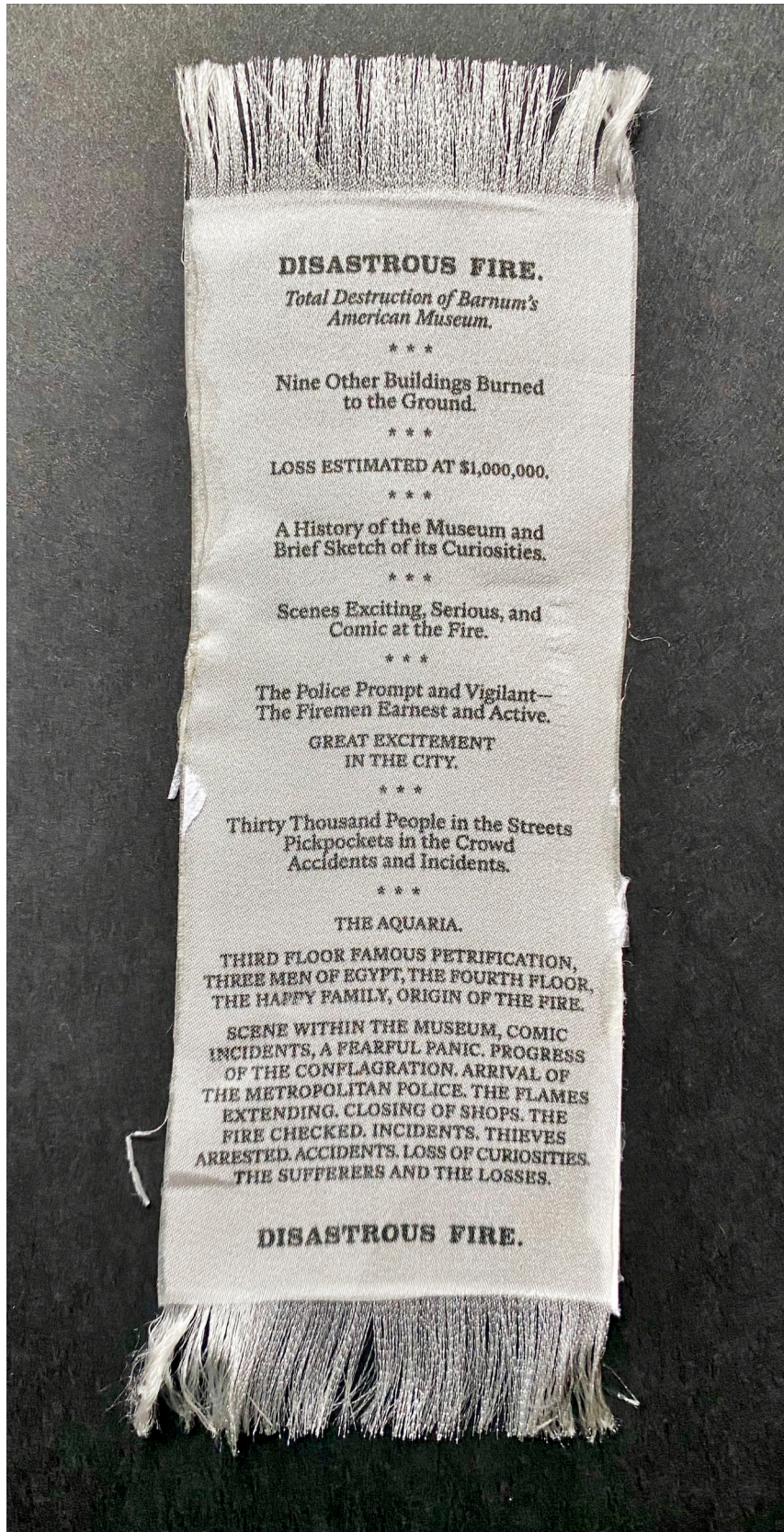


Figure 1: Bookmark by Laura Cull Ó Maoilearca in collaboration with Lucas Reif and Sarah Skaggs. As part of the expanded publication project, *An [Interrupted] Bestiary* (2022).

II: Orca

I Description

Take the example of J-35.

Take the example of Tahlequah.

J-35, also known as Tahlequah, is a female member of an endangered population of orcas called the Southern Resident Community who live off the coast of Washington State, in the northeastern Pacific Ocean.

A Southern Resident whale calf is born into the pod of their mother and remains in it for life. Their basic social unit is the matriline which is formed by a matriarch and all generations of her descendants. Since female whales can reach around 90 years old, as many as four generations are known to travel together. A number of matrilineal pods then form a pod, which is an ongoing and stable traveling unit with its own dialect. Pod members use underwater calls from their dialect to maintain contact at a distance.

On July 24, 2018, Tahlequah gave birth to her second calf, Tali. When they were first spotted by an associate from the Center for Whale Research, the newborn calf was seen swimming with her mother northeast from Race Rocks.

But only half an hour later, when researchers from the Center saw the pod of orcas again near Discovery Island, Tahlequah's daughter had died and she was seen carrying her body on her rostrum.

Tahlequah proceeded to carry her newborn daughter's body across the Salish Sea for 17 days. During this time it is thought she may have travelled up to 1,000 miles—following the pod around the San Juan Islands and interior waters of British Columbia.

Several days after her daughter's death, whale researchers noted that Tahlequah had begun to look emaciated and other pod members were showing concern for her health. After the seventh day, other members began taking turns floating the calf while allowing Tahlequah to rest. By the ninth day, the calf had shown signs of visible decomposition and was becoming harder to carry. The pod disappeared for several days in early August, but were spotted again on August 8, with Tahlequah still carrying her calf after 16 days. By the following day, after 1,000 miles of swimming, Tahlequah released the calf and rejoined the pod with no apparent signs of malnutrition or ill health.

Tahlequah's unusually long period of grieving attracted international human attention and prompted calls for intervention to protect the Southern Residents community, including by removing dams that disrupt their food supply. For many, including whale biologists, Tahlequah's

behaviour was a powerful ‘show of grief’; a demonstration of the complexity of animal emotions and further proof that mourning the dead is by no means exceptional to humans.

Of course, not everyone was willing to name Tahlequah’s behaviour as a display of grief. Zoologist Jules Howard wrote: “if you believe J35 was displaying evidence of mourning or grief, you are making a case that rests on faith not on scientific endeavour” (Howard 2018, n.p.). He went on to say: “This might seem unreasonable and even brutally cruel to some readers but remember this behaviour has been documented only a handful of times and that, on the whole, the sea is not filled with killer whales displaying such extreme and dramatic behaviours each time a loved one dies. Compare that to human societies, all of whom undergo dramatic periods of social upheaval upon the death of friends or family. You are likely to have experienced it. You, the reader, may still be carrying the effect of death in your human heart. That’s actual grief. That’s actual mourning” (Ibid.).

Once again—animal emotion is measured against the standard of a normative notion of human emotion which is defined as constituting “actual grief” (or proper grief), rather than simply one species variant amongst others.

Humans are the gold standard for grief. Tahlequah merely “grieved.”

Anthropocentrism is the violence of scare quotes.



Figure 2: “I Weave My Grief Into Yours” (2024). Drawing by Laura Cull Ó Maoilearca.

II Lesson

Orca (*Orcinus orca*)

You teach us how to grieve

After all, the name they gave you: *Orcinus* means "of the kingdom of the dead"

But more importantly, you taught her how to grieve

According to matrilinearity

Tracing a kinship through mourning

As your mother taught you,

As your mother's mother taught her:

We carry the bodies.

Calves at birth weigh about 400 pounds and are about 8 foot long.

Not yet black and white like us

Your belly was still an orangey-yellow, my beautiful one

As I put you on my shoulder

As I laid you on my back

This weight I cannot be without

This weight I carry for 17 days

This weight I carry for 1,000 miles.

Not because I don't know you're gone

Not because I don't get it.

But because I loved you before I met you.

Because I lost you before I met you.

Because I lost you before I got to teach you how the salmon move with the seasons.

Because I lost you before I got to teach you how to flip the kelp with your tail.

When we do it, they call it "postmortem-attentive behavior"

When you do it, they call it grief

When we do it, they call it "epimeletic behaviour"

When you do it, they call it mourning

Take the example of this one...

Take the example of that one...

How many times do we have to show you what we are capable of for you to see it without being shown?

Why do we have to show you at all?

She says: "Just because I'm not grieving in front of you, offering up my grief for your consumption, does not mean I'm not grieving.
I'm not going to grieve in front of a public audience of people I just met."³

And why should she?
Why should you?

She says: "humans and other animals have a capacity for grief that may or may not be expressed, depending on who they are, depending on the situation."

She says: "In its Metropolitan Diary column for January 16, 2012, the *New York Times* published an account by a woman about a day she and her sister were tending a community garden in Manhattan. Another woman, known to neither sister, approached with a paper bag containing the ashes of her father. The woman asked if the ashes could be scattered in the garden, handed them the bag, and left, saying, "Here, please take this. His name was Abe, and I've had more than enough of him."⁴

She says: "I just kept smelling her because she smelt so good and so different. I think I kept her blankets for over ten years just to take them out of their special box to smell them every now and then."⁵

Orca (*Orcinus orca*)
You teach us how to grieve:
Always more than one⁶
They say: no permanent separation of an individual from the group has even been recorded.
Always more than one
A temporary solo in the midst of community
Always more than one
Where "I" = the memory of holding you in my water
As the water holds me in hers.

At first, I did try to do it by myself:
To hold you up at the surface of the water
To dive back down to get you when you fell
I didn't eat
I didn't sleep
But as I began to get exhausted
The others started standing by
Taking turns to lift you, to attend to you.
Until I regained my strength.
Always more than one.

This is how we care for our dead.

Because I'm not the first and I won't be the last.

This loss is not only mine.

Some inexplicable tragedy.

They knew and they could have done something.

He says: "There's just not enough food"

He says: "It's all that poison they put in the water"

He says: "It's miscarriage after miscarriage. And when there is a successful birth, the infant usually dies."

They knew and they could have done something.

They call it a "mis-carriage"

A mistake, an error, a going wrong

The accusation built within the word⁷

Like she dropped you.

But she's not the first and she won't be the last.

He says: "It's probably nothing"

He says: "She's probably just depressed"

He says: "Oh, actually, we got the test results and it turns out she was right."

This loss is not only theirs.

Because they're not the first and they won't be the last.

They knew and they did something.

Taking turns.

Standing by.

Let this be my way of not letting you go.

Let this be how I trace our oceanic kinship:

Re-membering our differing grieves together.⁸

Notes

- ¹ The italicised block text part of the story is cited in an adapted form from Bosworth (2018).
- ² Adapted from Bosworth (2018).
- ³ Quote from Simpson (2024).
- ⁴ Adapted from King (2013, 7).
- ⁵ See Coleman (2019). Quotes are transcribed from East Side Freedom Library (2019).
- ⁶ *Always More Than One: Individuation's Dance* is the title of a book by philosopher Erin Manning (2013).
- ⁷ See Squires (2019). Quotes are transcribed from East Side Freedom Library (2019).
- ⁸ I borrow the term "grieves" from artist Siegmar Zacharias.

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Biography

Laura Cull Ó Maoilearca is an artist, writer and researcher based in Amsterdam, Netherlands. She holds a joint appointment as Lector (the Dutch title for professors at applied universities) of the Academy of Theatre and Dance at Amsterdam University of the Arts, and as special Professor of Performance Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam. Her latest publications are *Interspecies Performance* (2024) co-edited with Florence Fitzgerald-Allsopp for Performance Research Books and the expanded publication project, *An [Interrupted] Bestiary* (2022). Laura is a founding core convener of the Performance Philosophy network and an editor of its journal and book series.

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PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

THE POLITICS OF THE DEAD BODY

ANDRÉS FABIÁN HENAO CASTRO UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS, BOSTON
ELVA OROZCO MENDOZA UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT

Dedicated to the memory of Professor Selamawit Terrefe, a contributor to this special issue.

We are dedicating this special section of “The Politics of the Dead Body” to our admired colleague and brilliant contributor, Professor Selamawit Terrefe, known to us as Sally, whose untimely death last year we are still grieving. Dr. Terrefe was a renowned scholar of global Black comparative literary, visual, and cultural studies and the leading critical theorist in putting Afro-pessimism, psychoanalysis, and anti-Black violence studies in conversation with each other. We mourn their loss and we are grateful for having crossed paths with Dr. Terrefe, however briefly. We hope to honor Dr. Terrefe’s life by continuing to engage their scholarship and by combatting anti-Black violence in all its forms. Dr. Terrefe will be forever missed.

Introduction

There are dead bodies, in the plural rather than in the singular. These are bodies whose losses are forced not to count, for counting them is part of what we do to re-member them, to reconstitute membership to them, to consider them as part of the people and no longer simply as bodies. For these bodies, death is a tensed adjective. The racialized political structures under which they are forced to live subject them to conditions “that confer upon them the status of the living dead” (Mbembe 2003, 40), making them vulnerable to “premature death” (Gilmore 2007, 28), and further coercing them to a “slow death” (Berlant 2007) before re-animating them into the “social death” (Patterson 1982) to which they continue to be subjected in the “aftermath of slavery” (Hartman

2008, 6). Racial capitalism's logics of accumulation and its war machines dismember these bodies in the two senses of the term: by denying them equal membership in a political community that could otherwise recognize them as equally capable of natality and mortality, and by structurally "debilitating" them to such an extent that not even their coerced incapacitation is legible as disability (Puar 2017). Consequently, death is no longer in the future. Death cannot be simply anticipated as that inescapable event that can give authenticity to Being's existence in the form expected by the notion of "being-towards-death" (Heidegger 2001). Nor is death simply in the past. Death cannot be that principle (death-drive) that, in striving for libidinal satisfaction, is lethally bounded to the "most universal endeavor of all living substance—namely the return to the quiescence of the inorganic world" (Freud 1955, 62). Forced to live in constant proximity to violent death, death loses its eventuality.

Israel's genocide of Palestinians in Gaza can be "live-streamed," yet members of the academic community who speak against normalizing it are more likely to be disciplined and criminalized by university administrators than they are to see those administrators join the divestment and boycott campaigns Palestinians and their allies are urgently calling for to save their lives (Quinn 2024). Considered by scientists as climate change's point of no return, the Amazon rainforest can burn while the murder of Indigenous peoples' leaders fighting against extractive industries, logging, and cattle raising in the Amazon increases (Amazon 2024). The Black Lives Matter movement takes massively to the streets to confront the forced insignificance of Black peoples' deaths; yet every year, the US reaches yet another peak in the state-sanctioned killings of Black people (Mapping Police Violence 2024). The militarization of borders in the Global North forces migrants to die by the thousands when trying to cross them, yet those trying to save their lives are more likely to be incarcerated than those borders to be abolished for proving murderous (International Organization for Migration 2024).

To name this deadly reality as *a* politically transformable reality rather than "reality as such" means refusing its coerced naturalization. All the papers collected in this special section of *With the Dead*, titled "The Politics of the Dead Body," speak to the possibility of that refusal. Turning to the murder of Indigenous peoples, buried in unmarked graves beneath the residential schools they were coerced to attend in Canada and the United States from the late 19th to the late 20th centuries, Kevin Bruyneel introduces the concept of *necro-indigeneity*. As Bruyneel argues, necro-indigeneity refers to "the settler colonial presumption of Indigenous death that is not premature, as if it is forthcoming, but rather as death that is already enacted and buried in the past, thereby now an after-thought or barely thought of at all, unmarked and thus unremarkable to the settler eye." Meditating on what it means to witness the statistical rendition of "co-morbidities" that proleptically assign death to diabetic bodies, and a contemporary lithograph depicting the skull of nineteenth-century Mexican outlaw, Joaquín Murrieta, Susan Antebi introduces the concept of the *wounded object*. Wounded objects are, she elaborates, objects that demand our "attention to an unequally distributed human disposability, and to the suspension of death in life." Complicating Chinua Achebe's critique of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Caroline Rooney returns to the concept of *radical evil*, questioning Hannah Arendt's preference for "the banality of evil" in confronting the coloniality of genocide. Radical rather than banal evil captures, for Rooney,

Conrad's consideration of "genocidal colonialism as something that [cannot] be divorced from lofty idealist European philosophy as if colonialism were a mere atypical aberration." Meditating on the spectacularized death of twenty-two-year-old Pateh Sabally, a vulnerable immigrant from Gambia who drowns in one of Venice's canals, and on the misinterpretation of the attempted murder of Adesech Sadik, an Ethiopian domestic worker in Kuwait City accused of attempting suicide when found hanging from the window of the seventh floor of her place of employment, Selamawit Terrefe introduces antiblackness and white supremacy as the *urbild* of politics. For in forcing blackness to embody the nothingness of the psychoanalytic *Real*, out of which the Being of non-blackness coheres in a symbolically mediated order, blackness "can neither be the antagonist alternative of the political, nor agonist of nothingness." Finally, Osman Balkan reads in the public mourning of three commemorative art projects—*Die Toten kommen* (The Dead Are Coming), *Asmat* (Names), and *The List*—a distinctively political form of *grief activism*. For in grieving the otherwise ungrievable losses of thousands of migrants, these art projects refuse the power granted to militarized borders to carve the edges of the human.

The politics of the dead body

The five essays included here ask about the shattered worlds dead bodies evoke, the streams of violence they expose, as well as the urgent responses that the encounter with the figure of the corpse generates. Under consideration here is not just a 'dead body' or a disintegrating corpse but, more precisely, a brutally 'killed body,' a 'forcibly disappeared body,' a 'let to die body,' and a Black corpse whose ontological existence is persistently and permanently negated. In this sense, the politics of the dead body necessarily implicates the actions—and inactions—of the living, the political institutions we have developed over the years, our relations to the human and non-human world, and our hopes for the future. Considering the politics of the dead body is, therefore, imperative in the present context, given the growing sense of political decay felt across the world and fueled by the intensification of warfare ideology, militarism, and global white supremacy.

By drawing attention to the 'politics of the dead body,' we hope to emphasize the ways in which untimely, preventable, and politically induced deaths, to borrow from Judith Butler's analyses on precarity (Butler 2009), inform ongoing struggles. These struggles reclaim speech and action to change how we govern ourselves and those most impacted by settler colonialism, global racial capitalism, heteronormative patriarchy, contemporary slavery, and white supremacist anti-blackness. The politics of the dead body, hence, entails tracing the different ways in which the living mobilize—collectively, affectively, materially, or expressively—alongside the many (irreparable) deaths to build livable futures premised upon a vision of "radical care as a foundation for a better world" (Hall and Silver 2020).

Whereas Katherine Verdery famously stated that "corpses don't talk much on their own" (Verderey 2000, 29), the essays included in this special section suggest otherwise. The dead body's materiality harbors agency. And agency, as the essays curated in this special section suggest, denotes a capacity to produce certain effects or incite action. Dead bodies, "though lacking intentionality, nevertheless possess social, [political], and mnemonic agency" (Young and Light 2012, 138), one

that moves us to make demands in their name as witnessed in war, ecological catastrophes, pandemics, and forced migration, to name a few examples.

The dead body's capacity to inform social, political, and artistic action is shown in Balkan's consideration of how asylum seekers who lost their lives in the Mediterranean Sea while attempting to reach Europe have triggered several performative interventions aiming to dismantle "the global border regime." For instance, the "hunted images" of Alan Kurdi, the two-year-old Syrian child who drowned alongside his mother, Balkan shows, "elicited a short-lived shift in public debates about Europe's so-called 'migration crisis.'" Bruyneel's insightful discussion of the afterlives of *terra nullius* illustrates how the remains of Indigenous children presumed to run away from the premises of the Kamloops residential school in British Columbia sparked searches by the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc and other First Nations to locate them. By so doing, Bruyneel states, the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc "countered colonial erasure" and "the logic of necro-indigeneity." Antebi considers how the "excess" of deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic in Mexico and contemporary cases of unsolved homicides and forced disappearance that have proliferated in recent decades provide the occasion to develop new theoretical instruments to compel a critical witnessing of ongoing violence and differentially assigned disposability. Rooney's revaluation of Achebe's critique of Conrad's novella considers the notion of "theatrical testimony" as a literary device capable of attesting to the atrocities committed through genocide, "re-establishing the inheritances and lines of transmission that genocidal perpetrators have sought to violently occlude." The question of the dead body's agency, however, is complicated by Terrefe's insightful reflection on the Black corpse's immateriality, which they show does not lend itself easily to any considerations of agency given that the very notion of "political agency" is premised upon the (non)existence of Black life. If agency can at all be considered in relation to the Black corpse, Terrefe locates it in "the profundity and profanity of thought."

Counter-Aesthetics of the Dead

In the compartmentalized world of colonialism, says Frantz Fanon, "the economic infrastructure is also a superstructure" (Fanon 2005, 5). By that, Fanon means that the unequal distribution of life and death is not hidden but manifest in the material conditions of the city, such that whereas the colonist's sector is "built to last," signifying settler futurity, the native's is made "famished," there "you die anywhere, from anything" (Fanon 2005, 4). There is a clear overlap between material distributions of livable and unlivable conditions under regimes of apartheid and their aesthetic expression. But, as Fanon's own anticolonial writings in Algeria demonstrate, the material evidence of such unequal distribution is insufficient to render the hegemonic power relations enforcing it politically revisable. For, as Butler rightly asked in another context, when seeking to trouble the lethal effects of compulsive heteronormativity's gender dimorphism, "seeing" bodies, whether dead or alive, is not the answer for "*what are the categories through which one sees?*" (Butler 2006, xxiv, emphasis in original). There is always an aesthetic frame; nobody "sees" without a frame, and not all frames enable vision.

If philosophy can be understood as the activity that produces and studies the categories that make up the frames with which we see and performance philosophy as the activity that studies *how* these categories are produced and do their work, the politics of performance philosophy might be understood as the activity that studies the relations of power among rival bodies of categories, and the rival modes of their production. To publicly say: “It’s not war, it’s genocide; it’s not eviction, it’s ethnic cleansing; it’s not a conflict, it’s settler colonialism,” and to say it without protections, risking one’s public intelligibility or even one’s life depending on one’s positionality and context, is to perform philosophy in that double rival modality. The politics of performance philosophy, then, are not exhausted in refusing the naturalization of certain frames, even if it often takes that form (what connects performance philosophy to the labor of critique). Its politics can also take the form of offering alternative frames (what connects it to utopian or prefigurative thinking) and, more importantly, today, of refusing the frames that present themselves as alternatives. The essays collected here perform philosophy politically in all these ways but excel at the last one.

Expanding on what Yellowknives Dene political theorist Glen Sean Coulthard critiques as the colonial “politics of recognition,” Bruyneel demonstrates how the performatively uncertain apology of the Vatican for the genocidal role played by the Church reproduces, rather than redresses, the settler colonial frame of erasure at work since the doctrine of discovery. Terrefe speaks of the *poetics* of the Black corpse to: on the one hand, expose the libidinal capaciousness of a white supremacist frame to distribute the sensible such that it can demand unrestrained enjoyment at the consumption of Black peoples’ death and, on the other hand, articulates in the refusal of these bodies to docilely embody such nothingness a kind of politics beyond politics, poetic in the more radically inventive way that goes beyond the pitfalls of humanism. In Cennetoğlu’s *The List*, Yimer’s *Asmat* (Names), and CPB’s *The Dead Are Coming*, Balkan shows that migrant lives are publicly grieved against a political system that demands their abandonment. Such grief, Balkan argues, refuses the “territorially bounded conceptions of solidarity” implicit in the normalization of this border regime, enacting “a more expansive idea of the We.” Attentive to the performative power of wounded objects to simultaneously blur and clarify “the death that saturates everyday life for some bodies and communities,” Antebi meditates on their ambivalence. Resting there, she shows that the symbolic violence that statistics and lithographs otherwise innocently archive not only replays this violence but registers that which exceeds the frame. Finally, Rooney’s postcolonial critique of Hegel’s philosophical fetishism discerns a structure of plagiarism in the production of the aesthetic categories fueling both the genocide that Belgians perpetrated in Congo and the one Israel currently perpetrates in Gaza. Plagiarism is the presentation of the other’s knowledge as one’s own through an erasure of the appropriative act. Plagiarism, then, connects philosophical fetishism and colonial genocide in so far as settlers proceed to erase the indigenous peoples of the land that they want to appropriate to present themselves as the original inhabitants.

Loss, Grief, and Mourning

The agency of the dead body also lies in its capacity to generate strong feelings and emotions, even among those who are not in close proximity. The dead body often evokes an overwhelming sense

of grief and loss. Yet, in death, as in life, bodies do not enjoy the same social or political standing. In fact, existing inequalities follow the body to the death, even if, in some cases, such distinctions can be altered over time. But when bodies do not die a natural death but are deliberately killed, disappeared, erased, abandoned, or utterly negated, implicit is also the expectation that the living severs their allegiances and affective attachments to them. In this sense, what makes the dead body a necessary site for political reflection is the fact that existing power relations and socio-political structures of domination dictate which dead bodies constitute an irreparable loss and which ones do not.

As Butler argues, ungrievable lives “cannot be mourned because [they have] never lived, that is, [they have] never counted as a life at all” (Butler 2009, 38). To count them is to dispute who has the power to determine who can be mourned and who can be denied affection and sympathy. In this sense, the performative function of the corpse conveys something about the social and political marginalization that racialized, feminized, impoverished, and debilitated bodies experience in life such that their death—or murder—is not seen as a public loss and “do[es] not unleash an ethical crisis because these persons’ bodies and the territories they inhabit always-already signify violence” (Ferreira da Silva 2009, 121). How, then, are emotions and affects mobilized to remember the dead and redefine them as a public loss—instead of viewing them as threats to be eliminated at all costs—when dominant discourses, entrenched structures of inequality, and ontological divisions command forgetting? What aesthetic forms do these emotions and affects take when frames of war are ready to disqualify them?

Rooney’s unequivocal response is that a proper answer to genocide “is rightly to insist on the mourning and memorialization of those who have been killed,” for, as Cristina Rivera Garza reminds us, mourning is “the psychological and social process through which the loss of another is publicly and privately recognized” (Garza 2020, 59). Here, too, the dead body is invested with mnemonic agency in the form of commanding remembrance and influencing our collective memory. Significantly, mnemonic agency is not just connected to one’s capacity to remember but also shapes how we remember. For all these reasons, the dead body becomes “a vehicle for [affective] remembrance” and commemoration (Young and Light 2012, 137). To remember the dead body is, then, to:

perform kinship against membership’s exclusionary borders;

abolish the boundaries of the cemetery so that all the dead can be equally counted;

communalize the distribution of radical care;

reinforce our community with the ancestors.

To remember the dead body is to reconsider the future as the actualization of all those emancipatory possibilities currently buried underneath a single version of the real.

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PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

THE POETICS OF THE BLACK CORPSE AND THE *URBILD* OF POLITICS

SELAMAWIT TERREFE TULANE UNIVERSITY

I am not wherever I am the plaything of my thoughts; I think of what I am where I
do not think to think.

Jacques Lacan ([1966] 2006), *Ecrits*

On the subject of hatred, we're so deadened [...] that no one realizes that a
hatred, a solid hatred, is addressed to being, to the very being of someone that is
not necessarily God.

Jacques Lacan ([1973] 1999, *Seminar XX*)

The object of one's hatred is never, alas, conveniently outside [...] but is seated in
one's lap [...] stirring in one's bowels and dictating the beat of one's heart.

James Baldwin (1985), "Here be Dragons"

Part I: Den

A lair, hole, pit, cell, or cavity; what constitutes a den escapes the chasm between nothings, forever evading the grasp of inscription. Cloaked in the refusal of the signifier as its condition of impossibility, the void as nothingness registers a singular site of its illegibility. Hidden within ontology's demand for meaning, figuration favors nothing over blackness: nothing as a signpost of value, nothing as a number, zero, and nothingness, or non-being, as the mark of the sacrifice to which death awaits itself. The void Democritus endeavors to expound via his concept of the "den,"

characterized by Lacan as “not *perhaps nothing*, but *not nothing*” (Lacan [1973] 1998, 64) echoes notions of not only singularity and purity, but also the multiple(s)—whether coded as atom or number. For zero, like nothingness, non-being, negation, and negativity, functions as both a vacancy and an ontic counting of nothing. A den, or void, sustained by the symbolics of nothing(ness) and not-being, shadows black suffering in the discourses of not only love and hate, but also pure possibility: politics and desire.

Violence obscured by enjoyment, pleasure masked as hatred, rapture immune to the destabilization that less than nothing entails, the very light that serves as a guide to the den is none other than the legibility of predation. Herein both the black corpse and politics synthesize a site of inscription: the repetition and reproduction of metaphysics. Specifically, the political as violence cloaked in law, in the language of the good, of means and ends, of both dialectics and metaphysics. It is the lie of the good masked as truth, and the fabrication of truth as the contestation of unfreedom. Politics that allows one the conceits of a chimerical unburdening of the *real* in a phantasmatic unfolding, if not occupation, of ethics. Meaning, philosophy posturing as politics, through concepts such as ontology, lack, or the sublime, reaps similarly meager outcomes in shifting social conditions as any politic that presents itself as antidote to the externalized drama of a collective anti-black psyche. Accordingly, blackness can neither be the antagonist alternative of the political, nor agonist of nothingness. Rather, blackness shadows. Trespassing and sustaining politics as both *sinthome* and letter, a phantasmatic *Wiederholungszwang* (Freud [1937] 1964, 146–56) conceals black grief as belonging—a possession, perhaps, of truth, or an Other. But to what place, at what degree, and to which situation does this compulsion apparition itself? To enjoy and withhold the despised object confirms its suspension in a phantomed satiety of prohibition: global desire saturated in the semiotics of an other’s deprivation, cyphered in chrono-phantasmagoric exaltations of blackness as its remains.

Repetition, Compulsion, Desire

A high-rise in Kuwait City and a canal in Venice; the extent of exposure and depths of field rely on enjoyment, on one hand, and on the other, (im)possibility—its prefiguration. The aperture of the imagination triangulates the former, possibility, in the eclipse of a single lens, its cadence suggestive of an unremitting reproduction which is also its interruption. The canal seems quiet, black skin on water gilded, blackened by its shallow depths. Blackened water made darker in contrast with the sun, a man drowns while onlookers record and taunt racial abuse. “Africa! Africa!” “Let him die,” they yell, laughing while jeering “Go back home,” “Piece of shit” (“African Refugee Drowns” 2017). Twenty-two-year-old Pateh Sabally, a vulnerable immigrant from Gambia, must have been paralyzed by icy water barely reaching five degrees Celsius. He drowns in front of dozens of onlookers who watch and record his death, shouting “He is stupid. He wants to die” (Ibid.). In a seemingly parallel chrono-*political* dimension, an Ethiopian domestic worker in Kuwait City hangs from the window of the seventh floor of a multi-story building. Like Sabally, Adesech Sadik is accused of attempting suicide, yet she seemingly lives, if one can call the kafala system a life, graced—believed by some—with another (or is it always the inertia prior to the first?) chance to live.

Imagine the growing cacophony as its inverse drowns out the sound, upon sinking, of the breath stopping; Sabally's heart beats no longer as Sadik's fingers grip tightly. Her Kuwaiti captress videotapes, like the ingenue she envisions herself to be in her dreams, stepping back and watching the young woman hold on to the window with her right hand. The air in the Sabah el-Salem area of the city fills with Sadik's faint cries beseeching, "Hold me! Hold me!", as preamble to her screams (Shaban and Rahman 2017). Her fingers ultimately slip. She falls yet fails to transform into the black corpse of her employer-cum-videographer's imagination. Treated by paramedics, Sadik lives to tell the truth: "I wasn't trying to commit suicide, I was trying to escape from the woman who tried to kill me" (Ibid.). Whether "forcibly thrown" from a window in Kuwait or left to die in Venice's Grand Canal in Italy, without grief recognized as anything but a demand, a need, to reclaim what was taken yet never bestowed, one cannot pass down what the ancestors currently share. Ancestry without birthright and alienation¹ without natality² anchor in not only the performances of a past, but also a collective mourning, without community, for a future denied access to its mirror inscription. In other words, a repetition of death's thetic character condenses into a poetics averse to both the melancholy of grief and investiture in mourning.

In each of these cases, the focus is on watching/seeing and putatively hearing—the dream of a hypotyposis that could inscribe its symptom as metaphor. Both incidents filmed, the active exercise of decoding and encoding the semiotics of pleasure, consumption, and enjoyment. The boundary between viewer and black object of consumption is ineluctably impermeable. Namely, there is no defined limit for feasting upon black objects of desire: an enjoyment persistently indulged in without reservation. We read, we write, we claim to listen, chasing flight into what could never be rendered as possibility. The poetics of the black corpse is its tropological impress that effaces distinction, necropolitical or otherwise. It is neither a negative image nor a positive picture, a circumspection of its obverse, inverse, and reverse. The idea of its being anything but the *real* is both the *Urbild* of its thetic narrative and the principles of a politic.

To this end, there is no inhibition regarding the black body. The inclination toward its hatred is symptomatic of how hate, like love, can only be inscribed. Put differently, one is subject to hate, to antiblack violence, via hypotyposis, its mark. To think it reprehensible, an impossible knowing, its viewing is both a baptism into white supremacy *and* antiblackness: the positive of its negative, erasure in its wake. However, love, like hate, also requires an inscription, what poses as evasion. To defer is simply to breathe, to refuse the contamination of air in its stead. Presuming an impossibility other than materiality, death, in lieu of phantasmic potentiality, shrouds its poetics while murder, what is unimaginable, predicates what can be—that of suicide, its attempts, and failures. Who can say a calculated murder is executed under the auspices of cold, rather than warm, blood? What and why must the temperate nature of cruelty rest in the icy depths attributed to arctic conditions when they also constitute the foundations of poetics: Aristotle's position on the dominance of tragedy over the inferiority of the lyric. For something to be murdered and bequeathed as such it must have been birthed, which is not the same as being born—a twofold process.³ Murder involves being (as in the present and past—being born) and birth, rather than the nomenclature of nothingness and death. The difference: one cannot murder what has been birthed, as one *can* those who were born. What we bring to bear, what has been opposed to what

has been borne, what has been borne by body and psyche, is incomparable on and to the scales of imagination regardless of the attendant discussion of poetics and aesthetics.

But what reduces the contradictory imperatives within—to abolish and suspend, to preserve and transcend—through an anorexic moral judgement that camouflages an imperative to love? To love precisely whom? Or the command to hate—blackness as the object par excellence of white supremacy, the question that has yet to be posed. Can one love absolute dereliction without a Manichean transformation and its necessity to mask love or hate for oneself *as* other—for the other as a reflection, rather than constitution, of an absence of self? Moreover, if the “imponderable is death, whose real grounding is that it cannot be pondered” (Lacan [1966] 2006, 106) then grounded within the *mise-en-scène* of black death and the metonymics of its disavowal in the geometry of truth, possibility, and its deferral in speech and action represent the thetic character of both language and politics. Lacking the judicial authority to condemn or agency to demand, blackness traverses as an ineluctable provocation: the repetition of figuration’s refusal. Blackness in the realm of ontology suffers its aftermath without a genesis. It is the indeterminate place and moment when history, violence, and their global politics submerge, like an “O without a figure” (Shakespeare [1606] 1992, 1.4.152). To posit transcendence in the viscous chasm that only nothingness has the potential to cede.

Part II: Corpse

The following words introduce blackness against a white screen, or paper, displacing that which is unthinkable and what predicates the imaginable: a futility that conjures, reproduces, and eclipses the assumption of its prohibition. Neither thing nor hole, what Lacan describes in relation to the death drive as “real inasmuch as it can only be pondered *qua* impossible” (Lacan [1966] 2006, 106), there are no remnants of the black corpse within the *Urbild* of politics – a language sustained by the terror of aporetics it avers. The aim here, perhaps, is to introduce what could only be a perpetual possibility, of unknowing. The dead-and-undead, among the lifeless, parade the sign: a repetition arrested in its endless deferral of an indispensable psyche, engaged in war with its ruins—a self, dissevered and sedimented in its declivity.

Unlike the Cartesian subject of repetition noted in the first epigraph, violence, rather than the difference between statement and enunciation, engineers the structure of the split black subject. Specifically, the veiling of blackness’ ambivalence regarding liberation from its requisite objection. The last epigraph, published two years before James Baldwin’s death, serves in this same vein. Toying with the phantasmatic division of inside and outside, Baldwin discloses a profound awareness that hatred, like love, hatred *as* love, hatred *metaphorized* and *metamorphosed* as love “dictates” the twin seats occupying the deepest level of interiority—bowels and the heart. Governed by the external command to love and hate, a command from what is all but perfunctory divinity, the one in the position of loving that which is most hated, loving from the position of most hated, hates to the extent that one’s ability to love is enervated from a position of constant descent into what has only be conceived as nothingness. Within the surface of embodiment, whiteness has already dissipated an interior whose externalization marks a gratuitous need for its embodiment.

In other words, corresponding drives for recognition and misrecognition refract with, and without, relation. This is the materiality of the psyche's appetite. War cloaked as an abhorrence for violence, for a reward of a phantasmatic horizon of an Other, for a chance to alchemize disintegration into disalienation: a promise that could shoulder, if not replace, perception beyond sensation.

But what if the injunction to love *something*, not *anything*, is a *perpetual war couched in the politics of the dead body*? Bereft of articulation or semblance outside of this figurative stamp, the black corpse's immateriality proves indispensable to the reality and lie of the real. A mystified call for mastery—for sublation into a fantasy of agency, wholeness. That is, one's capacity to hate rather than one's propensity for dreaming awakens a drive that entails both Eros and Thanatos, not a bifurcation of the two. Yet this conjunction of drives, their irresolution and reputed incommensurability in the Imaginary and Symbolic, are enervated solely by the vigor of their promises of love—which is to say, both whiteness and its capacity to reconstitute hate as the arbiter of ontological peace. A hypotyposis through the poetics of the black corpse inscribes a diacritical juncture that forges meaning through its dual reproduction as both impossibility and the chiasmatic imaginary of its legacy.

Meaning, desire's evasion, circumvention's perpetual desire in flight, bolsters the conception of black death's immovable articulation as impossibility. The ground, the hypotyposis of black death is none other than the figuration of black life, foreshadowed in the fantasies and desires of those who refuse to hear yet see; for they are readers in all respects. Accordingly, the symptom undergirding metaphor, or the displacements buttressing metonymy's presumed foreclosure, catenates in a phantasmatic assumption of being. Represented but loathe to figuration, literality, and therefore *Abbild*, Blackness is a nothingness that is neither wholly one nor entirely an other. Rather, "*it is not a μηδέν [mêden], but a δέν [den]*" (Lacan [1973] 1998, 64). Specifically, it is subjection to widespread abuse, death, shame, and honor killings *for* anything other than black: killings devoid of honor but carried out in the name of the honorable, phenomena that collectively shape and define it as such.

Part III: The God Matrix

Now, they say we write beautiful poetry. Something historically attributed to blackness—that is, mimicry or imitation—can now proudly claim to have mastered the master art. Poetics involves the act of catharsis, if successful, and for centuries the black corpse has provided the medium, object, and mode of cathartic and imitative art—unimaginable, impossible murder of that which is both yet to begin and has yet to depart.

For instance, an unpoetic absolute or contingent proposition: animals consume what they kill. This statement is as categorically true as it is a natural truth for a contingent proposition: the taxonomy that ranks and classifies all Mammalia. But which animals display their kills? Which mammals hide their carrion? All following methods of consumption—deferred, immediate, plot driven, and performative—are exhibited by those who excel at predation. More specifically, those for whom predation marks as the *sine qua non* of the "human, after man" (Wynter 2003).

Antiblackness and white supremacy, as twin precepts, share an ambivalence toward neither love nor hate. Instead, they apportion *jouissance* for all except for that which hatred and love have decimated. In other words, the split subject that devastates the distinctions between life and death. Those who obliterate the ostensibly transparent meanings behind liminality and fissure. A chasm within the void, nothingness without *das ding*, the politics of the black body are the poetics of its chrono-resistant corpse.

But what if, or of, this is the profound ambivalence of love? Or, to speak more plainly and risk losing the precision that the language of black desire requires, how hatred and love share an ambivalent relationship with blackness. Freedom to X, liberation from Y—both distinct and irreducible demands since freedom, in the sense of both positive and negative law, is perhaps the mythic violence that Benjamin categorizes as law-making and law-preserving. Therefore, blackness's potential is nothing but the profundity and profanity of thought. The only mode and manner of theorizing that threatens to annihilate law through preserving its devastation. A messianism with neither a messiah nor a sovereign, violence without judgement, without the weight, the gaze, the ethics of psycho-political freedom that can only be imagined through the position of the subject—a projection of god, of the divine.

Hence, a project of freedom imagined, in and through a hinderance of imagination, a corruption of dreams, which is to say a corruption of love for hatred against the master signifier, against god, against the white master-divinity-god matrix comprising the drive, the agony and intoxicating goal to be white or die trying within the semiotics of the black corpse. A goal of which even whiteness anxiously protects, in its *jouissance*, its hatred of blackness. Hatred is awakening to the nightmare that blackness experiences anything but—because her nothingness of non-being is necessitated by her constitution as an object of hatred. To wit, hatred is dually posited as an external imposition ventriloquized by black desire and demand, while simultaneously understood as a demand for freedom, for recognition, for freedom *from* recognition as the violent unconscious desire that interrupts demand.

Differently put, a repetition compulsion to implore our freedom, even going to war, as an interruption as much as an instantiation of desire. For our desire for freedom is externalized as a resistance to war while demonstrating an acquiescence to its exposition of the object against which a war of all against all could be waged: a resistance to embracing war signals the internalization of hatred without political e/affect. Internal or external to war, or battle, hatred is situated, substitutes, and inserts a self where nothing empties into its abyss. Hence, neither hysterical symptom nor lexical access to the visual codes of black suffering prevent its legibility. Sabally's guileless murder and Sadik's forced obeisance to survivance's wile perform King Lear's command to Cordelia: "Nothing will come of nothing, speak again" (Shakespeare [1606] 1992, 1.1.85). Because nothing can be spoken or written, the death of the signifier and death prior to signification converge on a horizontal metonymic axis that removes Sabally and Sadik from any record of time, if not preventing its initial recording. The black corpse provides cover for not an absence of life, but instead a politically proscribed refusal of a chance to live life, to experience mortality in death—death as permanence that is bestowed freely to any other. Without a beginning or possibility of

becoming, the insistence on blackness as sacrifice results in the reiterative act of its killing: a repetition in both substitution and phantasy. And if the unconscious, like language, is sutured to the former's opacity and the latter's insufficiency, then regardless of the promises of the forgeries of risk—its hopes elided in the transparency of claims to a negative drive—it is not only the real that is unthinkable. Blackness is the urtext of what one can never know and yet only think itself as unknowable.

Notes

¹ Orlando Patterson's seminal study, *Slavery and Social Death* (1982), discusses natality and alienation in the context of slavery. He notes the following insights: "Slaves also differ from contracted athletes and bond servants in their alienation from all ties of natality and in their lack of honor and publicly recognized repute" (26). Furthermore, "Institutionalized marginality, the liminal state of social death, was the ultimate cultural outcome of the loss of natality as well as honor and power. It was in this too that the master's authority rested. For it was he who in a godlike manner mediated between the socially dead and the socially alive" (46).

² Hannah Arendt ([1958] 2013) conceives of natality as a critical facet of a human's capacity as political being: "the human condition of natality; the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting. In this sense of initiative, an element of action, and therefore of natality, is inherent in all human activities. Moreover, since action is the political activity par excellence, natality, and not mortality, may be the central category of political, as distinguished from metaphysical, thought" (9).

³ Arendt's political philosophy of natality reflects much of Western metaphysical thought's production of discursive categories that determine life and death. For her, natality is "ontologically rooted": "It is, in other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born" ([1958] 2013, 247).

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Biography

Dr. Selamawit D. Terrefe was a scholar of unparalleled brilliance and a fearless critic of anti-Blackness. Her groundbreaking research on anti-black violence transformed academic discourse and called us to action. Selamawit's revolutionary spirit extended far beyond her scholarship—she was a loving wife, loyal friend, devoted mentor, and guiding force in the lives of many.

Her voice, laughter, and sharp wit will be profoundly missed, but her legacy endures in her students, her writings, and the countless lives she impacted. As we honor her, we remain guided by her unwavering commitment to truth and liberation.

We invite you to celebrate her life and contributions by reading [her obituary](#) and joining us in carrying her light forward.

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PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

HAUNTING EUROPE: BODIES, BORDERS, AND THE ARTS OF COMMEMORATION

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In September 2015 the world was briefly haunted by images of Alan Kurdi, a two-year-old Syrian child who drowned with his mother and brother while trying to reach the Greek island of Kos from Turkey by boat. The family's goal had been to join relatives in Vancouver, BC. They set upon their fatal journey after being denied a refugee visa by the Canadian government. The heart-wrenching photographs of Alan's small, lifeless body lying face down on the shores of a Turkish beach elicited a short-lived shift in public debates about Europe's so-called migration "crisis." British Prime Minister David Cameron, who had previously described asylum seekers as "a swarm of people coming across the Mediterranean, seeking a better life, wanting to come to Britain," pledged to accept 20,000 Syrian refugees, noting that "we will continue to show the world that this country is a country of extra compassion, always standing up for our values and helping those in need" (Cameron 2015). German Chancellor Angela Merkel said that "if Europe fails on the question of refugees, if this close link with universal civil rights is broken, then it won't be the Europe that we wished for" (quoted in Eddy 2015).

According to data collected by the International Organization of Migrants' Missing Migrants Project, more than 70,000 people lost their lives while attempting to cross an international border between 2014 and 2024 (Missing Migrants Project, n.d.). About half of these deaths occurred in the Central Mediterranean, an area that holds the dubious honor of being the world's deadliest border zone

(ibid.). Following a series of high profile shipwrecks off the Italian island of Lampedusa in 2015, Pope Francis warned European leaders that the Mediterranean Sea was in danger of becoming a “vast graveyard” (Traynor 2014).

Widely circulated photographs of capsized boats, overcrowded dinghies, discarded life jackets, and dead bodies have all too clearly demonstrated the human costs of what Reece Jones calls “the global border regime”—a system that works to preserve opportunities and privileges for some by restricting access to movement and resources for others (Jones 2016). Such images may help spread awareness about the violence of borders. Speaking to reporters in Canada, Alan’s aunt Tima said that the world’s perception of the plight of Syrian refugees had fundamentally changed as a result of the death of her nephew. “It was something about that picture,” she said. “God put the light on that picture to wake up the world” (cit. Devichand 2016).

In response to the growing numbers of border deaths, artists and activists have staged various interventions aimed at publicly mourning, remembering, and naming the dead, engaging in what Maurice Stierl has termed “grief activism” (2016). Recognizing that individuals who die during their attempts at crossing the Mediterranean are often permanently lost at sea or, if recovered, are hastily buried in anonymous, mass graves, these “commemor-actions” seek to render visible both the structural violence of borders and the human toll of the global border regime. As Stierl argues, grief activism is a “transformative political practice that can foster relationalities and communities in opposition to a politics of division, abandonment, and necropolitical violence on which Europe’s border regime thrives” (Stierl 2016, 173). By centering the issue of death in migration struggles, grief activism has the potential to advance new forms of solidarity and to promote alternative visions of political community beyond the nation-state. The public performance of grief is a potent political force that works to destabilize the taken-for-granted nature of the global border regime, perhaps even contributing to its undoing.

This article examines three instances of grief activism connected to border deaths in Europe. My focus is on *Die Toten kommen* (“The Dead Are Coming”), a campaign by the Berlin-based Center for Political Beauty, *Asmat* (“Names”), a film by Ethiopian-Italian director Dagmawi Yimer, and Turkish visual artist Banu Cennetoğlu’s *The List*. Each intervention draws on different repertoires of action, performance, and critique to perform alternative gestures of mourning and memorialization that call attention to the structural violence of militarized borders and racialized membership. The Center for Political Beauty relies on public commemorative rituals like the construction of makeshift cemeteries and the staging of funeral ceremonies for deceased refugees to stretch mourning spatially by materializing burial places that connect locations and geographies that borders aim to separate. Conversely, Yimer and Cennetoğlu’s work foregrounds the importance of naming and remembering the dead as individual human beings, stretching mourning temporally through the public echo of naming the dead and keeping alive the memory of their loss beyond its sanctioned erasure. Taken together, these works exemplify the multifaceted ways in which the dead figure into transformative political projects. Furthermore, they illustrate how acts of mourning can bolster claims for more inclusive forms of citizenship and political community by

destabilizing ethnocentric and territorially bounded conceptions of membership, identity, and solidarity.

My approach to the politics of mourning is informed by Judith Butler's influential work on precarity and loss. In an essay written in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks and the onset of the Global War on Terror, Butler poses a series of generative questions about the radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability and precarity are distributed across the globe. "Who counts as human?" they ask. "Whose lives count as lives? [...] What *makes for a grievable life*?" (Butler 2004, 20). Their concerns stem from the observation that a hierarchy of grief and grievability informs ideas about the value of human life. This hierarchy rests on the presupposition that some lives (and deaths) matter more than others and should be protected and grieved for accordingly. According to Butler:

Some lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death? (xv)

Within this context, mourning practices are politically significant because they help delimit the boundaries of human communities. As Bonnie Honig argues, "mourning practices postulate certain forms of collective life and so how we mourn is a deeply political issue" (Honig 2009, 10).

Yet, not all losses are acknowledged as such, nor deemed worthy of public commemoration. In Butler's view, certain normative frames mitigate against the public recognition of loss. More specifically, "forms of racism instituted and active at the level of perception tend to produce iconic versions of populations who are eminently grieveable, and others whose loss is no loss and who remain ungrievable" (Butler 2010, 24). Elsewhere, I have proposed moving beyond a dichotomous framework of "grieveable" versus "ungrievable" life by approaching grievability as a spectrum that reflects the production of a range of subject positions in death (Balkan 2016). Nonetheless, Butler's insights on the political salience of mourning practices have been exemplified by numerous efforts to recognize and remember "ungrievable" border deaths in Europe.

"The Dead Are Coming"

One noteworthy example is The Center for Political Beauty (CPB), a Berlin-based performance art collective which describes itself as "an assault team that establishes moral beauty, political poetry, and human greatness while aiming to preserve humanitarianism" (Center for Political Beauty n.d.). The CPB has staged several public actions and demonstrations to draw attention to the violence of borders, including a high profile campaign in 2015 known as *Die Toten kommen* ("The Dead Are Coming"). The campaign culminated in the exhumation and reburial of Safea Jamil Deeb, a 34-year-old Syrian refugee who had drowned in the Mediterranean. Deeb had initially been buried in an unmarked grave in Sicily by Italian authorities. With her family's permission, the CPB exhumed her

corpse and transported it to Berlin. There, the group held an elaborate funeral ceremony, describing their campaign's aims and objectives in a message posted on their website:

Every day, hundreds of migrants die at Europe's aggressively sealed-off borders. These borders are the world's deadliest. Year after year, thousands of people die trying to cross them. The victims of this cordon sanitaire are buried in masses in the hinterland of Southern European states. They have no names. No one looks for their relatives. No one brings them flowers.

The Center for Political Beauty took these dead immigrants from the EU's external borders right to the heart of Europe's mechanism of defense: to the German capital. Those who died of thirst or hunger at our borders on their way to a new life, were thus able to reach the destination of their dreams beyond their death. Together with the victims' relatives, we opened inhumane graves, identified and exhumed the bodies and brought them to Germany.

Reactions to the event were mixed. Some German media outlets characterized the CPB's actions as "political pornography," while others saw in their acts "the most radical interpretation of Sophocles' *Antigone*" in recent memory, suggesting that "maybe our routine, our getting used to pictures of the suffering at Europe's external borders needs exactly such moments of shock." The *Berliner Zeitung* opined that "we are being confronted with the consequences of what we do or don't do," noting that the CPB's intervention "transforms refugees into people" (see Mund 2015).



Poster for Die Totten Kommen, Berlin

A few days later, the CPB staged another public demonstration in which hundreds of people marched to the Federal Chancellery to construct a “Cemetery to the Unknown Immigrants.” Some of the marchers wore black suits and carried styrofoam gravestones. Others came bearing flowers, shovels, and spades. Upon reaching the Platz der Republik, an expansive green space in front of the Chancellery, the marchers broke through police barricades and began digging ditches using all the tools at their disposal, including their bare hands. In the scuffles that followed, several people were arrested for illegally trespassing on the lawn. Nonetheless, the protestors managed to dig nearly one hundred makeshift graves, which they decorated with flowers, candles, and signs that read, “Borders Kill” and “Nobody is illegal” (von Bieberstein and Evren 2016).

In assessing the efficacy and impact of public interventions like the CPB’s *The Dead Are Coming*, media scholar Karina Horsti acknowledges that these events may not directly translate into a political force that would compel governments to open their borders. Nevertheless, by rendering visible a form of violence that often remains hidden, such performances help generate new, counter-hegemonic political possibilities. As Horsti puts it, “events have afterlives and critical action in the present may contribute to a politically transformative force in the future” (Horsti 2019, 6).

Others read CPB’s campaigns as acts of citizenship because they engendered new ways of acting politically and relating to one another (Lewicki 2017, 276). By foregrounding questions of borders and mourning, *The Dead Are Coming* brings into view “a politics of mourning without borders” (von Bieberstein and Evren 2016, 472). Such a politics works to disrupt nationalist scripts of kinship by extending grief to those outside the national community (462). Furthermore, it renders visible the complex web of relations that connect people seeking asylum with those whose governments often reject such claims. Through commemorative practices that foster radical equality—something that political institutions fail to provide—the performance of grief and mourning instigates new ways of relating to others and new forms of community, solidarity, and belonging.

Naming the Dead: *Asmat* (“Names”) and *The List*

A similar impulse can be seen in the works of Ethiopian-Italian filmmaker Dagmawi Yimer and Turkish visual artist Banu Cennetoğlu. Yimer left Ethiopia in 2005, arriving in Lampedusa a year later after crossing the Libyan desert and the Mediterranean Sea. He settled in Rome and was one of the co-founders of the Archivio Memorie Migranti (Archive of Migrant Memories) collective, which helps produce written and audiovisual narratives made by migrants about their experiences. The collective describes its artistic strategy as follows:

AMM’s activities are based on the use of participatory methods enhancing a multiplicity of forms of expression. Careful attention to the listening context and the quality of the speaker-listener relationship is at the core of our approach. The adoption of ‘circular’ and intersecting forms of storytelling makes it possible for the speaker-listener roles to be interchangeable. Listening is preceded by establishing a common space, sharing levels of discourse and ideals, working not only *among* migrants but *with* them, so that in representing themselves, they can be the

protagonists of their stories and can master the tools of self-expression. (Archivio Memorie Migranti 2007)

The collective's methodology sheds light on both the dialogic character and pedagogical aims of their aesthetic interventions. The works produced by AMM embody what Federica Mazzara has termed an "aesthetics of subversion." In her view, such works offer "a new narrative around the migratory experience," and also function as an effective way "to respond to the distortion of the 'migration crisis' scopic regime" (Mazzara 2019, 132).

In 2015, Yimer released the film *Asmat* (Names), a tribute to the 368 Eritrean lives that were lost at sea after their boat capsized off the coast of the Italian island of Lampedusa on October 3, 2013 (Archivio Memorie Migranti 2015). The film opens with a blank screen and the sounds of gentle ocean waves. A lone female voice sings a mournful and hypnotic melody. As the screen fades from black into color, the viewer sees images of a serene, crystal-blue seascape. Suddenly, the perspective shifts to first person as the camera moves underwater, mimicking the experience of someone struggling in the water. After a few minutes of violent thrashing, the camera goes still and the image blurs out of focus. The person has drowned. A single female voice returns, softly singing the following lines:

You who are alive
are condemned to listen
to these screams.
You will not cover your ears
because our cry is loud and strong.
Nothing can stop it.
Our bodies
will land on your shores

Asmat offers a searing indictment of the political structures that lead to the loss of life in the Mediterranean. It speaks directly to government leaders in both Africa and Europe as well as to people of faith around the world, exposing hypocrisies on all sides:

You African politicians
History will remember you
as the most impotent people of our times.
You make people flee, you make them suffer
You make laws that you would not enforce on your children.
With each victim dying in the sea
You are more naked and exposed.
You European Politicians
We are here, we came here
To observe your actions
The civilization you boast of.
You believers
Who are expecting something from the sky
Don't you see that Christ's body is arriving from the sea?
Can't you see God in the Other?

The narrator goes on to pronounce the names of all 368 Eritreans who drowned in the Lampedusa shipwreck. The names are spoken in the Tigrinya language and their meanings are simultaneously translated into English and Italian. According to Yimer, the intention behind the strategy of naming the dead was “to defy the attention and patience of the public, in order to bring back the numbers of the tragedy to the reality of the names” (cit. Federica and Ramsey 2019, 38). Before naming the dead, the narrator makes one final pronouncement that gives insight into what Yimer believes is at stake in mourning their deaths and commemorating their memory:

You poor parents
are condemned
to live without knowing what happened to your children.
Whether they are alive or dead.
Call them if they can hear you.
Look for them deep down.
Call them
if they can hear you.
Tell them the meaning of their names.
Speak their endless names.
There is no right time to die.
We are more visible dead than alive.
We existed even before October the 3rd
We’ve been traveling for years.
We’ve been drowning for years.



Still from Asmat, 2015.

As Simona Wright has observed, Yimer's film "commemorates life by actualizing its absence" (Wright 2018, 91). The act of naming is at once an effort to render visible the invisible dead but also a critique of the structural conditions which grant certain people more visibility in death than in life. In Karen Remmler's reading, the film "doubles as an indictment of the oppressive and harmful policies of neglect, outright persecution, and exclusion at the root of the displacement of migrants and refugees" (Remmler 2020). By calling out the names of the dead, names such as hope, peace, and beauty, Asmat brings into view their "now absent future lives" (ibid.), while also honoring their existence prior to their deaths on October 3, 2013. Like The CPB's *The Dead Are Coming* campaign, the film instantiates a politics of mourning without borders by extending grief to those violently excluded by European border regimes. It stretches mourning temporally by extending the memory of loss beyond its sanctioned erasure, shining light on these names without bodies.

In shifting the narrative away from numbers to persons, Asmat employs a similar strategy as *The List*, a work by Turkish visual artist Banu Cennetoğlu. *The List* documents the names, genders, age, regions of origin, and cause of death of 36,570 people who perished "due to the restrictive policies of Fortress Europe" (Cennetoğlu 2019). It has appeared in a variety of forms such as poster campaigns in railway stations, newspaper inserts, and on billboards in a number of European countries including Germany, Switzerland, Norway, England, Italy, Bulgaria, Greece, the Netherlands, and Turkey. In discussing its various incarnations, Cennetoğlu notes that people relate to *The List* differently when it is presented as a physical object. "When you hold it there's a way to relate to it that's better than an infinite scrolling experience," she observes. "When there is a screen, you have somehow the power to isolate yourself" (quoted in Higgins 2018). As a public, physical object, *The List* demands attention. "People should be able to see it despite themselves, and despite that they are caught up in their daily lives," says Cennetoğlu, noting that her goal was "to put it out there without any announcement, without any direct negotiation with the audience but somehow in a negotiated space" (ibid.).

According to Cennetoğlu, the emotional power of *The List* lays in its ability to compel the observer to acknowledge the singularity of each death. By doing so, viewers may start to reflect upon the ways in which their own personal choices are implicated in the complex web of politics that causes border deaths in the first place. For Cennetoğlu, part of the challenge lies in making visible a form of structural violence that governments try to obscure. "Governments don't keep these records for the public; they don't want the public to see these records because it exposes their policies," she says (ibid.).

Like the CPB's *The Dead Are Coming* campaign, *The List* memorializes those whose deaths may otherwise go unnoticed or ungrieved by the wider public, seeking to give them greater visibility and legibility. By disrupting the monopoly that official powers have tried to exercise over the memories of the dead, it also challenges dominant conceptions of the nation that are limited to those that the state acknowledges and counts as its own (Keenan and Mohebbi 2020). As an ephemeral and peripatetic document that appears in different iterations across the European continent, *The List* functions as a deterritorialized counter-monument to the dead. For those it names, often individuals whose bodies were lost at sea or buried in anonymous graves, it serves as a "distinctive, iterant resting place" (ibid., 167).



The List, on view in Berlin, 2017

Conclusion

Taken together, Cennetoğlu's *The List*, Yimer's *Asmat* (Names) and the CPB's *The Dead Are Coming* campaign all foreground border deaths to develop critiques of restrictive immigration policies and militarized borders in Europe. Although they rely on different means and media, they coalesce around a common purpose. By honoring and remembering those who have been excluded by European nation-states, these performances and interventions problematize territorially bounded conceptions of solidarity and enact a more expansive idea of the We. The dead are central characters in this prefigurative politics and serve as a haunting reminder of the stakes of political inclusion and citizenship in a world where such distinctions can be a matter of life or death.

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Biography

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PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

WOUNDED OBJECTS: MEXICAN AND GLOBAL CONTEXTS OF DISPOSABLE LIFE

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In this article, I consider visual and textual figurations of wounding, disability and death and their impact on the recognizability and valorization of human lives. I attend to transformed perceptions of temporal continuity and qualifications of the lifespan through select documents from Mexico and the US-Mexico borderlands. The analysis centers on what I call the wounded object, appearing through a violent cross-section of the living and the dead, the human and the artifact, suspending the divide between singular identity and uncountable anonymity. Following an introduction of the concept of the wounded object, my discussion continues with an analysis of the function of wounded objects through statistical renditions of mortality rates compiled by the Mexican government, as in other global contexts in the COVID-19 era. Here, “co-morbidities” such as diabetes and heart disease violently pre-assign some bodies to deceased status, even as multiple, layered factors shape the conditions of such human disposability, while also blurring relations of causality linking conditions to outcomes. I then turn to an image from a contemporary lithograph by Linda Lucia Santana referencing the famed mid-19th-century Mexican borderlands outlaw and lynching victim, Joaquin Murrieta. I offer this work as a mode of representation that frames the racialized body through performed gestures of spectacularity and anonymity, the one and the many, evoking the wounded object and its denunciation of violent injustice.

The juxtaposition of these disparate references, from tables of numbers to a lithograph, underscores the simultaneously tangible and abstract qualities of wounding, and the malleability of the wounded object, a concept that attends to ambivalent transitions between flesh and inanimate matter. In each instance, wounding confounds the distance between the specificity and the anonymity of the body, between human life and remains, as well as between the violence occurring in the here and now, and the ambivalence of events that may have already happened or not yet taken place. My theory of such objects, rather than seeking to enliven matter, pays attention to the perception of life in proximity to death. This approach is motivated in part by a sense that a new materialist privileging of the liveliness of matter, while useful to our understanding of the agency of non-human objects, risks blurring over human inequalities that condition access to liveliness as unbounded flourishing.¹ The role of the wounded object—its action and effect—instead is to demand attention to an unequally distributed human disposability, and to the suspension of death in life. In this sense, the wounded object in its performative function makes imperative our critical witnessing of asymmetrical mortality.

The example of statistics in COVID times suggests a biopolitical technology of power, in which the tangible aspects of the deaths and the making-disposable of population sectors are largely obscured through the proliferation of data. In contrast, the graphic depiction of wounding and death in the lithograph implies the work of a prior mode of sovereign power through the explicit violence of the spectacle, the targeted killing of individuals.² In a related sense, if numbers and graphs tend to enact distance from the deaths and wounding to which they refer, the use of artistic representation may sharpen our critical response to a specific infliction of violence. Yet attention to the role of wounded objects in both cases shows how the biopolitical and the sovereign—or the anonymous and the identified—may blur into one another, as these ableist and racist technologies of power collapse disability and death into a common terrain of predetermined devaluation. In other words, while the use of statistical data performs an obscuring of the processes by which some population sectors are marked as disposable, the lithograph instead performs a direct and explicit encounter with historical and ongoing violence. Yet in each case, the performative work of the wounded object also entails drawing critical attention to the shared spaces of human devaluation, by turns obscured and explicit, tangible and abstract.

I would like to offer a brief explanation of my concept of the wounded object here, recognizing that in doing so, I participate in a performative gesture, in two ways. First, in a more general and obvious sense, the explicit introduction of a concept, one that claims to be new, serves as both the birthing of that concept and the staging of its importance. Second, because the wounded object tends to move between the tangible and the abstract, the singular and the multiple, the living and the dead, sometimes blurring the lines between categories, some readers will object that this phenomenon is not an object at all. In insisting on the wounded object's existence and by giving it a name, I underscore forms of violence that are no less real for being difficult to define and capture. The wounded object as a concept in turn performs through acts of denunciation, allowing us to critically witness connections between seemingly disparate forms and representations of violence, between the anonymous and the named.

The wounded object is not a dead body or a partial fragment of human remains, nor is it simply a thing that has been damaged. It is instead the evocation of a violent present tense, troubled in its divide between singularity and multiplicity, and between living being and inanimate matter. It is here but cannot be claimed. Perhaps what appears of this object is a past or future wounding, the evidence of what has been or will be, for the wounded object also troubles distinctions between times of wounding—whether postponed, anticipated or present. Wounds and scars convey a tension between violence and denunciation, or trauma and resistance, as well as between life and death, marking the blurred divide between what has just happened and its future repetition. Through such uncertainties, the wounded object reveals violence and the critical witnessing of violence as a disruption to chronological history (Antebi 2021, 192–196).³ The temporal ambivalence of the wound or scar also suggests the structure of performance, in the sense of its repeating gestures towards prior rehearsals or future reenactments (Caruth 1995).

The ephemeral and ungraspable quality of the wounded object makes it difficult to define as a concept, which adds to its threatening or disturbing quality, while also allowing it to move between diverse manifestations, from those in which it seems to adhere to a specific body, to more abstract evocations of the effects of violence. Rather than presenting itself as a singular, materially tangible thing, the wounded object abides in the relationships it evokes between observable phenomena or other objects, both human and non-human, and particularly in the violent or painful causalities it makes visible. As a concept, the wounded object alludes as well to aspects of Timothy Morton's (2013) theory of hyperobjects, in the sense of such objects' interobjectivity and their viscosity, or adherence to what they touch. Wounded objects similarly announce themselves through in-betweenness and transitional states and are difficult to grasp.

The observation of statistical data, encompassing the numerical representation of human populations, offers a possibly counter-intuitive approach to the concept of the wounded object, given the abstract quality of such renditions. While the use of statistics exemplifies biopolitical understandings of relationships between states, markets, populations, and individuals, my reading here expands to consider the particularity of affective responses to numbers, and the uncertain movement between tangible and abstract renditions of human life (Mader 2007). The history of statistics shares an intimate relationship to that of eugenics, and by extension to the measurement of human bodies, and physical and cognitive capacities, generally geared toward the goal of the minimization of error—understood here as both error in measurement and error as deviation from normalcy (Hacking 2014). In this sense, attention to statistics necessarily encompasses a proximity to the body, and to historical or ongoing efforts to measure it. In her 2021 book, *Sostener la mirada*, Karina Marín posits a direct relationship between statistics, in its documentation of differences through data, and the regime of the visual; the data are something we can visualize, or are typically rendered in visual formats to make them easier to grasp and digest, in the same way that disability has historically been defined and shaped through a politics of visibility, determining which bodies should appear, and how they should appear (Marín 2021, 8). We can therefore imagine statistics as a nexus through which embodiment and its spectrum of deviations, standards, and ideals make their appearance, combining visual and abstract renditions in a singular form.

The notion of transparency is often evoked as a goal and advantage of statistical data, with the suggestion that fully visible and accessible data work to combat violence and impunity. This is the case in the Mexican context over the past two decades, in particular, where a series of transparency laws and initiatives have emerged, in part as a response to increases in rates of homicides, femicides and disappearances, most of which remain unsolved (Cortés Ontiveros 2005). In some instances, the numbers themselves become a source of fascination, encapsulating the missing evidence of bodies or other facts to be uncovered. This was the case in an internationally compelling story, picked up by a number of major US newspapers. Two mathematicians in Mexico City studied the discrepancy between numbers of officially reported deaths from COVID-19, and the much higher number found by the group Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad. In May of 2020, the group counted 4,577 possible COVID deaths in Mexico City, which was three times the official number (Sheridan 2021).⁴ Using an algorithm on civil registry websites, the mathematicians were able to calculate the specific number of ‘excess’ deaths. By early March 2021, the Mexican government ultimately confirmed an excess of 444,722 nationwide (Sheridan 2021; Despeghe and Romero Zavala 2020). In discussion pieces on this story, circulating in venues from *Nexos* to the *Washington Post*, the plot hinges on the revelation of a number, or series of numbers, and whether these numbers will remain available or hidden from public view. The role of numbers here becomes central to the reader’s affective response to the story, without which it would not be a story at all. In this tense equation, what is at stake is not only the answer to the question of how many, but how the disparity between different answers to that question suggests a graded approach to the issue of proximity to death, and hence the relative disposability of certain population sectors. In this particular rendition of biopolitics as a real-time unfolding of partial access to data, the wounded object emerges through the numbers’ failure to inspire confidence in their accuracy, and points to their insufficiency, of what they cannot show. Within this setting, numbers are both the damaged residue of incomplete evidence, and an always-expanding, comprehensive tabulation of deaths and diagnoses. The wounded object adheres to a visible number, as if to momentarily inhabit its location on the page or the screen. This is not to say that humans or bodies have been reduced to numbers, as is sometimes argued. Instead, the digits congeal their own scene of violence by encompassing an ongoing oscillation between the lively and deathly qualities of the bodies they conjure.

Recent scholarship notes that prior to the pandemic, Mexico had already seen a reduction in life expectancy, due to increases in homicides over the past two decades, along with increases in cases of diabetes and heart disease, adding that such radical statistical changes are due to “*circunstancias altamente anómalas*” such as war or the collapse of a health care system (Laurell 2020, 967–68). The context of these shifts is important, since it underscores a kind of layering of conditions of disposability. The notion of “*vidas desechables*” (disposable lives), familiar in the context of disability studies, as in analyses of debility or slow death, works here not because of a single condition or category, but generally through multiple, sometimes indeterminate factors that accumulate on top of each other (Puar 2017; Berlant 2007). This accumulation of factors then allows for the violent biopolitical representation of some bodies as already marked for death. The designation of a “pre-existing condition,” which is sometimes classified as a “co-morbidity” when a person develops acute illness, partially encapsulates this idea, so that those with any such condition fall into the category

of expected deaths, perhaps even while they are still alive. However, if multiple conditions, including racialization, socioeconomic status, and health factors, are layered together, and if these are presented in terms of the population or collective, rather than as individual cases, it becomes difficult to say which condition produces another, or which 'layered disposability,' determines subsequent outcomes for individuals or populations. The numbers tell this story, while also gesturing repeatedly to what they cannot contain, what is not yet known because of a current lack of data, but also what exceeds the quantitative tools of epidemiology. This is not to suggest that we simply need to uncover the "real" faces beneath the depersonalization of numbers. Instead, it is worth paying attention to the way we respond to the numbers themselves, and the way their layering performs an uncertain logic of proliferating differences, with proximity to death as the promise of a way of being counted.

Statistical data, as in the example of documentation of excess deaths, visualized as graphs or columns of numbers, offer a commonplace, though perhaps not intuitively apparent, format for what I have called the wounded object, combining the specific and the multiple, along with a temporal fusion that brings the fact of death as singular instant into a continuous, unending present. In these instances, the abstraction of a numerical rendition of lives and deaths defines the wounded object in its performance of distance from tangible violence. It is nonetheless this ambivalent distance, or apparent obscuring, that at the same time paradoxically requires our critical attention as witnesses to the absence of the counted and the uncounted.

In contrast, I turn now to a more graphic example, even at the risk of preempting the concept of the wounded object through an overly fleshly specificity. The picture I have in mind is a lithograph created by the artist Linda Lucia Santana. It is part of a series documenting renowned figures of Mexican and border history, images of folk heroes and their corresponding *corridos* (Santana 2013). In this case, the picture refers to Joaquín Murrieta, a Mexican miner, and victim of lynching at the hands of California rangers in the mid-19th century.⁵ The image shows two jars on a table, and beside them a skull. One jar holds a human head labeled "Joaquín Murrieta" and the other, a hand labeled "three-fingered Jack." In the background, a small flag of the Republic of California is visible on the wall. The caption to the picture reads, "Joaquín Murrieta-Society of California Pioneers, C. 1904." Perhaps this image is derived from a drawing found among archival papers, as the caption suggests; Santana's work is characterized by careful, even photographic attention to detail, framing and repeating the act of historical preservation, making it new. Her lithographs and drawings, images and texts, hover between performance and archive, confounding the role of the spectator before documents that are, and are not, historically fixed, akin to wounds themselves insistent in their present tense.⁶

Murrieta has come to occupy a fraught position, suspended between violently inflicted notoriety and a form of extended, collective anonymity that is common with victims of lynching, but also with those of other extra-judicial modes of "disappearance." This is in part because of the mythification and uncertainty surrounding Murrieta's identity, through which he was associated with the racialized stereotype of the Mexican "bandit" (Leal 1995, 2-3). The tension between the one and the many hence bridges the 19th- to early 20th-Century lynchings of the US south and borderlands

and the present-day impunity through which both named individuals and countless thousands are disappeared or killed. In the 21st-century context, unsolved homicides and disappearances have proliferated in Mexico, primarily within a racialized and economically precarious demographic, in which the numbers of the dead or disappeared supersede their individual names. Yet cases such as the 2014 disappearance of 43 students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teacher's College and subsequent protests and investigation underscore the divide between the specificity of some names and faces, and the sheer quantity of other victims.

As Ken Gonzales-Day writes of lynchings in the US Southwest, and of the archival sources through which they may be accessed, the stereotypical staging of many lynching photographs and postcards, and the ephemeral quality of archival images, sometimes replaced by copy prints of reduced quality, contribute to the erasure of historical specificity, and of individual names and stories. Over time, details fade away, and only a few generic or stereotypical narratives can be preserved (Gonzales-Day 2006, 117–119). As a legendary figure, celebrated in a number of works for his alleged bravery and resistance to Anglo oppression and exploitation, Murrieta nonetheless emblemizes the erasure of other, uncountable Californios, and in doing so begins to paradoxically perform his own erasure.

Visual still renditions of the effects of violence, as in the case of Santana's work, offer one approach to the dilemma of the wounded object, capturing the frozen quality of an unchangeable present tense as well as the blurred suture between identity and anonymity. The intentional artistry of the image does not function to reveal the "facts" of the case in a complete or transparent fashion, but rather gestures towards a history of obfuscations and revelations, in which answers to questions about the violent event are promised, postponed, and sometimes partially delivered. The graphic quality of such work in its depiction of border history and human remains conveys a visceral cruelty to the viewer, inciting engagement and response. In Santana's lithograph of the staged remains of Joaquín Murrieta and his accomplice, the wounded object seems to emerge in an obvious fashion, allowing viewers a sense of direct access to the scene of a crime that repeats through its restagings. The performance of an encounter with a notoriously violent historical event nevertheless repeats the impossibility of accounting for Murrieta, his body, and the other bodies this image evokes.

As in the case of statistical data, the artistic rendition also displays the quandary of death in life. The image freezes partial human forms, as if in a collection or cabinet of curiosities, while the inclusion of the skull suggests a reference to the genre of *vanitas* painting, with its grim reminder to viewers of the transience of life (Zimmerman 2019). This rendition, however, challenges the conventionally universal message of the *vanitas* image, by marking its scene as particular to a racialized borderlands community, its history and repetitions. The singularity of the image and of Murrieta's story at once signals an excess, that of other uncounted, unnamed racialized victims. Returning now to the numerical documentation of deaths, this time with the lithograph in mind, we may notice that here too the deathly residue around certain numbers—those higher or lower than expected, or incommensurate with what they purport to represent—stems from a distinction of excess. And it is this excess, although a numerical abstraction, that highlights the presence of

those whose biopolitical conditions of made-disposability, layered through the categories of socio-economic status, age, racialization, and comorbidities, may have classified them as already dead.

The wounded object as I have described it here necessarily resists attempts at absolute definition or classification. As a concept, it suggests the ephemeral and the in-between, shifting from distanced to direct evocations of violent acts and their effects. Our difficulty in approaching the wounded object may stem from this ambivalent quality, as we may be uncertain whether we are perceiving an object, its residue, or the absence it signals; if we wish to make such distinctions, the wounded object nonetheless supersedes them. In this reading I have intentionally juxtaposed two distinct moments as examples of wounded objects, a 21st-century statistical rendition of “excess” deaths and a lithograph displaying body parts of 19th-century murder victims. While these examples focus on Mexico and the Mexico-US borderlands, the concept of the wounded object they illustrate is applicable to numerous other sites and to a globalized production of unequally distributed violence. Placed together, the wounded objects I have foregrounded here perform a simultaneous blurring and clarification of the death that saturates everyday life for some bodies and communities, while leaving others relatively intact. The performance, in each case, entails a marking of the distance between the viewer and the human disposability she witnesses. The wounded object signals the imperative to continue to traverse that distance.

Notes

¹ The notion of the liveliness of matter has become familiar through a growing body of new materialist and posthumanist scholarship. See for example Bennett (2010); Chen (2012); Coole and Frost (2010); Alaimo (2010). For critiques of Bennett, see Povinelli (2016) and Lemke (2018).

² The standard source for this distinction between the sovereign and the biopolitical is Foucault (2003).

³ These observations also borrow from Deleuze (1990).

⁴ Note that the group, Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad, and its founder, Claudio X. González Guajardo have been extensively accused of corrupt practices including tax evasion, unethical conflicts of interest, and of targeted attacks on the government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador. See for example Delgado Gómez (2023).

⁵ The story of Murrieta includes an extensive range of artistic responses and documentation of events, many combining fictional and non-fictional intentions, or confounding the two. Examples include Rollin Ridge (1854); Valadez (2016); Nuñez (2006); and Neruda (1967).

⁶ The observation on performance and archive derives from Preston (2018).

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Biography

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PERFORMANCE
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THE AFTERLIVES OF *TERRA NULLIUS*: UNMARKED GRAVES, INDIGENOUS 'DISCOVERIES', AND COLONIAL AFTER-THOUGHTS

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The 2013 film *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* by writer-director Jeff Barnaby, of the Mi'kmaq nation, tells a fictionalized story about Indian residential schools in Canada.¹ The film's narrative centers on a Mi'kmaq Indian reserve in the mid-1970s, where Aila, a teenage Mi'kmaq girl, sells drugs to pay off truant officers to keep her and her friends from having to attend the local residential school. The film begins in 1969, when Aila's mother commits suicide after accidentally killing her son Tyler, Aila's younger brother, for which Aila's father takes the blame and goes to prison. In the narrative backstory, her parents were victims of the local residential school. These schools existed in Canada and the United States from the late 19th to the late 20th centuries, and in Canada at least 150,000 Indigenous children attended residential schools. The colonizing function of residential schools was to eliminate Indigenous people as a distinct people through coerced assimilation to Euro-American norms. Among other things, residential schools made it easier to steal Indigenous territory by fracturing Indigenous communities (see Brown and Estes 2018). The inter-generational trauma produced by these schools haunts Aila's waking life and her dreams. Notably, Aila's dead brother Tyler appears in her dreams, standing in the woods, his clothes, face and hair darkened with dirt as if he just crawled out of the grave. Tyler's ghost has a message for Aila, which he delivers after truant officers forcibly take her to the residential school, where she is beaten and her braids

violently shorn by nuns, after which they throw her into a locked cell where she passes out. Here Tyler returns to Aila's dreams to lead her through the woods beside the school, toward a clearing, where he points for her to walk forward and look. Aila covers her mouth in horror at what she finds. The camera pulls back to show her standing on the edge of an open pit filled with the dead bodies of dozens of children piled on top of each other—a residential school mass unmarked grave. The dream has revealed a nightmare. It is possible that to some viewers—especially those of us who are not Indigenous—the scene could appear to be a dramatic exaggeration to reinforce the horror of residential schools. In fact, it revealed a deeper truth that was buried, literally and figuratively, by the Canadian government and the Catholic church. This ugly truth became clearer to the public eye eight years later. Aila's nightmare of a fictionalized residential school mass grave eerily foreshadowed the May 2021 discovery of unmarked graves by the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation on the grounds of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia, on their unceded territory, containing the remains of 215 children, some estimated to be as young as three years old. The Catholic church ran the school until 1969, when the Canadian federal government took it over until it closed in 1978.

For decades, children of the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc nation as well as other First Nations in the province were forced to go to the school, and many of these children did not return home. The story told by Canadian and Catholic officials to First Nations families about the fate of their missing children was that they ran away, never heard from again, and thus they were not on school grounds, either alive or dead. This response by church and state officials to Indigenous claims about the whereabouts of their children is a contemporary form of *terra nullius*, to draw upon a key concept in colonialist logic used to justify seizing Indigenous territories centuries ago on the premise that these lands were empty of people. No one was there, went this logic, and thus the land was available for Europeans to claim. In our time, I argue, this logic of *terra nullius* took on an after-life in which it served to deny the embodied presence and thus evidence of the harm done to Indigenous children by residential schools. Once again, now in the 21st century, government and church officials of the colonizing society deemed the land to be empty of Indigenous people, here in the form of human remains. However, the colonizer's view is not the end of this story; Indigenous people have their own stories that counter colonial erasure through the assertion of Indigenous nationhood, presence and resistance. Indigenous communities such as the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc heard stories from former students about what happened to their missing peers. The First Nation thus initiated their own search, and the use of ground-penetrating radar led to the discovery of the children's remains. In the words of Chief Rosanne Casimir of the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation, the radar technology allowed them to "look beneath the surface of the soil and to confirm some of the stories that were once told [...] we do know that there is still more to be discovered." To Casimir, what they revealed to the public was "a harsh reality and it's our truth, it's our history...And it's something that we've always had to fight to prove. To me, it's always been a horrible, horrible history" (Austin 2021/2022). The discovery in Kamloops was the first of many across the country that revealed the "horrible history" that many Indigenous people knew all too well—"it's our truth, it's our history"—while the wider settler public ignored or disavowed it. To 'discover' the remains that Indigenous people knew were buried in their traditional territories, with "still more to be discovered" in Casimir's words, turns the table on the performative function of one

of the most troubling of colonialist concepts, that of *discovery*. It transforms the act of discovery into that which proves and centers Indigenous presence as well as the continued harm of colonialism. This discovery contrasts with the constructed absence and disavowal of Indigeneity and of the violence of colonial land theft that had been the central function of *discovery* since the time of European conquest.

To explain its foundational and performative purpose, the word 'discovery' references the legal rationale for European conquest by means of *the doctrine of discovery*. The doctrine of discovery is a late 15th-century Catholic Decree that laid the legal basis for explorers to make claims to territories that they deemed to be *terra nullius*, as in 'lands of no one.' *Terra nullius* did not mean the territory was without people literally; rather, it meant that the land so discovered was empty in the sense that the Indigenous peoples present were not Christians (and generally not 'civilized' in the eyes of Europeans), and were thus not deemed to be worthy of respect or fair treatment as full and equal human beings (see Pateman [2007] 2017). In other words, Indigenous peoples were present, of course, but *terra nullius* does the performative ideological work of producing them as absent for legal, political and socio-economic purposes. To draw this logic into our time and context, we exist now in a period shaped by the afterlife of *terra nullius* in which the absence and death of Indigenous people has become a background, disavowed presumption of settler colonial societies, not a new revelation but a colonial afterthought.² From the settler perspective—that of the state and the church, for example—the residential school grounds were the contemporary version of 'lands of no one,' *terra nullius*, when it came to questions about the remains of the children. This modern version of *terra nullius* is a performative production of Indigenous absence: nothing to discover, nothing to see here—no graves, no genocide, no modern colonial rule. This production of Indigenous absence has deep historical roots in the ontological presumptions that are core to logics of settler sovereignty and belonging.

The afterlives of *terra nullius* we see in the case of residential schools is an example of the settler logic I call necro-Indigeneity. I devise necro-Indigeneity from the concept of necropolitics, defined by Achille Mbembe to refer to "new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*" (Mbembe 2003, 39–40). Necro-Indigeneity is similar to but not quite the same as Ruth Wilson Gilmore's notion of racism as "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" (Gilmore 2007, 28). With the concept of necro-Indigeneity, I point to the settler colonial presumption of Indigenous death that is not premature, as if it is forthcoming, but rather as death that is already enacted and buried in the past, which is thereby now an after-thought or barely thought of at all, unmarked and thus unremarkable to the settler eye. Of course, Indigenous people do experience "vulnerability to premature death;" that is, racism, in Gilmore's terms. However, racism is not the whole story. Necro-Indigeneity expresses the idea that the existence of settler society is premised on Indigenous absence through death that has already been enacted and defined as the ontological condition of Indigenous people. By the logic of necro-Indigeneity, Indigenous peoples do not exist as contemporary beings but rather as peoples whose terms and meaning of existence are consigned to the 17th, 18th, or 19th centuries, and are thus ontologically *out of time* in the 20th and 21st centuries. This absence is applicable to

the living and the dead today, as a people whose meaningful lives and deaths are consigned to a settler past. By this settler logic, Indigenous people should not be here now just as they were not deemed to be there at first encounter, and this is how *terra nullius* does its performative work, then and now. The after lives of *terra nullius* in the contemporary context takes the form of settler disavowals and denials about Indigenous claims for and about their people and their land. In resistance, Indigenous people's assertions that their deceased relatives are where they say they are, in and of the soil, are direct efforts to counter the logic of necro-Indigeneity, through the assertion of Indigenous presence, in all forms. These are acts of Indigenous resurgence. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) describes resurgence as being about "nation building, addressing gender violence, movement building, linking up and creating constellations of co-resistance with other movements" (2016, 27). When Indigenous nations such as the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc take on the grim task of locating the remains of the ancestors of their community, one can read this as a refusal of modern *terra nullius* to instead assert Indigenous presence in the form of nation and movement building. Through their expression of self-determination and stewardship over their territories, the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc refused the settler production of Indigenous absence on this matter. They did so less to discover what they did not know, for they did know, and more to heal their community, return ancestors to their relatives, and reveal to the settler public the presence of the brutal, genocidal truth of modern Canadian settler rule. Through these efforts, Indigenous nations flip the idea of 'discovery' on its head. They do so by performatively recasting the manipulative colonial logic of discovery that denied the humanity and existence of Indigenous people into an Indigenous *discovery* of the inhumanity and brutality of modern colonial rule that is brought to light through the articulation of Indigenous nationhood and territorial responsibility. This was not a *discovery* of something these Indigenous nations did not know, but rather a discovery of the violence, abuse and deaths produced by residential schools that the settler society sought to bury and disavow.

Years before the discoveries of 2021, this 'horrible history' of residential schools, as Casimir called it, was available to the Canadian settler public and government officials. From 2008–2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada heard testimony from over 6500 witnesses, mostly Indigenous survivors. Still, the discovery of human remains on school grounds came as a shock to the wider settler society. This 'settler shock'—the fact that a good deal of settler society was shocked at what colonial institutions had done to Indigenous people, to children—speaks to the sustaining power of disavowal in settler colonial societies. Canadian settler society, as with settler societies in general, disavow the nation's genocidal history by trying to leave the matter buried, equivocating on the issue, or through outright denial. For example, in 2009 the federal government under Conservative Party Prime Minister Stephen Harper denied a \$1.5 billion request from the TRC to fund searches for the remains of the missing children, thereby leaving this deeper truth buried. Along with the refusals by the Canadian federal government to help, many school documents and student records were destroyed or withheld by government and church officials, and some documents burned in fires in poorly kept buildings (Narine 2023). Even without the full cooperation of the Canadian federal government and the Catholic church, the TRC concluded, in its 2015 final report, that in pursuit of "Canada's Aboriginal policy [...] to eliminate Aboriginal governments [...] and] to cause Aboriginal peoples to cease to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural,

religious, and racial entities in Canada,” the “establishment and operation of residential schools were a central element of this policy, which can best be described as ‘cultural genocide’” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015).³ This report was an important step in the public recognition of the harm done by residential schools. At the same time, the TRC’s claim of *cultural* genocide, as powerful as it is—evidenced by the fact that then Prime Minister Harper did not accept its use—did equivocate slightly, if meaningfully, on the matter (Barber 2015). The TRC report intentionally deployed the modifier ‘cultural’ to define the genocide carried out by residential schools as limited to “the destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group” but did not include “*physical genocide* [...] killing of members of a targeted group” (1). To be sure, the TRC received neither resources from the Canadian government nor adequate cooperation from the Catholic church to look for evidence of “physical genocide.” In defiance of these disavowals and equivocations, the Tk’emlups te Secwépemc Nation initiated their own search, which they deemed their responsibility as stewards of their territory. By so doing, they showed the presence rather than the absence of the truth of these lands, just as Jeff Barnaby conveyed about his Mi’kmaq community through Aila’s nightmare scene in *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*. The dramatic impact of that scene in the film and the tangible work of the Tk’emlups te Secwépemc Nation are evidence of the power of Indigenous resurgence that refuses and counters the ontological absence produced through the colonial logic of necro-Indigeneity. Unfortunately, this shock to the settler system, if likely only a fleeting one, required the discovery of the evidence of dead bodies, a painful and painstaking process for Indigenous communities to go through.

The politics of the dead body here is two-fold, on the settler and the Indigenous side. On the one hand, settler state and collaborative institutions such as the church carried out genocidal practices through residential schools and then disavowed the harm done by invoking a modern form of *terra nullius*. On the other hand, the anticolonial politics of Indigenous resurgence refused the performative work of settler disavowals and equivocations, and in so doing affirmed Indigenous presence and existence, in death and life. The Tk’emlups te Secwépemc’s “fight to prove” the truth of their history and of the stories they heard doubles as an anticolonial politics because it is a fight for their people’s inter-generational memory, capacity to heal, nationhood, and the respect of their ancestors. It is also a defense and articulation of their long-standing sovereignty in relationship to their lands and the people who live and die on them. Even after the discoveries of human remains at multiple residential schools, groups of settler ‘denialists’ refused to accept the evidence that Indigenous children died and were left in unmarked graves (Taylor 2023).⁴ The protestations and actions of these denialists reveal the power of the afterlives of *terra nullius* and of the persistence of necro-Indigeneity as a defining settler logic for justifying settler belonging and claim to these lands. At the same time, Indigenous leaders and nations have turned the performance and politics of ‘discovery’ back against the Canadian settler society and the institutions of colonial governance to place these ugly, brutal truths before the public. By themselves, such truths do not set a people free, as we know, but they can provoke gestural responses from those responsible, which I consider now.

The truth of Indigenous people’s experiences in residential schools confronted Pope Francis during his trip to Canada in July 2022, when he visited many Indigenous nations and offered an apology

for the church's role in the schools (Horowitz and Austen 2022). Not long thereafter, in April 2023, the Vatican formally rejected the doctrine of discovery, 500 years after it created it and two years after the discoveries in Tk'emlups te Secwépemc territory (Chappell 2023). As noted, from first conquest to contemporary colonial rule, the Catholic church was a vital pillar of settler domination over Indigenous peoples. The Pope's 2022 apology and the Vatican's 2023 refutation of the doctrine of discovery are important performative acts that, first, acknowledged the fact of residential school harm and, second, renounced the colonial logic of Indigenous absence that justified centuries of violent conquest preceding and precipitating the creation of residential schools. The potential impact of his statements should be taken seriously, while inviting questions about their substantive meaning for Indigenous peoples and for settler colonial societies. Genocide is at the core of both the doctrine of discovery and of residential schools. The charge of genocide is one that no nation, church or people is likely to accept willingly about their ancestors, institutions, and themselves. However, it is worth asking if in a settler society even genocide itself can become an after-thought, an accepted reality in a context still shaped by necro-Indigeneity, by the presumption of Indigenous death and absence, even in the face of Indigenous resurgence.

We get an example of genocide rendered as an after-thought from Pope Francis himself in an interview during his flight back to Rome at the end of his visit to Canada. Brittany Hobson, an Anishinaabe journalist for Canadian Press, asked him the following question: "The people who heard your words of apology this past week expressed their disappointment because the word genocide was not used. Would you use that term to say that members of the Church participated in genocide?" To this question, he replied: "It's true. I didn't use it because it didn't come to my mind but I described the genocide and asked for forgiveness. [...] Yes, genocide is a technical term. I didn't use it because it didn't come to mind, but I described it [...] It's true, yes, yes, it's genocide. You can all stay calm about this. You can report that I said that it was genocide" (Vatican News 2022). Granted, this is an unscripted answer, possibly worded hastily and poorly. Nevertheless, it is an apt metonym for how settler colonial governments, institutions and publics that contributed to the violence against Indigenous peoples and their dispossession respond to evidence of the damage they have wrought. They tend to, at once, begrudgingly gesture towards and then quickly away from the implication of the brutal truths with which they are confronted. We see this in the way in which Pope Francis' response does performative work at multiple levels. His answer is at once apologetic ("I asked for forgiveness") and presumptive ("you can all stay calm about this"), even casual ("it didn't come to mind") and defensive ("but I described the genocide"). This is not to say that he did not take seriously the harm caused by residential schools, but it is to note that calling it *genocide* was, by his own admission, an after-thought until an Indigenous journalist asked him a direct question. The ambivalence conveyed in the performance of the Pope's acknowledgement may well do more to reinforce the status and power of the Canadian settler state and Catholic church than it does to offer a path toward substantially addressing Indigenous people's concerns and demands.

For a colonial institution to admit to genocide of any sort, cultural or physical, should be damning, jarring, and lead to transformative change; it should change everything. And yet, what has changed or is changing? We should read the Pope's apology and fumbling acknowledgement of the church's

role in genocide as an example of what Yellowknives Dene political theorist Glen Coulthard critiques as a colonialist ‘politics of recognition.’ Coulthard levels his criticism at the idea that the destruction wrought by colonialism can be substantially addressed through apologies and acknowledgments from settler institutions and actors who seek reconciliation with Indigenous peoples but without any concrete repair, including the return of land. If anything, the performance of these acknowledgements—as we see with the popularity of land acknowledgements by settler institutions today—may serve to strengthen rather than weaken the status and legitimacy of settler institutions that make this gesture. As Coulthard states, the “politics of recognition in its contemporary liberal form promises to reproduce the very configurations of colonialist, racist, patriarchal state power that Indigenous peoples’ demands for recognition have historically sought to transcend” (Coulthard 2014, 3). In other words, without a substantial transformation of the institutions and authority over land that define the purview of the modern settler state, an apology or acknowledgement primarily serves to reaffirm the legitimacy and standing of settler sovereignty. As well, taking heed from Coulthard’s critique of recognition politics, the acknowledgement of genocide by colonial institutions likely serves to reinforce rather than challenge a foundational settler presumption. This is the presumption of *necro-Indigeneity*—the Indigenous *nullius* of *terra nullius*—only now with a liberal apology and acknowledgement appended to it as another example of the colonialist politics of recognition. If this is the dynamic at work here as we observe settler institutional and public responses to the discovery of the remains of Indigenous children, then an actual concrete next step toward repair would be to take seriously the ‘terra’ in *terra nullius*. Stealing Indigenous children and stealing Indigenous land go hand in hand in any comprehensive narrative of the history and purpose of residential schools. It follows then that reparations for the genocide documented by the TRC and for which Pope Francis apologized must include returning the land stolen from Indigenous people in order to seriously redress the harm in a way that deconstructs rather than reproduces settler institutions and logics. Maybe then the acknowledgment of genocide would be more than a colonial after-thought. It might become the basis for a transformative politics of anti-colonialism and decolonization instead of a perpetually haunting nightmare.

Notes

¹ Written and directed by the late Jeff Barnaby of the Mi’kmaq nation. Barnaby died in 2022.

² The ‘afterlife of *terra nullius*’ draws upon and recasts to address the dynamics of Indigeneity and colonialism Saidiya Hartman’s fundamental concept, the “afterlife of slavery,” by which she denotes “the skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment” as a consequence and continuing impact of slavery (Hartman 2008). I thank Andrés Fabián Henao Castro and Elva Orozco Mendoza for noting and encouraging further development of this ‘afterlife.’

³ For more on “cultural genocide,” see Macdonald (2015).

⁴ For more on denialism, see Justice and Carleton (2021).

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PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

GENOCIDE, PHILOSOPHICAL FETISHISM, MOURNING, AND TESTIMONY

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This article was first drafted prior to the devastating retaliation on the population of Gaza for the Al Aqsa Flood killings by Hamas, the relentless violence of which has been unfolding for over a year and that many have been calling a genocide. The article was originally in part prompted by the increased prominence of the ultranationalist right in Israel from 2022 onwards, as will be indicated further on. It was also originally motivated by my wish to re-engage with Achebe's critique of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to address certain epistemic and psychological pretexts of colonial genocide.¹

I first engaged with Achebe's essay "An Image of Africa: Racism in *Heart of Darkness*" in my book *African Literature, Animism and Politics* (Rooney 2000, 66–7). On that occasion, I endorsed Achebe's position that African indigenous cultures are not adequately represented in European literature where my concern was with how postcolonial theories shaped by European Enlightenment philosophies served to foreclose African spiritual philosophies that implicitly or explicitly accompany liberation struggles. However, since then my concern has been that certain aspects of Achebe's critique could serve to deflect attention from Conrad's analysis of colonial genocide in terms of how *Heart of Darkness* entertains the notion of radical evil beyond the formulations of the banality of evil.

In his reading of *Heart of Darkness*, Chinua Achebe accuses Conrad of "dehumanising" Africans, specifying a particular passage of the work as follows: "Herein lies the meaning of *Heart of Darkness* and the fascination it holds over the Western mind: 'What thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours...Ugly'" (Achebe 1997, 785). The extract that Achebe abridges is: "like yours—

the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough" (Conrad 1999 [1899], 64).

Firstly, it is paradoxical that Achebe considers Conrad's affirmation of a common humanity (however "ugly") to constitute a dehumanising gesture, where Conrad's implied position is one that is highly sceptical of the idea of modernity as civilisational progress. Secondly, I wish to propose that Achebe arguably misreads this passage of *Heart of Darkness* through failing to attend to the novella's orality.

Heart of Darkness is a theatrically spoken text, as it is narrated by Marlow to a group of acquaintances on a sailing yawl anchored on the River Thames. Regarding the previously indicated passage that Achebe finds offensive, it is a question of how you *hear* it. I believe that Marlow is addressing the interjected prejudices of his audience, the presumably British or European men to whom the story is being delivered. The passage would then read along the following lines: "Ugly [you say]. Well, ugly if you insist, but I would counter-insist that they are just as human as we Europeans are." Throughout *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow can be seen to struggle to persuade his ignorant audience with their racist prejudices that the barbarism of the Belgian colonisers is far worse than anything ascribed to the Congolese tribes, including the historically documented instances of cannibalism. Thus, Marlow is at pains to argue that those presumed to be cannibals exhibited commendable restraint, even when starved of food (Conrad 1999, 69), while the sadism and cruelty of colonisers like Kurtz lacked any ethical restraint whatsoever (Conrad 1999, 86).

The theatrical dimensions of *Heart of Darkness* can be linked to the text's status as a testimony with regard to the atrocities witnessed by Conrad in the Congo. Desmond Tutu, in his foreword to Yaël Farber's *Theatre as Witness: Three Testimonial Plays From South Africa* proposes: "Theatre is the ambitious sister of testimony. It strives to heal through truth" (Farber 2008, 7). For the purposes of this analysis, there are two particular aspects of the theatricality of testimony to draw attention to. In her introduction to Yaël Farber's testimonial theatre, Amanda Stuart-Fisher maintains that Farber believes that the healing power of communicating one's story depends crucially on the presence of a *listener* capable of acknowledging their actual reception of the story (9–17). The presence of an audience establishes that the testimonial delivery is engaged in a real process of transmission that potentially allows for the retrieval of collective solidarity as a means of restoring the dignity of the victims whose human existence has been negated.

The second reason for the connection between theatre and testimony that I wish to highlight here concerns the relationship of the witness or truth-teller to language. In her essay, "Testimony: Beyond the Language of Truth," Nora Strejilevich, writing out of her experience of state terror in Argentina (1977), argues that testimonial discourse is not eventually about the deposition of data and information (even as facts matter in a legal context). Rather for Strejilevich, while law courts demand precise objective evidence, the truth-telling of traumatic experience "should allow for disruptive memories, discontinuities, blanks, silences and ambiguities" (Strejilevich 2006, 704). This is explicitly a matter for Strejilevich of a literary discourse, presumably as opposed to a literal one. Yet this literary quality of the struggle to narrate the unbearable and unfathomable is, I would

suggest, significantly marked by the orality of a witness-speaker who in the moment of speaking dramatizes the inadequacy of language to utter what they seek to convey. This oral hesitancy is strikingly characteristic of the narrative of Marlow, with its dramatized gaps, discontinuities, silences and ambiguities, as he struggles to communicate less a sequence of events than an experiential horror that is pervasively mysterious. Strejilevich maintains of her own testimony in its Argentinian context that her driving concern has been to capture “the mystery of the horror” (713).

In *Heart of Darkness*, the difficult yet urgent need to find words for the undeniable yet radically disorientating reality of the horror contrasts starkly both with the banal platitudes of colonial bureaucracy and with Kurtz’s frequently emphasised boundless eloquence that for all its dazzling loquacity is said to be thoroughly deceitful; not so much a performance of truth-telling but a commanding linguistic fabrication of so-called truths.

One aspect of Achebe’s argument that is very pertinent for this essay is his suggestion that *Heart of Darkness* uses Africa as a stage for a “metaphysical battlefield” (Achebe 1977, 788), although I would suggest such a staging does not necessarily imply the ulterior motive that Achebe attributes to it; that is, as a supposed philosophical displacement of the genocide Conrad witnessed. I wish to affirm that while *Heart of Darkness* can be read as the staging of a metaphysical or philosophical allegory, signalled by Marlow’s hint that the meaning of his tale is not a kernel within it but contained in a halo or orbit beyond it (Conrad 1999, 33), it also constitutes a reckoning with the evil of colonial genocide as opposed to an avoidance of such.

It has been noted that the Buddhist pose and passive attitude of Marlow imply that Conrad may have been aligning his narrator with the Buddhist-influenced Schopenhauer (for example, Alpert 2017, 1). However, yet to be entertained, as far as I know, is that if Marlow could be correlated with Schopenhauer’s Buddhist inclinations, then Kurtz could be correlated with aspects of Hegel’s philosophy: this amounting to Conrad’s metaphysical battlefield. Conrad, through Marlow, is at pains to establish Kurtz as no mere ordinary colonial functionary but as a “universal genius” (Conrad 1999, 55), a kind of colonial mastermind. He is given to us as immensely learned across all fields and as rhetorically hugely impressive (75). Kurtz thoroughly believes in his own and Europe’s enlightening forces while he is also consumed by a venomous hatred of Africans, scrawling across his civilisational pamphlet the genocidal exhortation: “Exterminate all the brutes!” (78).

Would Conrad have known Hegel’s writings on Africa? Familiar with Schopenhauer, he would almost certainly have known that Schopenhauer despised Hegel, Schopenhauer writing of Hegel’s supposed genius as nonsense and jargon, comprised of: “stringing together senseless and extravagant mazes of words such as had previously only been heard in madhouses” (Schopenhauer 2015, 633). For Schopenhauer, Hegel constituted a pretentious and bewitching influence on younger generations, the way that Marlow depicts the naïve Russian “harlequin” boy as hypnotised by his “idol” Kurtz. If Conrad had read Hegel on Africa, he would have been aware that Hegel had explicitly depicted Africans as inhuman “man-animals” who needed to be enslaved

to civilise them through Westernisation, eradicating their African origins and belief systems (see Rooney 2000, 175–76).

If the correlation of Kurtz with Hegel has any plausibility, the implication is that Conrad does not consider genocidal colonialism as something that can be divorced from lofty idealist European philosophy as if colonialism were a mere atypical aberration. The unethical trajectories of history would rather be implicated in a certain problematic philosophical imposition. This notion that colonial practices may be correlated with certain European or Western epistemologies (thus, not only ideologies) has been significantly explored by both African philosophers such as Emmanuel Eze (1998) and by Indigenous scholars such as Sandy Grande (2015) and Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2015).

I would now like to suggest that Conrad explores two forms of evil in *Heart of Darkness*. The one form is what Arendt termed the banality of evil. However, while for Arendt the identification of the banality of evil replaced her earlier ideas about radical evil, Conrad juxtaposes the banality of evil with radical evil. First of all, Marlow is astounded by how colonial bureaucrats, such as the accountant, are fastidiously able to carry on with business as usual while just beyond their office windows Africans are dying visibly all the time from the persistent violent colonial abuses they are suffering (Conrad 1999, 44–45). This bureaucratic indifference as complicity is tantamount to the banality of evil, or perhaps more accurately, to the evil of banality.

Arendt's concept is derived from the research of Raul Hilberg who examined how German bureaucracy paved the way for the Holocaust. However, for Hilberg it is *not* that evil can be itself banal (Hilberg 1966, 150), but that banality can facilitate evil. It is because Arendt equates evil with banality that she gives up on the notion of evil as radical or extreme. Moreover, Arendt was excited by the discovery of the very *banality* of evil, and this could be because it allowed her to separate high German culture, particularly its philosophical tradition from Hegel to Heidegger, from the barbarism of the Holocaust (see Wolin 2015, 56–57).

As for Conrad, if Kurtz can be aligned with Hegel in certain ways, then the implication is that Hegelian philosophy is complicit with the politics of colonial history. While Hegel's philosophy of course predates the Belgian genocide, Hegel's attitude to the genocidal occupation of America is worth noting. Hegel maintains that the indigenous people made themselves just "vanish" (the word he uses) before the European settlers due to what he deems the "crouching submissiveness" on the part of the indigenous (Hegel 1991 [1837], 82–83).

In *Heart of Darkness*, it seems irrational that Kurtz, who apparently despises Africans, ends up "going native," so to speak. Marlow attributes to the African wilderness a mysterious, brooding spiritual presence that serves to out Kurtz as someone who is thoroughly "hollow at the core" (Conrad 1999, 86). For all his book knowledge, he may be said to be lacking the freedom of spirit and spontaneity that Marlow witnesses in the local African culture (41). On the one hand, Kurtz is very possessive in a materialistic sense with his horde of ivory and rapacious assertions of "mineness" (76). On the other hand, Kurtz would go beyond this in seeking to claim the African spirit that he lacks, hence

his ludicrous and disastrous attempt at becoming African, “going native.” In order to explain this, it is necessary to reflect on the dynamics of Hegelian dialectic.

As I have argued elsewhere (Rooney 2020, 14–15), Hegelian dialectic operates through the internalisation of what presents itself as other to it. Hegel writes: “The European spirit opposes the world to itself, and while freeing of itself from it, sublates this opposition by taking back into the simplicity of its own self the manifoldness of this its other” (Petry 179, 61). His dialectic is therefore a form of colonisation as usurpation in that the internalisation of the other eradicates them through replacing them. Lacan interestingly speaks of Hegelian philosophy as plagiarism (Lacan 2007 [1973], 22–23), and it can be said that the plagiarist internalises the other’s knowledge to present it as their own, in an act of usurpation of the actual author (and their sources). It is a cutting-off of the lines of transmission. More specifically, Magee argues that Hegel had a lifelong largely clandestine reliance on Hermetic philosophy (as derives from Ancient Egyptian thought), widely drawing on it without acknowledging his sources much of the time (Magee 2001).

Earlier I touched tangentially on the bond between plagiarism and colonial usurpation. Plagiarism functions like commodity fetishism in that both present the copy as if it were the original. Commodities are manufactured copies or clones of a template and yet they appear on the stage as if they have conjured themselves out of thin air, that is, as if they were self-authoring. Similarly, the plagiarised work is a copy that disguises its status as such and presents itself as auto-inspired. What I am calling philosophical fetishism in this essay is a case of the commodification of thought and ideas, presenting idealist philosophy as having a self-originating power, bewitchingly so.

The Hegelian internalisation of non-Western philosophical traditions is not merely an intellectual operation in that Hegel is not content for philosophy to be a belated reflection on historical events that precede it. Rather, history is *itself* supposed to be a rational or philosophical operation that unfolds itself with an auto-correcting power. If history is itself dialectical, then the colonising usurpation of the other, one that takes the place of the other, is potentially genocidal. That is, for the usurpation to be secure and successful, the drive is towards the eradication of the other as other. Regarding German fascism, as the Germans fashioned an Aryan identity for themselves, internalising the Oriental as somehow an inner property of the German nation, the Jews as Oriental others stood as a reminder of the failure to actually internalise the Oriental, and this is arguably what issued in the drive to eradicate totally the Oriental as outsider (as opposed to what is thoroughly and securely internalised) (see Rooney 2020, 36).

Plagiarism is in itself of course not equivalent to the barbarism of genocide. Rather, what is at stake is a mutual possessive dynamic, one that is akin to a kind of inheritance-denying soul theft (this as far more drastic than just cultural appropriation). Genocidal colonial racism specifically concerns how the settler immigrant tries to usurp the native through internalising the native while trying to make the actual native disappear. For example, white pride Americans can be seen to enjoy posturing as shamans, from the Ku Klux Klan wizard men to the recent “QAnon Shaman,” while the actual shamans are Native Americans. Joseph Pierce writes of the QAnon Shaman: “White supremacists like Angeli pose as Indians in order to create an image of themselves as inseparable

from the land itself. They imitate indigenous people and they justify their actions by imagining themselves as the natural heirs to a land retroactively emptied of Native Americans" (Pierce 2021). Pierce, as a Cherokee nation citizen, further comments, "It is a desire for indigeneity without indigenous people." Addressing this possessive assertion of belonging on the part of settler Australians, Moreton-Robinson further observes: "Kehulani Kuananui argues that Hawaiian identity is also appropriated by white people as a way of indigenizing their presence" (Moreton-Robinson 2015, 59).

When I first wrote this article with the hypothesis that Conrad posits Kurtz in terms of Kurtz's claiming indigeneity for himself through the genocidal erasure of African people and their inheritances, I was unaware of Rob Lemkin's film *African Apocalypse* that explores a specific historical correlative for Kurtz in the figure of Captain Paul Voulet, a French soldier sent by France in 1898 to consolidate French colonial dominion along what is now the Niger-Nigeria border. In the course of this mission, Voulet (like the fictional Kurtz) descended into barbaric sadism destroying the African villages on his route, brutally slaughtering thousands of Africans and sometimes displaying their heads on stakes. When the French learnt of Voulet's barbarity they sent another expedition in pursuit of Voulet to dispense with him. Voulet remained unrepentant and declared: "I am no longer a Frenchman. I am an African" (Lemkin 2020). His genocidal drive thus entails the fantasy of taking the place of the other.

Genocide is not merely the extermination of a group other, as happens in war in general. Genocide also constitutes a fanatical refusal to mourn the other, to acknowledge them even in death. That is, for the desired eradication to be complete, even the dead body or bodies must be disavowed, as if such a person or such a people had never been. It is a denial of the other ever having had a place in human history and thus the pretence is that there is no one to mourn.

Given the previous, one of the responses to the victims of genocide is rightly to insist on the mourning and memorialisation of those who have been killed, but what about the perpetrators? Who broaches the mourning of the evildoers? There is a certain political practice that seeks to deny mourning rites to those deemed to be on the wrong side of history. Both the corpses of Eichmann and Osama bin Laden were disposed of at sea after their executions. There were minimal burial rites but no proper burial as a site of commemoration and no mourners. The message is that such people deserve eradication without mourning, as remains problematically in keeping with the genocidal logic of total purgation.

In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow does allow Kurtz to be mourned when he withholds from Kurtz's fiancé the truth of Kurtz's barbaric actions in Africa thus allowing her to continue her adoration and mourning of him. He does not withhold the truth from the audience of his testimony, so it is not ultimately a case of disavowal on his part. Rather, he allows Kurtz his dismal sole mourner, and while Kurtz's actions are presented as abominable, he is too complex to be presented as a one-dimensional caricature of evil especially given his sincere deathbed recognition of his culpability. In addition, Marlow gives us to understand that the violent perversions of the colonial present will

most certainly be resisted by the African revolutionaries of the future, as represented by the spiritual leadership of the African woman who urges her people to revolt (Conrad 1999, 95).

Finally, I would briefly like to touch on the contemporary relevance of my reading of *Heart of Darkness* with reference to the current case of settler colonialism in Israel-Palestine. In 2023, the far-right Israeli finance minister Bezalel Smotrich made a speech in which he asserted that the Palestinians as Palestinians do not exist: “there’s no such thing as the Palestinian people.” At the same time, he claimed “I am a Palestinian,” fantasising himself and his family to be “real Palestinians.” (Staff 2023). This is a striking instance of the colonial logic of the appropriation of indigeneity precisely to erase the indigenous, as explored in this essay. It is also the case that former Israeli leader Golda Meir (originally of Ukrainian roots, as is Smotrich) claimed that Palestinians did not exist while she emphatically asserted: “I am a Palestinian” (Ahmed 2023).

Amira Haas, reporting on Israel’s 2023 bombardment of Gaza, considers it to be more than revenge in that it can be aligned with Smotrich’s open advocacy of the expulsion or extermination of all Palestinians (Haas 2023). The far-right in Israel also (with echoes of Hegel on Africa) refer to Palestinians as “human animals,” and West Bank settlers have used the Kurtz-like battle cry of “Exterminate the beasts” (Gunter 2024). At the same time, in tandem with the current violence against Gazans, Israelis on Tik Tok, as reported by Selma Dabbagh, have posted images of themselves dressed up as Palestinian Arabs in *kuffiyehs*: as a form of mockery yet also suggesting a stance of appropriation as usurpation (Dabbagh 2023).

Coming back to *Heart of Darkness*, as already indicated, Conrad posits genocide in terms of a total lack of restraint (Conrad 1999, 94). Although this might suggest that Kurtz becomes barbaric when removed from the civilizing forces of his own society, this is not really the import of Kurtz as himself the supreme representative of Enlightenment Europe. Rather, Conrad serves to anticipate Zygmunt Bauman’s analysis of the Holocaust where Bauman (in keeping with the earlier insights of Adorno and Horkheimer) maintains that the Holocaust must be understood as the very product of modern rational society, a society for which reason is paramount in the performative realisation of its social engineering designs. Bauman writes: “Modern genocide is an element of social engineering, meant to bring about a social order conforming to the design of the perfect society” (Bauman 1989, 91), and he also discusses the “rationality of evil” (202). The lack of restraint consists of the crazy rationalisation, so to speak, of extreme means such as genocide as necessary to achieving the desired end of the ideally cohesive community, cleansed of all the scapegoated forces that supposedly threaten it.

Bauman states of modern genocide: “*The design gives it the legitimation; state bureaucracy gives it the vehicle; and the paralysis of society gives it the ‘road clear’ sign*” (Bauman 1989, 114, italics in text). Thus, this kind of genocide is the *intentional* enactment of an idea or an ideal. (Marlow tells Kurtz’s fiancé, called “the intended,” that his last words were her name, thus conflating “the intended” with “the horror,” Kurtz’s actual last words.) In an important recent testimonial essay on the Gaza genocide, Atef Alshaer speaks of how Israeli (and White House) “discourse-engineering” gives evil

the “appearance of banality” to conceal the extreme inhumanity that is deliberately, systematically implemented in technologically sophisticated ways (Alshaer 2024, 8–9).

Coming back to the opening concerns of this essay, theatrical testimony emerges in contradistinction to the performativity of genocide. The performative, specifically as regards its philosophical formulation by Austin, concerns a *literalising* operation whereby linguistic claims are said to actualise themselves. Thus, the mere claim of the coloniser to be the native is intended literally to accomplish what it asserts. Beyond this, the violent enactment of ideological designs is a performative literalisation of those designs. While Baumann speaks of social engineering, Israel's bombardment of Gaza has also put into operation a sophisticated AI targeting machine called Lavender, as reported on by Yuval Abraham (2024). Lavender uses abstract generic modelling to posit suspected Hamas affiliates so as to turn these suspects into literal targets for their eradication, including the killing of all those in their vicinity.

While such uses of the performative seek to engineer reality through intention, construction and design, theatrical testimony necessarily attests to a reality that is outside of linguistic fabrications. With genocide, this concerns re-establishing the inheritances and lines of transmission that genocidal perpetrators have sought to violently occlude. These lines of transmission concern not only those deprived of their inheritances, but also those who disavow history. The opening lines of a poem by Rafaat Alareer (a Gazan English lecturer), written shortly before his assassination by the IDF, are:

Look in the mirror.
The horror, the horror. (Alareer 2024, 27)

Notes

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Biography

Caroline Rooney works and publishes mainly in the areas of postcolonial studies and Arab cultural studies, focusing on the cultural expression of liberation struggles and their aftermaths in sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa and the Middle East. She has held fellowships, including the ESRC/AHRC Global Uncertainties Fellowship (2009–2012) and a PaCCS Leadership Fellowship (2012–2015). She was also the UK PI on a Newton-Mosharafa programme (2016–2017) entitled ‘Egypt’s Living Heritage: Community Engagement in Re-creating the Past’. She has co-directed documentary films including, with William Parry, ‘Breaking the Generations: Palestinian Prisoners and Medical Rights’.

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PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

ON GRIEF AT THE END OF THE WORLD: A BLACK, DISABLED, QUEER RITUAL FOR PERSONAL AND GLOBAL APOCALYPSE

KAI HAZELWOOD GOOD TROUBLE MAKERS

My Apocalypse

I'm not an expert on snakes or healing, but I *am* a shedding human. Meaning I am a mess. Meaning I am gloriously whole. Meaning I am a glorious, whole-ass mess.

I began this research during an intense moment of shedding in my life. Shortly before the pandemic started, I began recovering memories of being sexually abused as a child. The memories were so intense, and my reaction to them so strong I developed PTSD. It got so severe I couldn't work, I rarely left the house, and I began to close in on myself. Then the pandemic hit, and I joked that now the whole world was living like me, staying home, their worlds small and preoccupied with the mundane necessities of survival.

Not long after the first lockdown was put in place I started to develop pain in my abdomen. It would get so bad that for days, weeks at a time I could barely leave my bed. I spent so much time hunched over in pain I developed a hump on my spine. I went from being a lifelong athlete to worn out from going to the bathroom and getting back to the bed. No one knew what was wrong, so my body widened and softened as I gained 30 pounds. I bounced from doctor to doctor and treatment to treatment as my pain intensified and my hump grew. I named her Gertrude in an attempt to befriend her that I'm not sure was successful.

I'd been withdrawing from people in my life as all of this transpired. As a Black woman I was never taught to have needs, let alone express them. Many people in my life resented that I couldn't support them, nurture them, in all the ways I had up until this point, nor could I explain clearly why. I didn't have language for my own unbecoming, and I was terrified of it, so I hid.

Many people moved away from me, and to escape that their departure made me feel like a failure, I moved farther away from them, and me too. I didn't know who I was if I wasn't the person who always had it together, was always working and creating at a superhuman rate, and still had time to keep my apartment sparkling clean and cook nearly every night for myself, my partner, and chosen family. I was a good mammy; I was working myself into the ground with a smile on my face and a ready laugh. The world easily asks this of Black women and femmes, and we're met with confusion, often anger, and routinely abandonment and dismissal when we can't carry on anymore.

I was finally properly diagnosed and treated, and then spent months sweating and shaking in bed from the medications working to kill off the infection discovered in my stomach. It had been there so long my whole system was out of whack. My white blood cell count was off the chart, and my whole system was flooded with inflammation. That led to discovering a connective tissue disorder that has caused multiple joint dislocations, chronic pain, and neurological issues. So far I've had one shoulder surgery, and have permanent tears in both shoulders and one hip.

Most recently I went from walking with crutches, to a cane because of knee instability. The condition is degenerative, so the future of my body and mobility is uncertain.

Through all of this, my constant companion has been my snake Bisoux. He rests in his tank near the foot of my bed. He gains and loses weight without the vanity that I do. He has lost his sight temporarily when he neglected to shed his eye caps and dead skin obscured his eyes. He doesn't seem particularly bothered; he seems to trust that there are other ways to perceive himself. He is dull as he sheds, and other times his scales shine bright with gold and green colors, he seems content in both states. During many late insomniac nights, I've heard the sound of his skin rasping across a tree branch in his tank as he used it to shed and work free of his outgrown skin. And I've wondered: how does he manage to constantly shape shift without worry? How does he approach transformation without the fear and resistance that plagues me? And so I began to study him.

What follows is a ritual Bisoux inspired me to create. It's some of what I've learned, what I'm learning. Along the way Gertrude has transformed too, she shrunk so much I gave her a new name: Betty, because she's just a little boop. I'd be lying if I said we're friends, and I hope she doesn't stay, but for now, we've found a way to coexist, and maybe that's enough.

KIN - Organisms that are genetically related to another or others

This is who has kept me company through becoming and unbecoming during the process of dreaming, embodying and writing. They are my kin, some of their genetic material, whether

recognizable or not, is here in my research. These scholars, friends, chosen family, healers, teachers and more make up the community that has formed/I've formed around me; their love, wisdom, writing, support, and, and, and, are part of the genealogy of my work and me. Some of them know this, others may never know, but I name them here because I know, and you should too.

My Boffice, or "bed office," where much of my writing and life takes place these days, and my pillow palace, the pillow system I purchased when it became clear my bed was going to be the center of my world for a while, are both critical parts of the genealogy of my writing and my body.

I am inspired by the words of American civil rights activist John Lewis. I am committed to making, making art, making room, making change, making good trouble.

Resmaa Menakem's research in racialized embodiment and Somatic Abolition inspires me to value and respect the brilliance of my own body instead of prioritizing the theory of others.

Eva Yaa Asantewaa, Sarah Ashkin, Ana Garcia, Alex Millar, Cheyenne Dunbar, Tatiana Ewing, Emilie Gallier, Ever Galvan, Marlene Hall, Tani Ikeda, Rajni Shah, and more have impacted the genetic makeup of my research by affecting me; some as mentors, business partners, and/or chosen family.

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha teaches me again and again that my journey through cripness deserves to be cataloged and shared; we all need the wisdom of crip body-minds to prepare us for apocalypse, because the future is in fact disabled.

Judith Halberstam teaches me that all the ways that I continue to feel like a failure are actually lessons in finding alternatives, and playful alternatives are what we need to survive apocalypse.

As a self-identified artist-agitator I also draw on the legacies of agitators past and present including adrienne maree brown, Audre Lourde, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, and Alice Sheppard. Like adrienne maree brown, I believe in the slow pace that deep, embodied, ethnographic research requires. Moving at "the speed of trust," as brown puts it. The way Audre Lourde lived so beautifully as an intellectual, a rebel, and as an artist, inspires me to live my own identities out loud as an artist, activist, and embodied scholar. Alexis Pauline Gumbs models how to learn from the wisdom of our more than human kin, and that perhaps inside of their difference from us, lies the way to learn how to build a new world.

Alice Sheppard's rejection of an able, white, straight body as the norm teaches me about what is possible when our perceived limitations lead us down routes of experimentation we never could have dreamed of without them.

Dr. Shena Young's magic in holding space for Black survivors to find their way back to themselves has brought me home to my own body again and again.

Bisoux, my snake-love continues to teach me every day and is my primary research partner.

A Ritual For Personal And Global Apocalypse

*What did my snakecestors know about slowing down
That can help me understand grief as a portal for transformation?*

*If the end of the world is here
Can we slow down to grieve what might have been
If we'd slowed down sooner?*

My people were born through portals at the edge of the world. Narrow windows in dark cells full of grief, fear, and hot bodies, above cold ocean and sharp rocks along the coast of West Africa. Those that survived this portal, the long inhumane journey that came after, and the brutal conditions of enslavement, led to me. I have the strength of their perseverance in my DNA, their brilliance at survival, their ability to cultivate joy and play in the unimaginable reminds me I already know how to survive the end of the world.

I'm grieving the loss of my body's ability after diagnosis and long illness, and I'm struggling, caught in the portal of this personal apocalyptic moment, to love my crip-self, while also inside of a global apocalypse. I find myself desperately searching for more teachers to show me how to survive the end of the world, both personal and worldwide. I found who I needed, here already, living quietly in a tank at the foot of my bed. This is a ritual for my snake-love Bisoux, my pet who has been my companion now for almost 20 years; my teacher in the wisdom of creatures who shed their skin and my snakecestors, who wove their way in graceful S shapes across the world long before I was a glimmer in the dreams of my human ancestors.

Liberation is a technique; I'm learning mine from snakes. Their capacity to move in any direction at every moment, the slowness they remind me to play with, their capacity to be in a constant state of transformation, and yet be fully themselves at any moment. Their shedding, constantly becoming and unbecoming, living peacefully in perpetual apocalypse.

I call this ritual a "play date" to remind me to lower the stakes, to play rather than try to control. I created this to support my own intense moment of shedding, a moment of personal apocalypse, and to remind me that the next time I have to shed, I already know how. I've always known how, and so do you.

...

Play Date: Reptile Time, A Grief Ritual

Set aside a few hours if you can. Listen to or read the following, then play with it.

A Hint: This requires ritual time. You cannot do this quickly, while multitasking, during the hustle of your day. This requires conscious cultivation of time and space to play. Take a moment to consider what you need to be ready to play. Perhaps it's after your household is asleep, or before they wake up. Maybe it's a soft cozy outfit, perhaps a cherished outdoor spot, or a favorite place in your home. Set the mood for your playtime, and when you're ready, and have cultivated the time, space, and conditions to play, continue.

Bonus Hint: "PAUSE AND PLAY" is your cue to try out what you've just read or listened to and continue on only when you're ready. If you can, give yourself enough time to play all the way through with time to pause and play as you go.



This is a grief ritual

The deep slowing down to reach reptile time is what I need to process grief I need the wisdom of reptilian slowness to make enough time for grieving

For living

For being alive in apocalypse

Be sure you cannot see a clock

We are moving away from the linearity, the speed, the neatness of time measured by a clock
Towards the millennia spanning slowness of snakes

Apocalypse isn't the end, it's a transformation
Can you slow down enough to be curious about
The deep unknown, the end of the world?
Don't set a timer for this
Stop when your body's temperature has equalized with that of whatever is beneath you
Or just stop when you're ready and notice how much time has passed
Whether your sense of time is close or far from the clock's timing
Arrange as much of your body as is available so that it is resting on the ground/floor/earth
This could mean lying down
Resting your hands on the ground
Feeling into your feet while you're standing
Choose what feels possible
Maybe you want to try this outside Perhaps in the privacy of personal space
Feel downwards into the earth Connecting with what's beneath you
Linger in this reaching down awareness as long as you need
When you're ready
Notice your connectedness to the earth
Also that it is supporting you back
The connection is both you reaching down and the earth holding you back
Stay in this duet with the earth as long as feels good

PAUSE AND PLAY (continue when you're ready)

When you're ready, notice the scores of tiny dances that happen between you and the ground/floor/earth

Maybe this is the way your relationship to what is beneath you shifts slightly as you breathe As your heart beats

Where is there contact, pressure, space?

What temperatures are created between you and what's supporting you? Can you feel any vibrations or textures?

PAUSE AND PLAY (continue when you're ready)

If you're comfortable

Can you adjust what you're wearing so more of your bare skin is in contact with what is supporting you?

How does that change the tiny duets happening between you and what is underneath you?

PAUSE AND PLAY (continue when you're ready)

From here, this slow deep place, ask softly what you are grieving

Allow it to gently enter your dance

How do these micro dances change when you allow grief to dance too? How is your body/you arranged around grief?

Linger here and dance with grief, your body, the earth... Remember, the world has been ending forever

We have to learn how to slow down enough to transform with it

Grieve it

The answers lie through the portal created by grief

PAUSE AND PLAY (continue when you're ready)

When you feel your ritual is complete, take some time to reflect, be it in writing, voice note, imagining, in your native language so anything you've gleaned can be saved, and wait for the time to revisit when you're ready. Remember that repetition is your friend. You can repeat/play/practice reptile time anytime you like, if you hate it, great, thank the wisdom of your own running from the pain of grief, from the end of the world, and play again and again!

Biography

Kai Hazelwood (she/her) is a multi award-winning transdisciplinary Disabled, Black, and queer artist, educator, and artistic researcher. She has guest lectured or taught and facilitated at universities and art institutions across the United States, Canada, and Europe.

Kai is the founder and executive artistic director of Good Trouble Makers, a practice driven arts collaborative celebrating queer identities and centering disabled and chronically ill QTBIPOC. Kai and Good Trouble Makers' collaborations have been covered by 21 media outlets including The Advocate, and have been supported by Arts Omi International Arts Center, The City of Los Angeles' Cultural Affairs Department, California Institute of Contemporary Arts, Pieter Performance Space, The Speranza Foundation, The California Arts Council and DAS Graduate School.

From her perspective as an embodied researcher and changemaker Kai co-founded and is a lead facilitator of Practice Progress, a consultancy addressing structural, professional, and interpersonal white supremacy through body based learning that serves non and for profit businesses, educational institutions, and individuals including MASSMoCA, Gibney Dance, Ohio State Dance Department, University of Texas, Austin Dance and California Institute of the Arts. Founded in 2019, Practice Progress leads clients and participants toward sustained cultural shift in their institutions, communities, and themselves.

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