

THE JUST POLITICS OF MOURNING AND JUDITH BUTLER'S *PRECARIOUS LIFE*Jill Petersen Adams, *Syracuse University***Draft only: please do not cite without permission.**Loss has made a tenuous 'we' of us all.¹

Judith Butler's *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* asks in the wake of September 11th, 2001, "what, politically, might be made of grief besides a cry for war."² Engaging the reality of retributive violence on national and individual levels, she raises a question of religious, political, psychological, and cultural significance. In the midst of violence, terror, suffering and anxiety, Butler articulates a politics of mourning that could have implications not only for personal grief but also the realms of public policy, international relations, the writing of history, and more. Mourning, as it is reconceived by Judith Butler, is a positive, ongoing response to loss that is part of subject formation, is rooted in both individual and collective grief and has concrete repercussions in policy and the public sphere. Mourning arises from a site of mutual vulnerability to loss and is formulated in terms of the face of the Other that holds, commands, or addresses me. This form of mourning has political implications based on the role of the humanizing or dehumanizing effects of discourse as well as the constant vigilance that is necessitated by the co-constitution of subjects and mutual responsibility.

Articulations of Mourning and Melancholy

Many contemporary discussions of mourning touch on Freud's foundational essays on mourning and melancholy. "Mourning and Melancholia"³ is a privileged touchstone. Freud suggests that every person must confront loss in one of two states: mourning or melancholy. Mourning, as Freud describes it, "is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken place of one, such as

¹ Butler, Judith, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, (London and New York: Verso, 2004), xii.

² Butler, *Precarious Life*, xii.

³ Freud, Sigmund, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* 14, 243-258, trans. and ed. James Strachey, (W.W. Norton & Company, 2000). Hereafter "Mourning." While this text is likely the important in the body of Freud's work on mourning, he also shares some interesting reflections in the roughly contemporary "On Transience" ("On Transience," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* 14, 305-307, trans. and ed. James Strachey, [W.W. Norton & Company, 2000]. Hereafter "Transience.").

one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on... [A]lthough mourning involves grave departures from the normal attitude to life, it never occurs to us to regard it as a pathological condition."⁴

Since mourning is a normal, non-pathological condition, the "work" of mourning is depicted as a fairly simple process: "Mourning impels the ego to give up the object by declaring the object to be dead and offering the ego the inducement of continuing to live."⁵ Mourning is considered "successful" when it ends: case closed. "When the work of mourning is completed," Freud declares, "the ego becomes free and uninhibited again."⁶ The "successful" completion of mourning is therefore both desirable and achievable for Freud. Melancholy, on the other hand, is a pathological condition that can involve an unconscious or disavowed loss.⁷ The effects and affect of melancholy and mourning are similar, except that melancholy leads to a lack of concern for oneself that can manifest in pathological states like depression, extreme inactivity, and a hatred of oneself (as opposed to the normal grief state resulting from mourning).⁸

More recent psychoanalytic thinkers and other philosophers expand Freud's emphasis on individual mourning to consider how the mourning individual relates to collective society.⁹ These positions also begin to articulate how mourning is concerned with political activity and justice. However, psychoanalytic feminists like Julia Kristeva, Ewa Ziarek, and Judith Butler herself often point out that Freudian subjectivity is

⁴ Freud, "Mourning," 243. Perhaps it is because Freud recognized that we mourn not only people but countries, ideals, and so on that his thought has been so provocative for thinkers like Butler who want to see how mourning relates to politics. She gives equal weight to our mourning other human beings and the way that communities mourn other losses as well.

⁵ Freud, "Mourning," 257. In mourning, the individual must give up his attachment to the object (the loved one or the abstraction in its stead) and, in short, "move on" to other objects. Then, as Butler notes, Freud later reconceives of successful mourning as *incorporation* rather than replacement of the lost object. Butler points out the change on *Precairous Life* p.20. Freud's later conception is articulated in his "The Ego and the Id" (1923).

⁶ Freud, "Mourning," 245. Freud rounds out this description in "On Transience:" "Mourning, as we know, however painful it may be, comes to a spontaneous end. When it has renounced everything that has been lost, then it has consumed itself, and our libido is once more free... to replace the lost objects" (307).

⁷ "Melancholy is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious" (Freud, "Mourning," 245).

⁸ Freud, "Mourning," 246.

⁹ Contemporary psychoanalytic thinkers of mourning see a political and historical dimension to mourning that is left undeveloped in Freud. Outside of the realm of the psychoanalytic feminists, Peter Homans describes what he sees as a problematic aspect of Freud's position towards mourning: "the central contradiction is: the ego can gather strength only by cutting itself away from the common cultures of the past, but as it does so, it becomes increasingly unsupported by and deracinated from its social and historical surround" (Peter Homans, *The Ability to Mourn: Disillusionment and the Social Origins of Psychoanalysis*, [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989], 264). Instead, Homans wants to retain the concern for the past that he sees as an integral part of mourning. Here Homans, like the feminists, calls for a mourning which does not seek to erase the past but instead one which, in its "linking activity," establishes new relationships within the social order.

centered on an implicitly and sometimes explicitly male-dominated or masculine ego. Thus, whereas mourning is a normative, conciliatory process for Freud, many feminists want to disrupt the normativity of “normal” mourning. They ask, in effect, who *wants* to be reincorporated into a masculine social order and implicated in the loss of the connection to the (m)other?¹⁰

Ewa Ziarek, following Kristeva, strives to articulate a way that political action can come out of the rupture of melancholy without sharing in its paralysis. Ziarek reconceives melancholy’s “inability to mourn” as a *refusal* or unwillingness to mourn in which the alternative of melancholy is the preferable one.¹¹ However, because melancholy is characterized by its disabling pathological effect, by an inability to act, Ziarek instead suggests that melancholy “would require both a recognition of the violence inherent in the neutralization of the other and a refusal of the necessity of that violence, without succumbing to a paralysis so characteristic of melancholia.”¹² Like Ziarek, Butler also resists the closure or completion of mourning, but unlike Ziarek, she retains the sense of melancholy’s problematic paralysis or disavowal and instead mobilizes “melancholy” to describe an undesirable state of affairs.

Specifically, Butler argues “that a national melancholia, understood as a disavowed mourning, follows upon the erasure from public representations of the names, images, and narratives of those the US has killed.”¹³ Melancholy denotes that something is rotten in the State of America. This rottenness results from the United States’ refusal to acknowledge its mourning and its refusal to recognize that the country even has something *to* mourn—particularly the deaths of thousands that die at its hands or in its name. Butler points out that “when grieving is something to be feared, our fears give rise to the impulse to resolve it quickly, to banish it in the name of an action invested with the power to restore the loss or return the world to a former order, or to

¹⁰ Psychoanalytic feminism *first* engages and alters Freudian mourning and melancholy at the site of the primordial loss of the other—the loss of the mother. One of the most prominent thinkers of melancholy and the loss of the mother is Julia Kristeva, who explores originary maternal love in *Stabat Mater* simultaneously through her own pregnancy and the Virgin Mary’s loss of her son. This primordial bodily connection of mutual vulnerability between a child and his or her mother is an important foundation for Butler’s conceptions of precarious life as well, a point to which I will return below. See Julia Kristeva, “Stabat Mater,” in *The Kristeva Reader*, 160-186, ed. Toril Moi, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

¹¹ Ewa Ziarek, “Kristeva and Levinas: Mourning, Ethics, and the Feminine,” in *Ethics, Politics, and Difference in Julia Kristeva's Writings: A Collection of Essays*, 62-78, ed. Kelly Oliver, (New York & London: Routledge, 1993), 73. Hereafter “Kristeva and Levinas.”

¹² Ziarek, “Kristeva and Levinas,” 75. Such a formulation might be along the lines of what Butler presents elsewhere as a *unification* of mourning and melancholy without necessary resolution: “If ambivalence distinguishes melancholia from mourning, and if mourning entails ambivalence as part of the process of ‘working through,’ then there is no work of mourning that does not engage melancholia” (“Psychic Inceptions: Melancholy, Ambivalence, Rage,” in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, 167-198, [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997], 193).

¹³ Butler, *Precarious Life*, xiv.

reinvigorate a fantasy that the world was formerly orderly.”¹⁴ The U.S.’s dangerous melancholy is its disavowal of mourning, its fearful rush toward a hasty resolution that stomps on international legal conventions in the hopes of “restoring” some previous (invulnerable!) state of affairs. Butler, therefore, uses melancholy to different ends than some of the other feminist writers who appropriate the term for feminist politics. She does, however, articulate a radical sense of *mourning* in politics that shares the earlier feminists’ concerns and resistance to Freudian resolution.

The Politics of Mourning

In her preface to *Precarious Life*, Butler describes the role of mourning in politics: “It is not that mourning is the goal of politics,” she writes, “but that without the capacity to mourn, we lose that keener sense of life” and its precariousness that “we need in order to oppose violence.” She appeals to Emmanuel Levinas’ use of the “face” as a “figure that communicates both the precariousness of life and the interdiction on violence.”¹⁵ As I will describe in more depth below, Butler links the face with mourning to break the narcissistic impulse in Freudian mourning and instead imbue mourning with a religious and ethico-political orientation that refuses resolution. Thus it is through *mourning* that Butler addresses what Ziarek characterized as a recognition and refusal of the violence that happens in neutralizing (or, as Butler will put it, “dehumanizing”) the other without succumbing to the paralysis (and fearful retributive violence) of melancholy. Under Butler’s watch, mourning retains a constant vigilance against violence.

On this note, Butler expresses a doubt about mourning that is not only confessional but strategic as well. “I am not sure I know when mourning is successful,” she writes, “or when one has fully mourned another human being.”¹⁶ Because mourning is ongoing and uncertain, for Butler, it can motivate political positions and ethical orientations to others. “Perhaps,” she writes, “one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly for ever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say *submitting* to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance.”¹⁷ The implications of this assertion are manifold. First of all, this process of transformation can be ongoing, such that one is not simply transformed (case closed) but rather transforming, always remaining open to the face and address of the other. Secondly, this transformation radically alters what it means to be a human being and a subject, and thirdly, the transformation can play out in ethical and political actions.

The first implication of the ongoing transformation of irresolvable mourning, in which one refuses to close oneself off to the address of the other,¹⁸ draws strongly on

¹⁴ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 29-30. Consider Freud’s own description of this possible orderly world: “Once the mourning is over... we shall build up again all that war has destroyed, and perhaps on firmer ground and more lastingly than before” (Freud, “Transience,” 307).

¹⁵ Butler, *Precarious Life*, xviii.

¹⁶ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 20.

¹⁷ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 21.

¹⁸ I will return to this point below in my discussion of the “face.”

Jacques Derrida's sense of impossible mourning. "Impossible" for Derrida does not mean that mourning is not possible or can never happen. His sense of "impossible" mourning comes from the fact that any attempt at "successful" mourning is impossible or intolerable insofar as it is unethical or unjust. Against Freud's later picture of successful mourning as interiorization of its object, for Derrida and Butler, any mourning that aims toward interiorization does not respect the other as a singularity, as an other (face) who addresses me and constitutes me in relation to that other (and many others). In his *Memoires for Paul de Man*, Derrida writes, "Upon the death of the other we are given to memory, and thus to interiorization, since the other, outside us, is now nothing. And with the dark light of this nothing, we learn that the other resists the closure of our interiorizing memory."¹⁹ For Derrida, Freud's interiorization, his resolution of mourning, breaks down because the other as other *cannot* be interiorized completely; the other's opacity exceeds any attempt at such totalizing knowledge. Thus Derrida names the aporia of mourning that haunts his work and Butler's: the aporia of mourning is that "*success fails... [a]nd inversely, the failure succeeds: an aborted interiorization is at the same time a respect for the other as other.*"²⁰ Impossible or irresolvable mourning does not mean that it is impossible to act. In fact, because of this respect for the other, we *must* act, out of responsibility to and for the other(s) that we mourn and in the name of any possible future.

The second implication of the transformation is that it radically alters what it means to be a human subject.²¹ For Butler, mourning challenges my relation to myself. Butler has a profound sense of the psychological, internal, effects of mourning at the site of conjunction between the individual and collective: "Grief contains the possibility of apprehending a mode of dispossession that is fundamental to who I am."²² Part of the "transformation" mentioned above, then, is that grief first alienates us from ourselves and illuminates our fundamental opacity to ourselves. This fundamental opacity to ourselves is then mirrored in the face of the Other: if I cannot presume to be transparent to myself, I certainly cannot assume the transparency of the other. Instead, I come face-to-face with an Other who petitions and addresses me, a notion to which I will return again below. Butler encapsulates the significance nicely when she writes, "I find that my very formation implicates the other in me, that my own foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection with others."²³ This constitution

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man*, revised edition, trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, Eduardo Cadava, and Peggy Kamuf, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 34. Hereafter *Memoires*.

²⁰ Derrida, *Memoires*, 35.

²¹ Engaging Butler and Derrida in a different essay, Ewa Ziarek also sees Freudian mourning as an impossible choice—the choice which cannot and should not be made in light of its attempts to erase and overcome loss. Building upon her earlier portrayal of Kristeva's melancholy, Ziarek formulates an "impossible mourning" more appropriate to Butler's project. She writes that the "ethics and politics of the impossible mourning are not merely one subjective experience among others...; they are also the very condition of the emergence of the subject of experience" (Ewa Ziarek, "Encounters Possible and Impossible: Derrida and Butler on Mourning," *Philosophy Today*, 144-155, Vol. 50, Supplement 2006, 149. Hereafter "Derrida and Butler."). "Impossible" mourning therefore constitutes the subject in some way.

²² Butler, *Precarious Life*, 28.

²³ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 46.

occurs (ontologically, though temporally as well) prior to subject-formation. The subject is *constituted in relation to* an Other, in primary vulnerability to loss, and thus in mourning.

In psychoanalytic terms, this primary vulnerability is first formed in the womb, in relation to the mother that the child “loses” in being born into this world. This vulnerability to loss is common to all beings. Butler writes, “Although I am insisting on referring to a common human vulnerability, one that emerges with life itself, I also insist that we cannot recover the source of this vulnerability: it precedes the formation of the ‘I.’ This is a condition, a condition of being laid bare from the start and with which we cannot argue.”²⁴ Thus both mutual vulnerability and loss precede the formation of the subject. A subject is formed in mourning and in relation to other(s). I am “always already” laid bare by others. To be laid bare is to be raw and exposed before the other, awaiting judgment.

Rather than mourning’s simply being a response to a death, then, there is some sense in which people are always already in mourning, that part of what it is to be a subject is to be in mourning. Politically reformulated, this sense of being always-already in mourning and in relation to others could be thought of in terms of what Derrida, echoing Marx, calls “inheritance.” Derrida writes, in *Specters of Marx*:

Inheritance is never a *given*, it is always a task.... We are in mourning.... That we *are* heirs does not mean that we *have* or that we *receive* this or that... but that the *being* of what we are *is* first of all inheritance, whether we like it or know it or not.... [W]e can only bear witness to it.²⁵

Human being is constituted in mourning as inheritance, as a primary mode of human subjectivity that demands our attention to others. Butler’s version of “bearing witness” to this inheritance lies in the connection between mourning and politics—thus invoking the third aspect of how transformation plays out in ethical and political actions.

Butler makes a strong case for a collective or historical mourning that indicates that a duty to the dead is bound up in our duty to the living and to the future (since we cannot know the result of the transformation in advance). Butler writes that “to grieve, and to make grief itself into a resource for politics, is not to be resigned to inaction, but it may be understood as the slow process by which we develop a point of identification with suffering itself. The disorientation of grief... posits the ‘I’ in the mode of unknowingness,” which can turn the “narcissistic preoccupation of melancholia” into “a consideration of the vulnerability of others.”²⁶ The destabilizing force of mourning in effect forces one to turn toward others.

Butler makes this point to argue against the allegation that mourning is “privatizing” and “depoliticizing.” Johannes Baptist Metz, a Catholic political theologian, wrote that the memory of suffering “*prevents* the privatization and

²⁴ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 31.

²⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, (New York: Routledge, 1994), 54.

²⁶ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 30.

internalization of suffering, and the reduction of its social and political dimension.”²⁷ Evoking this memory of suffering, Butler uses mourning to articulate a “fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility. If my fate is not originally or finally separable from yours, then the ‘we’ is traversed by a relationality that we cannot easily argue against,”²⁸ and this relationality is based on our fundamental, shared, vulnerability. However, this relationality does not, because of my opacity to myself and the opacity of the Other, mean that I can *know* the Other.

Presuming to “know” the Other would imply a mode of closure or foreclosure against which the entire theme of mourning is speaking. If I can know the Other—whether another individual or a nation—I can strike preemptively, deny the other speech, circumvent international or interpersonal laws or policies that govern my interactions with others, or perpetrate another host of violences. The Other must remain fundamentally unknowable, mandating my remaining in open relationship with her, him, it or them. In recognizing our shared vulnerability, I must allow myself to be “undone” by the Other. Butler poetically writes: “For if I am confounded by you, then you are already of me, and I am nowhere without you. You are what I gain through” the disorientation and loss that comes from trying to speak to an Other. “This is how the human comes into being, again and again, as *that which we have yet to know*.”²⁹ Ideally, both ethically and politically, the realization that the other is *always* that which we have yet to know, is *forever* unknowable, stays our hand at the moment of potential violence.

Mourning, Subjectivity, and the Face

The real hinge joining Butler’s discussions of the way that the subject is co-constituted in relation to others and the way that subject is therefore always, at once, in an ethical or political relationship, is her use of Levinas’ evocation of the “face.” I mentioned that the transformative role of mourning makes mourning ongoing or resistant to closure, alters what it means to be a subject, and plays out in ethical and political realms. Butler’s articulation of the relationship to the face builds upon and also encapsulates these three aspects through at least three related points—the structure of address, the site of nonviolence, and the question of representation and dehumanization.

²⁷ Johannes Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, (Seabury Press, 1980), 115. Emphasis added. Like many of the psychoanalytic feminists, Metz is opposed to the memories which bathe everything in a conciliatory light and thus run the precise danger of *losing* or erasing the danger or the violence and suffering of the past. Instead, he seeks the “dangerous memories, memories which make demands on us. There are memories in which earlier experiences break through to the centre-point of our lives and reveal new and dangerous insights for the present” (Metz, 109). And, to evoke a Benjaminian or Derridean temporality, “such memories,” are, for Metz, “like dangerous and incalculable visitations from the past... memories, as it were, with a future content” (Metz,110).

²⁸ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 22-23.

²⁹ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 49. Emphasis added.

Butler writes that she considers the face in order to “explain how it is that others make moral claims upon us, address moral demands to us, ones that we do not ask for, ones that we are not free to refuse.”³⁰ These demands, which comprise what Butler calls the “structure of address,” are made simply by being in relation to others; we do not ask for or even necessarily welcome these demands. The structure of address situates us in relation to others; it does not necessarily originate from an act of our will but requires our response. Butler writes:

The structure of address is important for understanding how moral authority is introduced and sustained if we accept not just that we address others when we speak, but that in same way we come to exist, as it were, in the moment of being addressed, and something about our existence proves precarious when that address fails. More emphatically, however, what binds us morally has to do with how we are addressed by others in ways that we cannot avert or avoid.³¹

“Address,” through these demands, comes from the living and the dead and is part of the structure of our inheritance or the constitution of our subjectivity. Address means that we are in a relationship of radical attention, bound by a kind of force that flows back and forth between myself, the dead, and the living others.

The face of the Other thus lays claim to me, makes demands upon me, and calls for my response. I can be “faced” with the deaths of those others in the World Trade Center on September 11th or the thousands more in the years before or since, or I can be faced with the death of a grandmother, a father. I can be faced with the demands of one person, alive, in front of me—a child, a spouse, a person on the street (and while Levinas cannot extend his thinking of the face to beings other than human beings, Butler and others occasionally do). Likewise, the United States (or any political body) can be faced with the deaths of millions at its hands or in its name, or it can be faced with prisoners unlawfully detained or possible murderers who still deserve protection under International laws. Whichever face undoes me or undoes us, it simultaneously appeals to me and threatens me.

As Butler reads Levinas, the face is both the temptation to kill and the call to peace in the “You shall not kill.” Butler concludes from this assertion that “the face makes various utterances at once: it bespeaks an agony, an injurability, at the same time that it bespeaks a divine prohibition against killing.”³² In being laid bare by and before an other, I simultaneously submit or open myself to the other while wanting to lash out to protect myself and overcome the discomfort. However, the Levinasian double injunction is paradoxically the source of nonviolence. Nonviolence is not an *absence* of violence or struggle but is a position or relationality that arises out of coming to terms

³⁰ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 131. When calling for a “consideration of the structure of address itself,” Butler notes that the obligation to *respond* to an address “is about a mode of response that follows on having been addressed, a comportment toward the Other only after the Other has made a demand upon me, accused me of a failing, or asked me to assume a responsibility” (Butler, *Precarious Life*, 129).

³¹ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 130.

³² Butler, *Precarious Life*, 134-35.

with the possibility of violence that is signaled in the face. Butler articulates the paradox as follows:

There is fear for one's own survival, and there is anxiety about hurting the Other, and these two impulses are at war with each other... But they are at war with each other in order *not* to be at war, and this seems to be the point. For the nonviolence that Levinas seems to promote does not come from a peaceful place, but rather from a constant tension between the fear of undergoing violence and the fear of inflicting violence.³³

Nonviolent resolution to political conflicts cannot come out of a denial of violence. Denial of violence plays into the paralysis of melancholy that perpetuates more violence through fear, as I discussed above. In melancholy, one averts one's face and lashes out.

Butler speaks against such violent action against others in the name of self-preservation: instead, "it is as much a matter of wrestling ethically with one's own murderous impulses, impulses that seek to quell an overwhelming fear, as it is a matter of apprehending the suffering of others and taking stock of the suffering one has inflicted."³⁴ The nonviolent resolution comes from an acknowledgment of, a willingness to undergo, mourning as a mode of being in responsible relation to other beings, recognizing a mutual vulnerability and acknowledging wrongs. For this "willingness" to be more than lip service, however, it is helpful to consider how the face and address map onto discourse and representation.

Butler writes that the Other is the condition of discourse in the following sense: "If the Other is obliterated, so too is language, since language cannot survive outside of the conditions of address."³⁵ Discourse, which is the relation between what can be said and what cannot be said, involves how one responds to the address of the Other. The politics of mourning stakes out what is human—the real, the grievable—against dehumanizing forces that produce the unreal or the ungrievable. Butler helpfully concretizes this rather abstract assertion in her discussion of the obituary.

Butler uses the example of the obituary to demonstrate how mourning and discourse are tied together in defining who is human or who is grievable: "The obituary functions as the instrument by which grievability is publicly demonstrated. It is the means by which a life becomes, or fails to become, a publicly grievable life, an icon for national self-recognition... As a result, we have to consider the obituary as an act of nation-building. The matter is not a simple one, for, if a life is not grievable, it is not quite a life."³⁶ If a life cannot be talked about because there is no place in, say, American discourse for its acknowledgment, that life is nongrievable, it is dehumanized, it is made unreal. The "address" of that life falls on deaf ears, a face turned away. For example, we do not (or can not) see the obituaries of Palestinians or other people who die at the hands of US state violence because acknowledging those losses threatens US identity in some way, just as the face threatens my own existence.

³³ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 137.

³⁴ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 150.

³⁵ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 139.

³⁶ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 34.

The conditions of sayability in the obituary are therefore indicative of a broader issue of discourse: “There is less a dehumanizing discourse at work here than a refusal of discourse that produces dehumanization as a result” by failing to acknowledge the individual lives of those who have lived and died outside of what can be talked about.³⁷ If a person is lost but that person does not, discursively speaking, exist, how can mourning take place? In lieu of mourning, once again we enter the state of melancholy: “What follows as well from prohibitions on avowing grief in public is an effective mandate in favor of a generalized melancholia (and a derealization of loss) when it comes to considering *as dead* those the United States or its allies have killed.”³⁸ Melancholy *is* the averted face.

The question of the obituary, or of how we can acknowledge the dead Other generally, is a question of representation. While this question can be engaged from several perspectives (say, for example, in how images of war or death are mobilized for political purposes), I am especially interested in how the way that the face exceeds representation can help prevent sovereign acts of violence. The issue of the unprinted obituary forecloses the possibility of representation, which is a problem in itself. What about the obituaries that *are* printed, the deaths that do make it into the national imaginary, the histories that are written? Is there any guarantee that acknowledging the Other in these ways *prevents* violence?³⁹ Well, the simple answer is “no,” there are never any guarantees. However, the structure of the face and the address do open the space to stage some significant resistances. These resistances are based on what could be called two “excesses.”

On the one hand, the face of Other exceeds representation. I noted earlier the connection between my opacity to myself and the opacity of the other to me. The face of the other confronts me with that opacity. It is at once a face and a façade, a surface but one that returns my gaze. The façade or surface is what tempts one to make a representation of the face (say in media images) to mobilize a political agenda. But the fact that there is someone unknowable embodying that face is what can prevent representations from being mobilized so successfully for war and other heinous endeavors. Butler describes an “incommensurability of the face with whatever it represents.” Therefore, “there is something unrepresentable that we nevertheless seek to represent, and that paradox must be retained in the representation we give.”⁴⁰ The response, as was the case with nonviolence (mapped onto mourning), is *not* to stop representing the face, a move which would be like avoiding mourning or failing to see how nonviolence comes out of struggle with violence. The face, as a facade, is

³⁷ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 36.

³⁸ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 37.

³⁹ Edith Wyschogrod, in her conception of the “heterological historian,” has an acute sense of the possibility of violence—and the need to write against that violence—that is entwined in the writing of history. Wyschogrod knows that the promise to the dead that makes one write history has no exact terms and no guarantee of success. In fact, the historian courts violence based on an impossible decision that must be made anyway: “When the historian speaks in the name of the other, she preempts the speech of the other, whereas if she remains silent the other is consigned to invisibility” (*An Ethics of Remembering: History, Heterology, and the Nameless Others*, [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998], 38).

⁴⁰ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 144.

fundamentally representative. By *confronting* or coming to terms with representations in their paradoxical manifestations, we begin to undergo the transformation of mourning.⁴¹ By acknowledging the insufficiency of any representation to present the human, by acknowledging in and through the representation that the human other is wholly Other (a humanized “someone” whose demands break into my projects and make me respond), my ethical responsibility is stirred and a political response can begin to form.

On the other hand, the Other exceeds interiorization. Irresolvable, impossible, radical mourning is predicated upon the idea that the Other cannot be internalized completely, hence the aporia of mourning that “failure succeeds.” In fact, the “just politics of mourning” should be based on recognizing the inassimilable alterity of the Other coupled with a mutual vulnerability that indicates that the potential for violence—in this case, the attempt to internalize the Other or incorporate the Other into a totalizing discourse—is always there. Because the dead (as well as living “others”) cannot be incorporated and instead leave a “trace” that always exceeds any interiorization, in principle they cannot “fit” into or be subsumed by any discourse that attempts to co-opt them for other uses. As Ewa Ziarek points out, “the just politics of mourning, though often mobilized by the demand of public recognition for the repudiated losses, exceeds the limitations of such discourse.”⁴² Ziarek’s hope is that this disjunction will prevent mourning from being used as an excuse to justify horrific acts of attempted retribution. Unlike Freudian mourning, the “just politics of mourning” holds open a place of possible justice without designating a site that could be co-opted for further violence. Butler also writes against this possibility of retributive violence: “The fact of enormous suffering does not warrant revenge or legitimate violence, but must be mobilized in the service of a politics that seeks to diminish suffering universally, that seeks to recognize the sanctity of life, of all lives.”⁴³ The character of this politics is still being worked out⁴⁴ and warrants continued, continual inspection and interrogation.

Conclusion

Because the politics of mourning marks an ongoing, constant vigilance in the name of responsibility toward the Other (whether dead or alive), ethico-political projects must respond to the address of the Other and be formulated nonviolently on mutual vulnerability and opacity. To reach this position, Judith Butler builds upon psychoanalytic feminist critiques of mourning and melancholy to envision a radical sense of mourning that is ongoing and resistant to closure, alters subject formation, and produces ethical and political engagement. Attention to the “face” and address of the

⁴¹ Presumably, images of human suffering, which invoke our mutual vulnerability, can be especially powerful in this regard (though perhaps problematic for other reasons).

⁴²Ziarek, “Derrida and Butler,” 151.

⁴³ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 104.

⁴⁴ To further discuss the character of this politics, one might turn to Butler’s critique of sovereignty, particularly in her chapter “Indefinite Detention.” In this chapter, she critiques a melancholy “form of sovereignty that,” for example, “seeks to absorb and instrumentalize an international coalition, rather than submit to a self-limiting practice by virtue of its international obligations” (Butler, *Precarious Life*, 100).

other then raises questions of discourse and representation. These relationships must be based on a respect for the precariousness of life that will extend to ever-widening circles of politics.