The Value of Silence

David L. Eng

Now the Sirens have a still more fatal weapon than their song, namely their silence. And though admittedly such a thing has never happened, still it is conceivable that someone might possibly have escaped from their singing; but from their silence certainly never.
—Franz Kafka, “The Silence of the Sirens”

Tragedy is a preliminary stage of prophecy.
—Walter Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama

A Moment of Silence

What is the value of silence? And what is that value of silence from which it is impossible to escape?

In the initial aftermath of the tragedies of 11 September 2001, New York City was utterly silent. Immediately following the collapse of the World Trade Center Towers there appeared on the streets, in parks, in subway and train stations, on make-shift bulletin boards all over the city and its outlying suburbs hundreds, then thousands, of home-made posters for “missing persons” (Fig. 1). I am struck not just by the inescapable silence of these posters—the smiling and soundless faces of the thousands of “disappeared.” I am also amazed by the complete silence engendered in the crowds

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3 In invoking “the disappeared” (desaparecidos), I am referencing not only questions of nationalism and state-sponsored violence during the years of Argentina’s “Dirty War” (1976–1983) but also issues of bodily remains or, more accurately, the lack of such material evidence. As psychologists and theorists note, the absence of the dead body or bodily remains makes the work of mourning especially difficult, often leaving it in permanent suspension and denying possibilities for closure. See Diana
who gathered, and continue to gather, around these now public shrines to absorb their mute appeals.

Very quickly, this silence has been overtaken by noise. Through all this incessant and increasing noise, I continue to wonder and to worry about the place of silence, a place for silence. While initially emblems of hope, these silent posters of the disappeared are now for those who survive tokens of mourning, transitional objects, to use Winnicott’s term, as hope evaporates into dread, and dread turns into grief. In this mute space, the shock of trauma slowly transforms into the reality of loss, and in this regard, silence might be considered that moment before—that liminal space from which—loss is expropriated into its symbolic meaning. Silence, then, is not the opposite of speech but, indeed, its very condition of possibility, the precondition of knowing and of meaning. But what, we must ask, will happen to this silence—to the silence of countless, inexpressible, and singular private tragedies—as it encounters a public language of mourning and is reduced to a state speech wholly inadequate to the inconsolable contours of its grief?

At the moment—it is a month and a half after the events of 11 September that I sit down to finalize this essay—collective calls of a US President and legislature for unity

and tolerance within, and for war and retribution without, initiate a battle for “infinite justice” (subsequently redubbed “enduring freedom”) with no ostensible conclusion and, hence, with no possible future horizon. In its attempts to repress any reckoning with the future, the mania of nationalism incited by the politics of (state) mourning reduces the globe to an “us” and a “them,” while producing a truly unprecedented New World Order of American sovereignty. You are with US or you are against US. In one and the same breath, this politics also works to obviate the potential of tragedy, as Benjamin provocatively suggests, to be a preliminary stage of prophecy. It does so precisely through the severing—the silencing—of the past.

Mourning and Melancholia

It is odd, Benjamin tells us in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, “that the Poetics of Aristotle make no mention of mourning [Trauer] as the resonance of the tragic.” Here, Freud’s observations on the work of mourning [Trauerarbeit] provide an important occasion to work through the resonances of the tragic as a relation to history. In his 1917 essay, “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud attempts to draw a clear distinction between these two psychic states through the question of “successful” and “failed” resolutions to loss. He reminds us in the beginning of his essay that “mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on.”

Mourning, unlike melancholia, is a psychic process in which the loss of an object or ideal occasions the withdrawal of libido from that object or ideal. This withdrawal cannot be enacted at once; instead, it is a gradual letting go. In Freud’s initial definition of the concept, melancholia is pathological precisely because it is a mourning without end. Unresolved grief results from the melancholic’s inability to resolve the numerous psychic conflicts and ambivalences that the loss of the loved object effects.

Indeed, Freud tells us, when faced with the burden of unresolved grief, the melancholic preserves the lost object by incorporating it into the ego and establishing an ambivalent identification with it—ambivalent precisely because of the vexed nature of this forfeiture. The turning of the object into the ego marks a turning away from the external world of the social to the internal world of the psyche, the enclosure of the social in the psychic. This turning from outside to inside threatens to erase the political bases of loss. In this regard, we must insist that melancholia and politics are not separable but coterminous phenomena. Moreover, when the (state) politics of mourning circumscribe the individual’s ability to negotiate the symbolic dimensions of loss in the face of collective group imperatives and sanctioned public histories, melancholia cannot be far behind.

From a slightly different perspective, we might understand that, in turning from outside to inside, and from the social to the psychic, the melancholic makes every

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4 As the US and its allies began bombing Afghanistan on 7 October 2001, the “Operation Infinite Justice” campaign was replaced with the “Operation Enduring Freedom” campaign. As before, this new name also suggests a campaign with no conclusion or future horizon.

5 Benjamin, *The Origin*, 118.

conceivable effort to retain the lost object at any cost, sustaining its threatened and precarious existence by preserving it within the “private” domain of the psyche. Unlike the mourner who has declared the lost object dead and gone, the melancholic is haunted by the continual return of the lost object. Freud notes that the psychic expense of maintaining this ongoing spectral relationship is tremendous. In identifying with the lost object, the melancholic assumes the emptiness of the lost object, invariably participating in his or her own self-denigration. “In grief the world becomes poor and empty,” Freud summarizes, “in melancholia it is the ego itself.”

While he continually attempts to describe melancholia as a mode of pathologized individual grief, Freud cannot ultimately sustain this distinction. Melancholia is not just the precondition for the work of mourning—indeed, as Judith Butler points out, the precondition for the very formation of the identifications that constitute the ego as psychic entity. More importantly, by preserving the lost object in the domain of the psyche, the melancholic leaves history open for continual re-negotiation. That is, unlike mourning, in which the past is declared resolved, finished, and dead, in melancholia the past remains steadfastly alive in the present. By refusing loss and by engaging in “countless separate struggles” with it, melancholia might be said to constitute an ongoing and open relationship with the silence of the past—bringing its fleeting ghosts and specters into the present. In this regard, we find in Freud’s conception of melancholia’s persistent struggle with its lost objects, places, and ideals not a renounced past that is silent but a silent past that is announced. The avowal of this silent past generates new sites for history and for tragedy, a space from which the voice of prophecy might be heard. Here lies that value of silence from which there should be no escape.

The Language of Loss/The Loss of Language

In rethinking the politics of mourning, then, we must consider melancholia not only as a depathologized structure of feeling but also as a psychic condition through which individual tragedies return from the silent past for a reckoning with the future. Considering this return, we might ask what are the larger social histories and sanctioned politics that make certain losses unresolved, unresolvable?

Here, we might invoke queer studies and the AIDS pandemic of the 1980s for an important lesson. Both Douglas Crimp and Butler isolate the plaint of the melancholic in the age of AIDS as one in which the loss—indeed, the refusal—of a public language to mourn a seemingly endless series of excoriated, dead young men triggers the absolute need to imagine a discourse of identification that could mean anything other than silence, isolation, self-abasement, and death. Crimp writes in “ Mourning and Militancy” that “[s]eldom has a society so savaged people during their hour of loss,” while Butler states that “[i]nsofar as the grief remains unspeakable, the rage over the

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7 Ibid., 246.
loss can redouble by virtue of remaining unavowed. And if that rage is publically proscribed, the melancholic effects of such a proscription can achieve suicidal proportions.”

Consequently, in the face of these massive and unresolved collective losses from AIDS, the creation of a public and politicized language of grief—the stitching together and widespread display of the AIDS quilt, for instance—works to annul the tragic forfeitures that a homophobic world repeatedly demands. This is a language of loss that is arduously created against the conscripted loss of language, a mourning *and* militancy that returns melancholia’s internalized anger to the sphere of the social and to social activism. Butler asks of melancholia: “Is the psychic violence of conscience not a refracted indictment of the social forms that have made certain kinds of losses ungrievable?” Are homosexual love and loss “worthy and capable of being grieved, and thus worthy and capable of having been lived?”

### The Language of Mourning/Mourning as Nationalism

It might seem, at first, counterintuitive to compare the lack of a public language for mourning during the AIDS pandemic with the current situation in which there seems to be nothing but massive, elaborate, and abundant occasions of and for public speech. Yet, in all this noise, the language of mourning is no less impoverished for it has become the language of an unyielding nationalism, one that brooks no internal dissent—indeed, legitimates the suppression of dissent. (And what is democracy without dissent?) Sadly, though predictably, this enforced unity serves to produce President George W. Bush and Mayor Rudolph Giuliani as new icons of a seemingly tolerant domestic multiculturalism. At the same time, erosions of civil rights and liberties clear the space for racial profiling, for physical and ideological attacks on people who appear to be of Middle Eastern descent. This unified language of nationalism achieves its apotheosis when some members of these targeted groups feel compelled to adopt its speech—to display, for instance, the US flag not as an emblem of solidarity or militarism but as a symbol offering the possibility of inoculation from bodily harm (Fig. 2). Paradoxically, this language of nationalism solicits the identifications of those very minority, working-class, and immigrant groups typically excluded from full citizenship in the nation-state, from equal participation in an ever-shrinking civil society.

The inconsolable and singular personal losses suffered at the World Trade Center, at the Pentagon, and in the fields of Pennsylvania assume their symbolic significance in the public language of unity and protection from militant Islamic assault on US ideals of democracy and freedom. In this time of global crisis, opportunities for alternate forms of public speech contract such that cries of grief can only mean cries for war.

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Moreover, in this politics of mourning, certain deprivileged losses are summarily erased, as alternative narratives of community and belonging, too, are diminished. Thus, the public language of nationalism grounds its social structure in traditional notions of family and kinship. The rhetoric of the loss of “fathers and mothers,” “sons and daughters,” and “brothers and sisters” attempts to trace a smooth alignment between the nation-state and the nuclear family, the symbolics of blood relations and nationalist domesticity (Fig. 3). This narrative of white heteronormativity leaves no public space, no public speech, for those liminal groups—gays and lesbians and undocumented migrant workers, for instance—who perished in the tragedies but whose degraded social status, hard to affirm in life, become impossible to acknowledge in death.\footnote{Gay press newspapers such as The Washington Blade have covered these deaths, including an openly gay pilot (David Charlebois) on American Airlines Flight 77, a passenger (Mark Bingham) on United Airlines 93 who is said to have fought back against the hijackers, a gay couple (Daniel Brandhorst and Ronald Gamboa), with their adopted three-year-old son (David Gamboa) on United Airlines 175, and a new York City Fire Department Chaplain (Mychal Judge), administering last rites to a dying firefighter. This coverage, for the most part, serves to construct these gay individuals as anomalies, while folding them into the discourse of nation and patriotic heroics. This coverage does not force public recognition of the alternate modes of community, intimacy, friendship, and family that gays, lesbians, queers, and people of color have created and long sustained that challenge white heteronormative, blood-based exclusions of national belonging. As an exception to this general trend, Denny Lee writes about the denial of government benefits, such as worker’s compensation, to surviving gay and lesbian partners. See “Partners of Gay Victims Find The Law Calls Them Strangers,”}
Figure 3. Pennsylvania Station, New York City, 27 September 2001. Photo: David Eng.
for any form of relief, material or psychic, these groups illustrate Benjamin’s dictum that “Even the dead will not be safe.”16 Like losses from AIDS, these deaths remain hard to avow and often outside of public speech. We comb the silent posters of the disappeared for these missing narratives (Fig. 4).

While it is crucial to challenge melancholia as an individual pathology by returning its source to the domain of the social, it is equally important to consider the ways in which the nation-state itself can be melancholically structured. The national plaint of threatened but cherished ideals under terrorist attack assumes a melancholic form that is produced against both histories of loss and loss of histories. That is, the work of mourning as nationalism is, ultimately perhaps, less an effective language of grief than the affective, the manic, refusal of the nation to confront its other losses. This is a melancholic history of particular institutionalized political, economic, and cultural exclusions, domestically and abroad, that repeatedly return and cannot be laid to rest. This is “the ghost in the machine.”17

Let us also remember here Freud’s observation that the “most remarkable characteristic of melancholia, and the one in most need of explanation, is its tendency to change round into mania—a state which is the opposite of it in its symptoms.”18 The mania of nationalism is the complete externalization of a nation’s grief, as streaks of emotion (passionate militarism as grief) triumph over questions of reason: What made this tragedy possible? What is our responsibility in the face of it? This mania transforms ungrievable loss into absolute disavowal—the refusal of the US to confront the silence of its past, its disavowed histories and policies that have helped to create specters of and for global terror. In the campaign for “infinite justice/enduring freedom” history is shorn off from the past such that the horizon of the future disappears and prophecy remains a proposition yet to come.

In this externalized mania of nationalism, the value of silence goes unheard, for silence exists in that moment before loss gains its symbolic meaning and tragedy is exploited for a politics of mourning. To refuse symbolization is, of course, impossible; symbolization constitutes the world we inhabit. Yet, in the current language of nationalism as mourning, the personal losses of 11 September 2001 are redoubled in their public display. The past—victimized, buried, and dead again—is silenced once more. What we must accomplish now is not the politics of mourning but the mourning of the politics that we have inherited, the mourning of the histories that we have lost.

The melancholic refusal to allow a certain object, place, or ideal to disappear into oblivion marks an excess of loss, a loss that demands and yet defies signification. In

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14 October 2001, CY4. Asociación Tepeyac is one of the largest Mexicano/a labor organization in New York City. With five hundred of its members missing at the World Trade Center, Asociación Tepeyac is organizing documentation and aid relief efforts.


Figure 4. Pennsylvania Station, New York City, 27 September 2001. Photo: David Eng.
this excess, silent but unyielding, lies an ethical call. Freud explores in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, a text written in response to the traumas of World War I, the problem of a subject’s inability to recount a history that only appears as a series of repetition compulsions—of continued and unbindable affects. This sense of inexorable loss and a silent past constitutes the psychic limits of melancholia not only for the individual but also for the group, for the nation. Indeed, it suggests that we consider the inexorable loss underwriting the epistemological rupture of the beyond of the pleasure principle as a type of missing history whose only affective trace lingers in the shadowy realm of an articulate silence. Hence, rather than perceiving the repetition compulsion as the failure to bind a traumatic affect—the failure to bind the individual and group, the domestic and global, traumas we now face—perhaps we might see in the call of the melancholic not just the value of silence but, finally, an ethical demand to provide another kind of language for loss, another story, another history.

Figure 5. Broadway (between 115th and 116th Streets), New York City, 27 September 2001. Photo: David Eng.