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A Light for a Light

Minoritarian Aesthetics and the Politics of Grief-Work

Abstract: How does loss tear a hole in the world and produce a collective remaking of a new social order in which grief-work is not contained singularly but is a process done in feminist, queer, and Black and Brown ensemble? Interested in how we deliberately incorporate loss into collective grief-work, this article pulls from feminist and queer theorists of color who move across social and psychical constructions of sorrow. Highlighting contemporary art by minoritarian artists such as Eva Margarita Reyes and Pedro Lopez, who embrace loss, the author argues that grief-work is a communal labor we undergo together in acts of intimate meditation, suffering, spillage, and transformation. Happening in feminist and queer ensemble, grief-work is a deliberate decision to assemble in nonlinear feelings and attachments; it is an intention to work together to defend not only the dead but also the living, tending to immaterial energies that shift the fecund terrain of both life and death.

“What does it mean to defend the dead?” (Sharpe 2016: 10). This is but one compelling question that permeates the pages of Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, wherein to protect the dead, one must commit to the conscious labor of wake work. In arriving at such consciousness, Sharpe answers her own question: “It means work. It is work: hard emotional, physical, intellectual work that demands vigilant attendance to the needs of the dying, to ease their way, but also to the needs of the living” (10). Analyzing both aesthetic and everyday accounts of Black life that are assembled into what she calls “the orthography of the wake” (20–21),

Sharpe demonstrates how Black life weathers beyond the afterlives of slavery, even in spaces of impending death, terror, and erasure. In this interplay between life and death, one might also ask, what does it mean to simultaneously tend to both the living and the dead, a “ghostly matter” (Gordon 1997) that reorganizes the politics of tenderness, existence, materiality, and labor all at once? All these questions require that labor be seen as a material and an immaterial ethics of care, a working “in the wake” that exceeds the normative ways we have been trained to envisage and respond to loss. To weather on, then, is to also return to the question of tending to the dead and the living at the same time. Or, how does loss tear a hole in the world and produce a collective remaking of a new social order in which grief-work is not contained singularly but a process done in feminist, Black, Brown, and queer ensemble?

Interested in how one mobilizes loss into collective grief-work during a global crisis, this article pulls from feminist and queer theorists of color who move across social and psychological constructions of mourning. From Sharpe’s orthographies for communal loss to José Esteban Muñoz’s (2020) Brownness as “being-in-common” to Leticia Alvarado’s (2019) haunted communions as relationality, and Judith Butler’s (2004) precarious lives, I consider the co-presence of “a choreography of singularities” that “should not dissolve incommensurability and difference into equivalence” (Muñoz 2020: xxxi) when navigating communal grief amidst ongoing colonial violence. Calling on contemporary minoritarian performance artists such as Eva Margarita Reyes and Pedro Lopez,¹ who manage loss across Black, Brown, and queer cultural resonances, I argue that grief-work is a communal labor we undergo in acts of historical admission, intimate meditation, suffering, spillage, and transformation. Happening in minoritarian ensemble, grief-work is the decision to assemble nonlinear feelings and attachments, and in so doing tend to the immaterial energies that shift the fecund terrain of both life and death.

Grief-work engenders an ensemble of affinities, resonances, and invitations for reckoning with “the stain of enduring historical violence” (xxvii) across sites and subjects under siege. Those lost to state violence, unnatural disasters, deadly viral strains, police brutality, colonial logics, and anti-Black violence are rendered not only grievable here, but livable within other forms of energy that flow beyond the physical body. For if we tend (not only defend) to both the dead and the living simultaneously, we might begin to feel how death not only undoes one but also remakes the communal

into revitalizing forms of immaterial matter and multidimensional embodiments—always in “co-presence with other modes of difference” (xxxix).

Building on and pulling from the genealogies of Black, Brown, and queer performance studies scholars and artists through recourse to grief and mourning, this essay interrogates how loss binds us in our efforts to carry out wake work by enabling collective energy to be reconstituted by sorrow. The artists presented here turn to fire, ash, water, salt, bodily tears, and other elements of the earth to uncover how grief-work is inseparable from the activities, subjects, and objects that inform our everyday ways of living, laboring, and dying. For in attending to all life forces, we intentionally labor together to defend the dead and animate graveyards—grieving more than a body, but the residual sparks that linger of spirit.

A Light for a Light: A Communal Vortex of Loss

Piecing together her own orthography of the wake through ritual practice for Black and Brown life, Afro-Latinx interdisciplinary performance artist, playwright, poet, and scholar Eva Margarita Reyes carried the weight of death on her fingertips in her piece *Light of Ours* (2020–21). Performed on New Year’s Eve, between the hours of 11:00 p.m. and 1:00 a.m. to catch the end and beginning of years, Reyes broadcast live this endurance piece in honor of Black life. For nearly two hours, Reyes thoughtfully and slowly lights 750 donated candles for the dead, not just flames that flicker in memory, but fire that survives its own ephemerality. Collected over months through community donations, from mailed-in candles delivered from across the United States to online funding sources, Reyes curls the candles across space, making spiral-like enclosures across her living room, kitchen, and office floors, “before finally having light spill out to the front door and into the yard”² she shares with her mother and brother. Remaining lit for seventy-two hours, the piece flows over and out of time: a clever admonition that this light of ours is delicate but enduring. Fire burns through space and time, but fire also generates growth to sustain numerous ecological systems: it is both end and beginning, abundance and flux.

Reyes understands all these acts of and for the communal as spillages that are inseparable from the inter-articulations of everyday life and staged performances. Carefully moving between candles with every burn, Reyes’s body spirals between space, light, her white gown, and the afterlives of Blackness; all these movements create a communal vortex with

each candle lit. Every candle honors a Black life taken by state violence, terror, neglect, and police brutality—constituted by and constitutive of a global anti-Blackness. Death, and all her hauntings, are held alive for Reyes as fire glints, swaying back and forth and clarifying how life’s playground also belongs to the dead. For three full days Reyes’s candles remain afire: these physical and temporal spillages indicate existences that compel our responsibility to one another in multidimensional ways.

In an interview with the artist, she opens up about the importance of space working in the service of family, community, and ongoing loss. *Light of Ours* is wake work for the people and also deeply personal as she performs the piece in her Los Angeles family home. Reyes shares that three different houses all sit on one plot of land—one for her, her brother, and another for her mother. She adds that “they are lined up horizontally like dominos . . . I live in front, my brother in the middle, and my mother takes up the master house in the back. The yard sits in between my mother’s and brother’s houses, and the spillage is necessarily communal.”³ While honoring the commitment to one another in such spills, Reyes works from the inside of her home outward, a private response to loss that eventually enters the public domain of common suffering in her family’s backyard.

Created during the height of the pandemic and social protest, *Light of Ours* recognizes the grief inundating our daily lives and how we must learn to navigate communal mourning spaces. Arguing against the state’s deadly impulses to abandon collective needs for both living and grieving, Reyes sees loss as a consequence of violence against the most vulnerable. For Reyes, these losses are inevitably personal, even if and especially when we may not directly know those who have passed: “Each time we lost a Black life, a sense of time, a sense of normalcy, it hit home.”⁴ *Light of Ours* was created to express shared grief, to provide terrain for memorial and ritual, and to enliven life (or the dead?) by honoring and remaining with the silences that breathe across energies. This is to say, and as Sharpe (2016: 130–31) insists, living is done “in the wake of slavery, in spaces where we were never meant to survive, or have been punished for surviving and for daring to claim or make spaces of something like freedom, we yet imagine and transform spaces for and practices of an ethics of care (as in repair, maintenance, attention), an ethics of seeing, and of *being* in the wake as consciousness.”

In tending to the ethics of care that require one to hold life closely, Reyes turns her home into an illuminated chapel to land us in a cemetery of light,

rather than buried corpses. Reminiscent of the ritualistic practice of standing in line to light candles at church,⁵ Reyes waits her turn and summons the spectator to do the same. But instead of creating a standing candle altar, Reyes bends and kneels to produce light from the ground up that moves throughout her home to blaze across the backyard. The camera pans in and out, slowly following her across each space. At times, Reyes stares into the lens, sustaining our gaze as she also illuminates those gone too soon one candle at a time. With no candle holders to navigate flames or dripping wax, Reyes labors within flammable and tight space, each foot careful not to entangle her long white dress within flashes of light.

Gently, Reyes moves from candle to candle, with only a sliver of space between her movements, a choreography so unhurried that the motions carry the heaviness of endurance. The suspense is exhausting: all our time together (between the camera, artist, viewer, objects) is tempered by the temperament of fire itself, for at any moment a candle can become extinguished, or the artist could go up in flames as she encircles herself to light candles curved into a circling current. The risk is necessarily worth it; for in laboring, we attend to the friction between knowing and unknowing, the limits of living and possibility of dying. These tensions turn Reyes into the animator, facilitator, and conduit of the lit vortex as we wait to deliberately mourn the dead and collectively conjure spirits. Reyes's home transforms into a flammable site but also a wake, a space to observe and linger in communion with Black life. As Sharpe notes, wake work is a practice used "to think about the dead and about our relations to them; they are rituals through which to enact grief and memory" (21). *Light of Ours* is a piece devoted to our shared grief, an entanglement that excludes no life force but welcomes energy to enliven us in ensemble. The title of her piece hints at such orchestrations as Reyes riffs on a popular gospel song "This Little Light of Mine." In her rendition, however, the plural leads the lyrical score. From "mine" to "ours," Reyes recollects the sweeping ways our shared grief cascades and cracks open the boundaries of attachment by creating "swirling patterns of exhaustion that design a future that flows"⁶ within perpetual social change.

Committed to potential overflow and ongoing cultural fluxes, Reyes covers herself in a long, white dress that eventually becomes another site of tinged and endangered life, and she shares that the "fabric functions as a blank canvas for spillage." Intrigued by both "the residual stains of life and performance," the white material acknowledges "the particular ways

lo sucio cultivates a lingering presence in the production of labor.⁷⁷ Pulling from and enacting scholar Deborah R. Vargas's (2014) notion of *lo sucio*, Reyes's dress collects dirt and debris, elements of an earthly and present Brownness (Muñoz 2020: 121–22) as she slides on her hands and knees to set flames to candles. While she intentionally pounds the pavement in *Light of Ours*, spillage occurs between embodiment and concrete, and fire and dirt against her plush white garment. By the performance's end, a section of Reyes's dress is left with a "black/brown hole" from the one instance that her gown caught fire between lighting candles, while the front portion of her dress is stained with "murky brown fingerprints from having picked up the dress"⁷⁸ so many times so as not to be set aflame once again. This feminist practice of tending to the dead is no easy feat under colonial logics. For as Reyes notes, one must be intentional with one's labor, even if it presents personal danger. Curiously caring for the dead is an exercise in tending to the living, for conjuring is never a solo choreography.

Ghostly Communion: Precarious Death and Entangled Grief

In writing about the contemporary minoritarian performance artist Nao Bustamante, whose avant-garde body of work spans decades, Leticia Alvarado (2019: 243) suggests that we think of "haunted communion as a site of relation," a way to re-coordinate not only time and bodily connection but also overall approaches to "queer sociality." Following the tracks of communal mourning and melancholia, Alvarado pieces together genealogical and epistemological loss through Bustamante's aesthetic work. In pieces such as *Given Over to Want* and *Somewhere, My Love*, the artist not only grieves the loss of a loved one, José Esteban Muñoz, by conjuring his being and body of thought, but also affords the public an opportunity to relive his spirit—one never actually removed from this material plane—together. Offering herself over to "ghostly matters" and "ghostly givings," Alvarado locates Bustamante's art as a "melancholic conjuring of brownness" that elaborates a Muñozian sense of Brown in which to feel the pangs of sorrow together is to survive "the hostile present" (243). In asking us to enter such communion, Alvarado, like the artist, welcomes "to the stage a panoply of ghosts" (247) and a monopoly of feelings; for in every word curated, the writer remembers that to conjure is not only to hold close the lost one via sentence but also to reanimate existence. Alvarado, a student of Muñoz's, disintegrates the haunting and unveils her own mourning practices,

tethered to Brownness; to Bustamante, her late teacher; and to the energies that subsist beyond consumption. This is also the method of Reyes's grief-work—a laboring in circles and spirits that extends us into both public and private domains, beyond what is earthly given. It means to consciously pause and commune with the dead or to create a space for the living and the dead, as Sharpe (2016: 21) describes: “Wakes allow those among the living to mourn the passing of the dead through ritual.”

In all her performances, Reyes works “to explore conjure, ritual, and ‘cere-mourning’ and investigate diasporic sociological haunting with the intention of unsettling colonial forms of gathering.”⁹ From *Pan de Coco* (2018), a ten-minute play about Afro-Latinx *bruja* conjuring through culinary recipes to combat familial racism to *Conjuring Stains* (2020), an endurance piece completed over nine days that explores government documents like the census as “sites of haunting” in which “the submission to and of the form” leaves “the subject with the residue of caste painting, an ink made of ghostly matter,”¹⁰ Reyes confirms that the antithetical determination between life and death is more an entwined circuit, not a finite destination. *Conjuring Stains* produces the ongoing outpouring of mourning and living beyond common codes of existence: the piece was being made as she cared for her terminally ill father; as he passed away during the process, the performance inevitably changed in meaning and shape. Of *Conjuring Stains*, the progenitor of *Light of Ours* and *Salt, Fast, Ashes Heat* (2020), Reyes suggests that her goal was “not only to subvert the documentation process but to allow flesh to spill outside of the boxes we were expected to fill in.”¹¹ She notes that, serendipitously, the overflow happened: “I was faced with having to fill out forms about my father’s cause of death and race. The boxes were filled with mourning. They spilled over.”¹² All her circular motions across her body of work produce the vortex of grief-work that animates the immaterial that becomes material in her circling waves.

Reyes lives in grief-work, “finding comfort in recognizing the entanglements of social, personal, and artistic practices,” for in grief she “best theorizes and works beyond archives to embrace our lived repertoires.”¹³ Reyes literally illuminates how this mutually constitutive dynamic necessarily becomes an experience. As air hits against each one of her candles, flames sparkle and glimmer, enlivening lives modified by quotidian violence. Lisa Marie Cacho (2012: 147–48) cautions one about both universal and personal accounts of “the devalued dead,” in configuring the language of mourning, for one must decipher “value into language.” Under the

neoliberal agenda and colonial racial capitalist logics, not all life is valuable but instead is valued according to systemically biased indexicalities such as “deviant” or “criminal” that approximate the conditions of worth and the grief required to live against such racialized grammars. So how do we thoughtfully defend, tend, and value the dead?

Reyes’s body of work reveals how even when death presents itself singularly, individual grief is inseparable from public loss; for in shared grief, as Alvarado notes, we build and cultivate anew. Similarly, Butler (2004: 20) reminds us in *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Justice* that “loss has made a tenuous ‘we’ of us all.” In Butler’s conjoined proposition, the singular folds into the plural, not as a negation of unique suffering but as a consequence of state sanctions that render certain lives unworthy of being lived and grieved. From casualties due to pandemics, epidemics, global war, and deadly violations against ongoing vulnerable populations, loss is imbricated in the contours of the world, as bodies are conjoined and constitutive of one another, even if in a delicate relationship. Or as Butler attenuates, “Each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies—as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of publicity at once assertive and exposed” (20). In disclosing our equivocal bodily connections to one another, Butler adds, “Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure” (20). While grief is steadily stored in one’s psyche, individual loss is also a vulnerable encounter with other bodies, for to labor in grief is to be politically and socially entwined. Butler also notes of such entanglements that mourning is not prescriptive, linear, formulaic, culturally conscious, or even just at times, for to mourn is to also commit to asking oneself “whose lives count as lives?” and “what makes for a grievable life?” (20). These questions lead to a larger question about the limits of the human as a category of identification and its ontological value. If not all lives are worthy of being bereaved, then, as Butler notes, we must reimagine not only how violence and mourning compose the human but also how, prior to any formulation of the individual, we are “given over to the Other” (41) and “undone by each other” (23) in a nuanced matrix of vulnerabilities that reproduce the very construction of the human.

So how do we reconstitute the “we” that binds us all in mourning? How do we move past the idea that “grief is privatizing” and without social politics? Could loss, as Butler advises, provide “a sense of political community

of a complex order . . . by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility?” (22). Understanding that we all experience loss, and that in this process of such loss we are embroiled in systems of desire and accountability, Butler proposes a practice of collective responsibility. This is not to conflate the singular with the plural but to advance a commons by way of mining through the particularities of communal mourning. We must insist “on a ‘common’ corporeal vulnerability” (42) that does not disappear the matter of everyday violence, the dehumanization of certain humans, or the unrecognizability of some vulnerabilities. Knowing that the *we* is as tenuous as the *I*, Butler offers no easy claim for how to encounter one another but instead commits to being confounded by the other, even if through the maze of language. As she declares of such social tangles, “I cannot muster the ‘we’ except by finding the way in which I am tied to ‘you,’ by trying to translate but finding the way my own language must break up and yield if I am to know you” (49). An investment in such discursive yielding enables Butler to reorganize the Freudian constructions of mourning and melancholia in which loss is either successfully replaced by another object or toxically introjected forever. For Butler, like for Reyes, mourning is always more than Sigmund Freud’s assertion: it is a site of transformation and not merely introjection, a way of becoming momentarily undone but subsequently remade. Or as Butler empathetically shares: “You are what I gain through this disorientation and loss. This is how the human comes into being, again and again and again, as that which we have yet to know” (49). Being and loss are inextricably linked, for even time and energy can be lost and also reconstituted, leaving loss open to more than just human concern, but planetary matters for how we imagine our compounded frequencies.

Another way of imagining such ontological connections, too, is to push against the strict categories of life and death that organize the elements of existence. A title like *Precarious Life* might easily read *Precarious Death* if how we understand the human is made possible by how we offer meaning to death. Reyes’s art spills beyond these parameters of life to say something about death and Blackness. What is life, as she conjures and wakes the dead, making room for the silences that shade into ghostly matters and immaterial materials that haunt? The human is an expansive constellation that does not end in flesh but begins before its inception, an encounter that enables one to move from being toxically undone to delicately changed, transmutations that offer new ways for measuring the sensorial limitations

of the human. For in all of Reyes's work, embodiment does not take on human form, but it deforms the body into formless formations that linger and live (Ruiz and Vourloumis 2021).

Grief-work is political labor done in the service of existence, a “tenuous we” that generates something other than being gone, for in exercises to mend suffering, we fuse sentiments, social orders, energies, and the communal. Butler (2004: 30) claims that, “to grieve, and to make grief itself into a resource for politics, is to not be resigned to inaction, but it may be understood as the slow process by which we develop a point of identification with suffering itself.” For “this disorientation of grief—‘Who have I become?’ or, indeed, ‘What is left of me?’ ‘What is it in the Other that I have lost?’—posits the ‘I’ in the mode of unknowingness” (30). But both the I and *we* are more than distinctive parts, for losing, like returning, necessitates an ensemble of forces that blend these categories in ways we may never know. Unknowingness might be all “we” know in our efforts to unfurl a common way of intelligibility and communicability. Reyes comfortably rides this line and convincingly works from “unknowingness” in all her work, running over and into various feelings, worlds, social anguishes, and entities.

Consuming Grief: Injurious Mourning Rituals

Livestreamed on September 23, 2020, from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, Reyes performed *Salt, Fat, Ashes, Heat* as a continuation of *Conjuring Stains*, showing how aesthetic spillage is just one method for imploring the dead. Produced by Mateo Hurtado, Bre Taylor, Yaire Vazquez, and the artist herself in association with The Tank NYC and The Brown Theatre Collective, *Light of Ours*, directed by Bre Taylor, publicly mourns the death of Reyes's father by cooking, conjuring, and consuming. Happening over twelve hours in her family homes again, this piece is an invitation to join the artist in her personal loss but also to commemorate all Black lives lost in 2020. As both mourning artist and daughter, Reyes confesses, “Given that I was experiencing my own personal grief at a time when it felt that the world was also mourning, I simply knew I wanted to cook with my father's ashes.” She goes on to add that “I wanted to gather with him one last time.” Of this desire she notes, “My entry point to gathering has almost always involved food, and when I thought about putting together this piece, my immediate thought was I must cook the last meals my father asked me to make for him: Guatemalan tamales, rice and beans, and fritas. My dad's

ashes were the main ingredient, allowing me to quite literally cook with him.”¹⁴ Each dish incorporates the manual labor of generating complex dishes like *tamale*, and as the artist notes, the enduring labor of making tamales is never done for one person. As viewers we remain for hours, watching her mix ingredients methodically, gather pans and utensils, create the *maza*, and then fill two big pots with thirty-five tamales in each, to then add into a smaller pot nine of what she calls “papa’s tamales.” These nine tamales are only for her, as they contain her father’s ashes; the others are for friends and family to join in ceremony and grief. In this act of communal consumption and mourning, we behold the spillage between singular and plural grief-work, not as antagonistic discharge but as a circulation of intentional emotional labor and care for one another.

In arguing for these sets of relations, Reyes claims that “the tamales are an appropriate representation of the accompaniment work that runs throughout this piece.” She adds: “I think of accompaniment not as a form of advocacy, but rather a critical sitting-with that allows us to acknowledge the affective forces that bring us to endure time together.”¹⁵ Using an endo-cannibalistic approach in this performance,¹⁶ Reyes makes and consumes three different meals that enclose her father’s remains. Celebrating his spirit and also “showing how communities pass on knowledge through a practice of eating and conjuring with one another,”¹⁷ Reyes reorders our natural ideas of flesh, labor, and consumption. With no physical body present, Reyes elucidates how the politics of flesh is also about how “people were transformed into living property” (Chambers-Letson 2018: 11) and reduced to “that zero degree of social conceptualization” (Spillers 2003: 206 as cited in Chambers-Letson 2018: 11) but also a critical site for social, civic, and cultural reconditioning (Musser 2014). For Reyes, flesh is not the body but a site of immaterial entanglements that play out in her methodological approaches to conjuring and endo-cannibalistic designs for consumption: “To consume the flesh of the other is to commit to their history and its reinvention through sharing, and this endo-cannibalistic (re)activation necessitates accompaniment.” In other words, as the artist emotionally releases, “it takes two, at minimum: someone to create the entry point, and someone else to journey through it. Almost as if to say, where you go, I go. I will break bread and bone with you, for you. For our love, we create a collective mourning.”¹⁸ Accompaniment, mourning, consumption, and love, as Reyes brilliantly shows, is not about reclaiming or resurrecting a body made flesh, but to “mobilize haunting toward communion” and to

acknowledge the “haunted communion as a site of relation, beyond human frameworks” (Alvarado 2019: 246). It is also a set of connections that move us into understanding Blackness beyond two-way relationalities and into the domain of ensemble (Moten 2003). Or as Reyes conveys of all her pieces, they explore and honor how “Blackness is porousness,”¹⁹ everydayness; it is also about reordering production, labor, and acts of consumption that essentially consume us into death. Reyes’s conjuring celebrates the material made immaterial, working to archive flow, flux, and spillages alongside the mourning practices of Blackness across the globe. For Reyes, this labor is “situated at the crossroads of morgue, stage, and spiritual practice,”²⁰ but it is also at the apex of how we simultaneously tend to the dead, the living, and all life forces that appear in the crevices of existence.

To be in the wake, at the morgue, at the people of color funeral, is to tend to the living and dead at the same time. In company with all sorts of bodies, from the one gracing the casket to the ones crying in unison, the funeral is the spot where transition is held. Unlike the wake, the Catholic funeral ceremony feels finite, a moment in which flesh is buried and the spirit, one hopes, is delivered elsewhere. The body is flesh and bones, a transitory entity that will disintegrate in both time and enclosed space. These are the feelings I harbored as I attended my own father’s funeral in November of 2018. If, as Reyes argues, we are always already entangled by inter-life matters and spirits that hover around, above, and beyond us, then her performances have drawn me personally in to mourn with her, for her, with our fathers. Often divided into public loss versus private mourning, grief-work can appear apolitical, too personal, and indeed it is often never and always these things. The spillage of all these absolutes is the domain of conjure, where to feel the dead enlivened is to ask if they ever really left us.

As the pallbearers gathered themselves to carry my *papi*’s coffin into the ground, I felt a surge of anger and guilt take over my body, not only because they were all cis-gendered Puerto Rican men walking him into his final hours but also because of the white gloves they wore to carry his body. They felt distancing, a way to separate the sacred from the profane, a way to mark his entry into the dirt, with their lives still here, and clean. This, of course, is conjecture: when in mourning everything is an assault, for in losing another, you lose yourself. And parents, unfortunately, reserve the right to take a piece of us when they pass on; all logic becomes an act of predetermined survival.

In an act that was retrospectively injurious, I demanded to carry the casket and be one of two front pallbearers. The men (cousins, brothers-in-law, *compadres*) warned me that the front of the casket was the heaviest, and they cautioned me to move to the center to hold less weight. I refused. I refused the white gloves. I refused to cry. I placed my right hand on the handle, inadvertently moving the men to the middle and back of the casket with such conviction that other mourners possibly wondered why Don Juan's youngest daughter was staging such a scene. My niece offered to hold the other side of her *abuelo's* body, and together we walked, trembled, and hardly blinked. At one point, I turned to her to see if she was indeed alright, for our drastically different heights made it difficult to steady the box. I used the moment to offer my left hand to my right, both desperately re-choreographing the ensemble of laborers and mourners. We led the procession, not in typical cultural form, but we led him into the open air.

The coffin, leaning downward and almost dragging to the ground, was unbearably heavy—our arms and legs shuddered, and the journey to the burial site was painful. I could feel my lower back and legs shake so profoundly that my knees wobbled and knocked. This was the texture of grief-work, suffering, and losing another man of color (our *papas*) to state peril, oversight, and systemic disdain for vulnerable lives always already marked for death. There's both a haunting and a political sociality to carrying a body to the ground that was already marked by loss, a pre-conjuring if I may, that leaves open ways for transgressive acts to assemble. I staged a scene of intentional politics that left my body undone in an act of "ephemera as evidence."²¹ I was in my body and outside it; his body was lodged into a box with energy simmering over the lid. I didn't know if I wanted to drop the casket or jump in it, but I knew that his body was mine, not singularly, but a light of ours that I wanted to delay extinguishing.

The day after the funeral on my way home from the airport, I sprained a muscle and was unable to walk without assistance. I bounced from the sofa to physical therapy for almost two months, unable to do much of anything but live in the denial of death. My mother, convinced the injury happened because I demanded to carry the coffin, also reminded me that it was the same leg my dad injured before he passed. Did this detail mean we were infinitely joined? Was the ramification for staging a public scene, the inability to move, like his body decomposing in the ground? Or was this the first act of haunting? Avery Gordon (1997: 201) argues that "haunting is a shared structure of feeling, a shared possession, a specific type of

sociality . . . haunting is the most general instance of the clamoring return of the reduced to a delicate social experience struggling, even aware, with its shadowy but exigent presence.” Did I consume him as Reyes ingested her father’s ashes, or were we now communal ether sharing space, time, and breath, and, in consequence, consuming each other?

I didn’t know it until studying Reyes’s work, but my feminist public scene was everything I needed to understand that the human body is both limited and limiting; death is not the body’s afterlife, but her portal to immanent energy. And so, I rested, transformed, traveled in space and time, and in the process brought him closer, not as a memory but a spirit lingering across my body, injury, between and over everything I understood about tending to the dead, to my own living. If “haunting is the sociality of living with ghosts, a sociality both tangible and tactile as well as ephemeral and imaginary” (201), then my father took some of me with him, but as Reyes explains in her work, it was done in accompaniment. He, too, returned the offering by leaving a segment of himself behind: the injury, just the relational object that joins the departure and arrival; and the body, just an entryway into the vortex of communal grief across the sociality of hauntings.

Basins for the Bereft: Ensemblic Spillages of Sorrow

In consciously activating the will to attend to the tenderness of tending, we develop alternative modes for grieving. Drawing attention to those murdered by state-inflicted brutalities, in particular the governing parties that facilitate the Mexican drug wars, scholar Iván Ramos recreates both a death scene and a public funeral for collective mourning. Turning to the performance of Mexican artist Teresa Margolles, who reframes the spectacle of these everyday displays by reproducing a drug war crime scene for the Venice Biennale,²² Ramos suggests that the artist’s installation reorders our conventional constructions of loss, grief-work, and violence to upend state control over ways of living and remembering the disappeared. Writing on the viscosity of grief and public mourning through the material consequences of blood, Ramos (2015: 299) asks that we reassemble how we conceptualize death and commune with the dead, and “particularly with the deaths of anonymous victims of drug-war violence whose names and lives we have never known.” Ramos brilliantly asks: “What alternative arises when we attempt to access radical ways of mourning those who remain unknown to us? What if encountering corpses, blood stains,

outlines, and the debris of a murder there can also be figured a new relationship to loss and death?” (299). Like Reyes, and as Ramos notes, Margolles places pressure on forms of embodiment by reconstituting the body; so, while using different methods, both artists express similar impulses: to conjure the dead, to re-remember the nonlinear facticities of death, those named and never known. In such acts of both violent and intimate entanglements, the aesthetic is still the link between the social, political, and psychic, wherein unique and common suffering, we grieve the ungrievable. Like Ramos, Chambers-Letson (2018: 5) reminds us throughout his body of work that performance, and aesthetics writ large, are a refuge for the living and those marked for death. We must labor intentionally not only to honor the living but also to cultivate life in our quotidian strategies for ongoing existences. In doing so, minoritarian performance is not what happens after the revolution, after the party, but is everything that forms and incites the revolt.

Pedro Lopez, a New York City–based queer Puerto Rican organizer and multimedia artist, understands this refuge as an act of public politics. Working in sculpture and public art, Lopez (2019: 197) sees the material/ immaterial consequences of death as an opportunity to create a “culture of collective weeping.” Through art and activism, he “builds new emotional communities” that extend the limits of “our colonial histories.”²³ In countering these colonial narratives, Lopez’s sculptures investigate how openly sharing our vulnerabilities is also an invitation to self-preserve (197). Always folding the singular into the plural, Lopez places his finger on activities we all engage in daily, even if not consciously aware of the details that instigate such actions. His *Tear Basins* (2017), a series of stone sculptural installations created to be placed across public landscapes, are a response to the ongoing economic and natural catastrophes of Puerto Rico, and the effects these disasters have across the diaspora. Lopez began this project around the 2016 island elections, and then it quickly evolved into a deeper sense of activism after Hurricane Irma, Maria, the governor scandal, and the summer protests across Puerto Rico and the mainland. Lopez explains that the project began to jump out of the “temporal looping” (Ruiz 2019, as cited in interview with Lopez 2020) that binds Ricanness through art, and he hoped that an aesthetic/activist response might allow us to “interact with each other’s emotions” in an attempt to “break down individualism and upend colonial time.”²⁴ In binding us in tears, Lopez’s basins provide the environment and container for a Rican, brown,

and queer weeping together that exists outside state violence. Disidentifying to survive a hostile present,²⁵ Lopez's wet basins store our vulnerabilities as ephemeral evidence of our communion of tears, for tears carry recuperative properties that both remain and disappear like Reyes's flickering lights.

Lopez, like Reyes, is not alone in his call for collective mourning practices. Moving from particular accounts of loss to a motley of sorrows across place, time, and difference, Cindy Milstein (2017: 4), in *Rebellious Mourning*, maps collective stories of grief. Interested in "what it looks like when people collectively yet personally quiet centuries of loss," Milstein conjures the past, present, and future to publicly disentangle loss from life. She provides the space to not only remember the dead but also impel mourning forward into moments of radical praxis and revolution that advance a common understanding of grief-work. To mourn rebelliously, then, is to accept the invitation to grapple with and sound out loss, even if the state labors to suppress communal grieving (9). Opposing a universal plan for mourning and a singular prescription for heartache, Milstein assembles stories across consequences from "colonialism to incarceration, climate catastrophe to poverty, rape to chronic illness" in order to find common ground, the ways to rehumanize us into a great understanding of state oppression, global fascism, and the intimate ramifications of subjugation and restorative healing. Meant to help us "bear our manifold unnecessary losses when they are worked through in common, on commons: spaces that we create and sustain to use, share, and find comfort in, but also spaces that are ours to self-determine" (6–7), the anthology moves with suffering across thinkers. In Milstein's assessment, these stories directly answer Judith Butler's evocative question in *Precarious Life*, which is, "What counts as a livable life and a grievable death?" (7). All loss is also already life, for Milstein, and all expressions of vulnerability, from the heaviest to the most tender, are essential to the public labor of mourning collectively.

Similar to Milstein's intervention—to show how social accounts of grief can "open up cracks in the wall of the system" (8)—I, too, hope to tear a hole in the world and unveil the necessary light needed to share a tear for a tear, a flame for a flame, and locate the resonant calls of mourning that transcend borders, and in consequence, unite us in our commons, common suffering, or our "apartness together." This very "apartness together" is an idea developed by Muñoz from an ideological question posed by W. E. B. Du Bois (1989: 1–2): "What does it feel like to be a problem?" In

attempting to say something about Brownness, Muñoz turns to Du Bois's historical analysis of Blackness, not to conflate the two, but to try to answer, in earnest, Du Bois's question. To be a problem within the world, always surveilled, violently amended and apprehended, punished, crushed into submission, one must understand the minoritarian strategy for living as an "apartness together." Muñoz (2008: 444) argues that while Brownness is always a co-presence with other modalities of difference, it is at once "an 'apartness together' through sharing the status of being a problem." To feel Brown is not an identity, a strict category for defining the self and others, or an umbrella term to neatly collectivize the marginal masses, but a conscious praxis to be of a commons. To feel Brown is also to remember that one is a historical subject tied to different types of utopian ambition, in ensemble with others, forming responsibilities to one another that exceed the immobility of indexicality in this here and now (444).

Feeling Brown is about a "way of being in the world" that is not reduced to how one is perceived but is about "shared consciousness and even insurgent action" (Muñoz 2020: xv), actions Muñoz exposes through everyday life and aesthetic practice. Brownness is not limited to phenotype, language, costumes, or national regulations of citizenship; and it does not deny resonance across culture and communion. All shades of these feelings surpass facile dialectics of us versus them, asking rather that identification serve as care and communion, a practice of intention, ideological investment, and ethical integrity for the commons. Like Reyes's 750 candles for Black life, Lopez's tear basins enact a porous common that harbor our unique differences within our apartnesses together. Both artists show how feeling like a problem together is also an invitation to conjure and be in accompaniment across hauntings, across Black, Brown, and queer lifeworlds.

Ethical intention, in the name of being together, is at the heart of Lopez's piece. For this artist, being queer and Rican is a process, an investigation, a way of becoming in both art and activism, across body and spirit. His basins are a cultural exploration, a public laboratory for coming and feeling together that enact the "ethics of brownness" that also include psychic and social approaches for understanding queerness "as a site of emotional breakdown" and transformation (Muñoz 2006: 681, 684). Like Sharpe's ethics of care, Muñoz's ethics of Brownness and queerness are attentive to the "larger collective mapping of self and other" (679), one that collapses simple relationalities into the ensemble, one that takes on you in

an effort to take on *me*—carefully attending to Butler’s tenuous *we* into domains of synchronicity within varying frequencies. This collective mapping of energy refuses to let the relational become the comparative; refuses to stall the impulses of multiple orchestrations across feeling brown, being down for one, many; and summons ephemera as the necessary archive.

Lopez argues that the material for these basins is as important and ephemeral as the tears that will eventually fill and escape them. He sculpts with alabaster or soapstone because of its accessibility, but also because it connects him to the earth and his ancestors. Carving stone is a process of cultural identification, one in which he understands as “a relationship with the earth” where he “can create from it and for it.”²⁶ The object’s material produces its eventual immateriality: “Alabaster is a water-soluble compound,” and “in this future world with ubiquitous tear basins nothing seemed more poetic than a community of tears slowly dissolving a large stone. I love the use of emotions to carve through an emblematic emotionless material.” Lopez adds that “working with calcite is ancestral,” for when the “light hits the basin it glows due to its transparent properties”; it is as if “the light is calling you.”²⁷ Lopez sees this all as the queer ensemble of the immaterial/material that never precludes race, sex, and nation.

Instantiating her own textured ensemble, Christina A. León (2019), following performance artist Ana Mendieta’s earthly excavations across Miami and Cuba through *siluetas* and cave paintings, understands the markings across stone, sand, dirt, and water as “trace alignments.” Traces that produce relational encounters that transcend the past into the domain of the ephemeral; for, as she shares of Mendieta, “the past was her matter and medium, but not her property” (2019). Traces reproduce affinities not only between subjects but also within the textured materialities that reshape space, history, and object relations. Interested in what is “hauntologically traceable visually” across elements of the earth, León reminds us that something like water “threatens to erode but also unite” (2019). Lopez answers the call to water by creating public basins that might ultimately turn into fountains, moving between the water that bodies carry internally to the collective ways we cultivate and experience water. Water not only lives and moves across bodies and sites but also enables a space to possibly rinse oneself of suffering, and in doing so combines all possibilities tied to the ethos of Lopez’s aesthetic labor.

Planning to place these tear basins in unused public spaces across New York City, Lopez hopes to alter the city’s landscape by infiltrating the

ownership of space. Lopez's plan is to "appropriate the space of the city with new ideologies for social infrastructure" in what he sees as "an act of temporal insurgency in the space of Empire" (Ruiz 2019: 83, as cited in interview with Lopez 2020). If the demands of empire necessitate our death, our space, our everyday performances of self—from gender to race to class—then we must counter such violence with a "collective consciousness."²⁸ For Lopez, like for Henri Lefebvre (1991), space is never neutral, never given; it must be made, taken at times, and always remade by the bodies who inhabit it. As an activist for vulnerable populations in New York City, Lopez reclaims space by acting as the finance officer for New York Boricua Resistance²⁹ and the cofounder of Comida Pal Pueblo,³⁰ a survival program serving the Williamsburg/North Brooklyn communities. Protesting, creating food pantries in unusual spaces, distributing resources for neglected communities across the city, Lopez's activism is inseparable from his art.

And yet his overall sense of collective consciousness is also achieved by exhibiting a "softer side of the revolution," for his tear basins welcome communal weeping as we similarly work to "break down white-supremacist-patriarchal-capitalism."³¹ Interested in how tears promote queer of color sociality, Lopez argues that we must change the "culture of crying for men and the male population of color in public" so that we engender "prosocial behaviors" that welcome "softer" expressions of collectivity. As a queer man of color, the artist notes that crying is frowned on unless it is displayed as an act of force, not emotional release or a form of social bonding. Crying together "creates an emotional contagion that leads to systemic change," wherein outdated and dualistic gender constructions, operating in the service of colonial, racialized logics, do not prevent our common formations of a "we," even if tenuous at best.³² For crying is psychologically and physiologically cathartic; it viscerally benefits the body by releasing hormones that elevate mood.

It is unsurprising, then, that Lopez has been studying the benefits of crying for over five years, a project that has led him to create the basins but also closely study biochemists like William H. Frey. In researching both the biochemical and emotional components of tears, Lopez fell upon Frey's *Crying: The Mystery of Tears*, wherein the author attempts to uncover why people cry. By theorizing how the act itself helps "to relieve stress by ridding the body of potentially harmful stress-induced chemicals" (Brody 1982), Frey explains the physiology of tears to understand their emotional

force. Crying is a process of secretion and excretion, a process “like exhaling, urinating, defecating and sweating, releases toxic substances from the body” (Frey 1985)—everyday actions that remind us that we are alive. Chemicals leave the body and the body is then restored to equilibrium. In hypothesizing the bidirectionality of mind and body, Frey demystifies the act of crying and exposes the importance of tears by debunking the social notion that “big boys don’t cry” (Brody 1982). He also indicates the emotionally cathartic and biological benefits of releasing stress hormones and, like Lopez, sees crying as an act done in accompaniment, arguing that one should be assuaged when crying, not discouraged (Brody 1982).

This connection between the emotional and biochemical in crying is also made politically aesthetic, furthering the idea of performance as both refuge and accompaniment. For instance, photographer Rose-Lynn Fisher in *The Topography of Tears* (2017), following and studying Frey as well, turns to the image to capture what tears look like when animated by different feelings. Trying to understand the visual consequences of why we cry, Fisher uses an optical microscope to apprehend our sentiments. Her black-and-white photography documents tears for all sorts of emotional releases like “laughing till I’m crying,” “resolution,” and “redemption” to “possibility/hope” and “compassion” to “tears of elation at a liminal moment” and “the pull between attachment and release.” Combining science and art, all images reveal the complicated landscape of why we cry, and how such tears manifest visually. Ann Lauterbach (2017: 11), writing with these images, argues that when we cry “all five senses collapse into a singularity: taste of salt, wetness of skin, sight blurred, ears filled with the rush of a pulsing, breaking breath, the thick scent of gladness or sorrow.” While a reflection of our conjoined senses, “tears are intellectual” and “come from thoughts that spill over the body’s containing well; they are the secretion of excess we assign to emotion” (11), and the emotion we follow in a haunting of communions, spillages, and knowable/unknowable vulnerabilities.

Lopez traces precisely this haunting by following in a tradition of queer of color artists who have turned to crying as a way to sustain the hostile present. For example, queer Rican artist Ryan Rivera offers his tears to the viewer in *Goodbye Piece* (2002). A less than a minute black-and-white video of the artist in extreme close-up, expresses a less conventionally masculine affectivity by crying into the camera. With no body, words, or moving limbs, the spectator sees only Rivera’s face pressed against the screen as he wails and weeps, calling us all to imagine a world in which queer sociality is pledged by a shared coordinated vulnerability (Ruiz 2019). And Nao

Bustamante's *Neapolitan* (2003) shares similar sentiments. In this piece, Bustamante sits intimately with the film *Fresa y chocolate* and cries profusely and repeatedly over a singular love scene meant to tug at all of our heart-strings. While the film loops for over ten minutes, the viewer lingers with the artist as she replays the final scene of the movie (Muñoz 2006: 676). Of this scene, the artist herself notes that two protagonists hug, "that's it, they hug, a plump moment of relief and connection for the emotional body." Bustamante (2003) also shares that, as the scene's "music swells," her eyes follow suit: "I cry every time, inducing a momentary emotional response by technical manipulation of my psyche. An emotional vibrator of sorts." Seeing tears as a conduit for social connection, Bustamante commissions our passions, asking that we endure her depressive feelings through the screen over extended loops. Muñoz (2006: 676), writing about this piece, suggests that Bustamante's installation is an example of the rewinding, repetitive nature of the depressive position and "its connection to minoritarian aesthetic and political practice." This depressive position exists in affinity to what he calls Brown feelings, repeated feelings that archive an "ethics of the self that is utilized and deployed by people of color and other minoritarian subjects who don't feel quite right within the protocols of normative affect and comportment" (676). Bustamante's video art, then, suggests that feeling Brown, like queerness, "never fully disappears; instead it haunts the present" (684) in ways that are both ephemeral and inevitably quotidian.

Lopez understands tears as ephemeral evidence for being, being-with, and being-together that shift, transform, and spill into the ways in which we are meant to behave publicly: "Ritual weeping allows us to find the resolve within ourselves, enabling more time to focus on how we want to live in the future rather than being emotionlessly stuck in our present and past."³³ A collection of tears, Lopez's work suggests that crying is provoked by queer of color ensembling, sometimes on-screen, other times in public; and that mourning is a communal labor we feel together in acts of meditation and transformation. Or to return to Sharpe (2016: 130), perhaps tears, like Reyes's flames, are also a form of "aspiration," a way of "keeping and putting breath in the Black body," a way of tinkering with existence that unmarks those marked by death.

In Resonance and Invitation

In a loop of framed sentiments, all the artists mentioned here from Reyes and Lopez to Bustamante and Rivera and Margolles and Mendieta

intentionally tend to both the dead and the living simultaneously, laboring in common to enliven the present-future by tenderly regarding material/ immaterial entities. Their cuts, holes, tears, flames, and ashes operate as invitations to conjure in multiversal ways. From a tear lives the exit as opening, expressions of loss that are also commands for another beginning. A perforation, another side, another perspective, a passage glistening from both lightness and darkness; something other, maybe something better than just a thing forcibly separated. A tiny tear, and a tear, has light passing through it. Tears are a lamentation for more than just grief, as Lopez attenuates; they are ways of vulnerably being together. Like Reyes, Lopez thrives in spillage and tension, the pressure to hold on and let go through the material act of communally crying and the ephemeral stains of tears themselves. A tear for a tear is also a flame for a flame in this collection of aesthetic interventions that surpass minoritarian death traps, for these artists produce vortexes for ongoing shared grief.

This is what it means to deliberately hold each other (up) through the darkness, through the desired entry into light after loss, and to continuously adjoin singular mourning to public grief-work in minoritarian spillages and vortexes for new social orders. In turning to the aesthetic, this essay works like a collection of tears and contributes further to genealogies of minoritarian thought, politics, and artistic practice at the forefront of grief-work. This is also to convey how queer, brown, Black, and feminist socialities help reveal the intimate contours of mourning rituals across cultural resonance. While we bear witness to both an ongoing slow and rapid death, accelerated by global disaster and colonial racial capitalism inflicted on minoritarian subjects whom we know as family, and those we feel in ideology, loss becomes our everyday and the everyday, a cyclical snapshot of the future. The everyday often leaves little room for grieving; however, the aesthetic provides an ample and powerful countermeasure, allowing us to labor to hold on, let go, conjure, remember, enliven, and be together.

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Notes

- 1 To further learn about Eva Margarita Reyes's and Pedro Lopez's work, please visit their websites, www.evamargaritaperforms.com and www.pedrodaniellopez.com, respectively.
- 2 Eva Margarita Reyes, email interview with the author, 2020–present.
- 3 Reyes, interview.
- 4 Reyes, interview.
- 5 Reyes's work is in communion and conversation with the series of Black Lives Matter Matters vigils that graced the U.S. landscape in response to ongoing state violence against Black life.
- 6 Eva Margarita Reyes, email interview with the author, 2020–present.
- 7 Reyes, interview.
- 8 Reyes, interview.
- 9 Reyes, interview.
- 10 Reyes, interview.
- 11 Reyes, interview.
- 12 Reyes, interview.
- 13 Reyes, interview.
- 14 Reyes, interview.
- 15 Reyes, interview.
- 16 In an interview with the artist, she describes her research process for endo-cannibalism. She claims that “endo-cannibalistic approaches vary from culture to culture and are done as a funerary rite of passage. To consume the flesh of the other is to commit to their history and it's reinvention through sharing.” Reyes turns to scholar Julietta Singh (2018: 34) who describes this practice as: “rarely ever about consuming the whole body, but rather a discrete symbolic act of incorporation. A small act of taking the body of another's into yours. Taking in the flesh of another is a way of claiming it as a part of you.”
- 17 Reyes, interview.
- 18 Reyes, interview.
- 19 Reyes, interview.
- 20 Reyes, interview.
- 21 This understanding of ephemera as evidence is being adopted from Muñoz's (1996) essay by the same name.
- 22 Teresa Margolles, *What Else Could We Talk About?* (2009), installation consisting of a repeating performance carried out by one to three people mopping the floors of the exhibition space with a mix of water obtained from humidifying fabrics that previously absorbed fluids and leftovers of crime scenes in different cities of northern Mexico, Mexican Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy.
- 23 Pedro Lopez, email interview with the author, 2020–present.
- 24 Lopez, interview.
- 25 Muñoz (1999: 5) describes disidentification as a “survival strategy that works within and outside the dominant public sphere simultaneously.”

- 26 Pedro Lopez, email interview with the author, 2020–present.
- 27 Lopez, interview.
- 28 Lopez, interview.
- 29 To further learn about the work that New York Boricua Resistance is doing, you can find them on Instagram at @nyboricuaresistance.
- 30 To further learn about the work that Comida Pal Pueblo is doing, you can find them on Instagram at @comidapalpueblo.
- 31 Pedro Lopez, email interview with the author, 2020–present.
- 32 Lopez, interview.
- 33 Lopez, interview.

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