Corpses that Matter: Grievability, Marginalization, and the Newtown Shooting

On December 14, 2012, twenty miles away from Yale University’s campus in New Haven, CT, a man four years younger than me took several semiautomatic rifles from his mother’s collection. Shortly over a half-hour later, after killing his mother, twenty first-graders and six staff at Sandy Hook Elementary School, Adam Lanza took his own life. With speeches and promises by the President, members of Congress, the National Rifle Association, and folks at family Christmas parties, the event launched a national conversation on the topic of gun control. Compare this to Boston, where I worked at a nonprofit focusing, in part, on young adults in the criminal justice system. In 2010, in the City of Boston alone, fifty-two youth were killed in the course of the year. Statistics like this are not unusual in any urban area in this country. According to the Children’s Defense Fund, every thirty minutes a child or teen is shot in the United States.¹

Yet, it was only the shooting in Newtown that garnered the attention of the public. Why is it that the discussion about gun violence became urgent in national discourse after a Newtown elementary school is shot up, but not when a school in Chicago is decimated? In this paper, I will explore the epistemological frameworks of living in which the intersections of race, class, and geography dictate which lives are mournable when lost, and which lives are never considered lived or losable in the first place. It is these frameworks, I contend, that shape the production of our public discourses around death: what makes certain lives grievable (or not), and what we are compelled to do about it (or not).² The eruption of national ethical deliberation on gun violence

² I use “we” throughout this talk to refer to a “collective American consciousness” as represented in public discourse. The troublesome question of who gets to count as “we” is part of the animating drive of this inquiry.
after Newtown depends fundamentally on which lives count as life, which bodies and deaths “matter,” and under what conditions these lives and corpses are candidates of mourning at all.

Briefly to locate myself socially, I am a white cisgendered man raised lower-middle class in a suburb of a small, predominantly white city in southern Appalachia. I am now a student at a university whose name is associated with the ruling class of white America, but which is located in a post-industrial city in the suburbs of New York City, whose geography is marked by the continuing effects of redlining, white flight, and urban renewal. I approach this question as someone who was rocked by the shooting in Newtown, only slightly less than I was living in Boston by my ignorance of the staggering scale of gun violence and my affective numbness in its face. I am at least partially attempting to make sense of my epistemological barriers to grieving.

According to Judith Butler in her book *Precarious Life*, we come to see what animates grief through loss and our pursuant vulnerability in its wake. Butler understands loss according to Sigmund Freud’s account: in loss we lose something *within* the one who is lost, though this is often enigmatic and unknown.³ This is not merely a question of identification with the person, though this certainly plays a role. More deeply, for Butler, loss and grief reveal the ties we have to each other by showing how I become “inscrutable to myself” during a loss.⁴ Loss leads us to ask “‘Who have I become?’ or, indeed ‘What is left of me?’”⁵ and so directs our attention to how our individual integrity relates to our ties with others, which compromise us as selves. This happens on a personal level as well as a collective one—after Newtown a motivating question being, “Who have we, as Americans, become?” Grieving is the playing out of such an undoing of the self when the loss of a “you” questions my stability as “I.”⁶ Loss reveals something, even

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⁴ Ibid., 22.
⁵ Ibid., 30.
⁶ Ibid, 22-23.
if we cannot name it, in the other that is fundamental to our understanding of ourselves. But evidently, not all loss entails this undoing; some loss does not register in grieving in the first place. Butler claims that these ungrievable losses must not really be lost in the first place. But how? As Butler puts it, “If someone is lost, and that person is not someone, then what and where is the loss, and how does mourning take place?”

Butler suggests that non-mourning of loss is a question of who counts as a person. This poses questions about the status of these non-persons’ lives within our cultural epistemology, and this unreality changes the perceived effect of violence on the other: “From the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated.”

This unreality functions, first, at the level of discourse, where certain lives are not considered lives and are therefore unhuman; violence against them only dramatizes a dehumanization already accomplished, and second, at the level of representation, where a life that is not grievable is not quite a life, its death not worth noting as it is already unburiable. “It is not simply, then, that there is a ‘discourse’ of dehumanization that produces these effects, but rather that there is a limit to the discourse that establishes the limits of human intelligibility. It is not just that a death is poorly marked, but that it is unmarkable. Such a death vanishes, not into explicit discourse, but in the ellipses by which public discourse proceeds.”

Unlived lives are “lost” in the very gaps of our cultural epistemology, formed by the impossibility of their being marked, buried, mourned. There is reason to hesitate here about the epistemological violence that may be being done in arguing that a life is already lost, already subject to violence. Does such a move continue to define the lives of those in communities marked by violence as being defined

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7 Ibid., 32.
8 Ibid., 33.
9 Ibid., 34.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 35.
by it? This would certainly be a liability if the task Butler is engaging in were normative, or were “merely” descriptive. But rather, Butler is engaging in a social analysis that seeks to combat these situations of violence, which must take seriously the effects of derealization. While we want to make sure social analysis does not get short-circuited, we also must avoid staying there.

In an uncharacteristically colloquial turn, Butler says: “Let’s face it. We’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something.”12 The question is then what we are missing when we are undone by the events in Newtown, but not by those in Boston or Chicago. If, as she notes, grief is the undoing of an “I” by the lost of a “you,” then non-grief must be the lack of a “you” that would undo my “I.” Ultimately, as Butler frames it, it must be a question of whether the person lost is a “you”—or if it is a life that is not quite a life, not merely because it is not like mine (which it is not, at least at the level of representation) but because it fails to register as a life in the first place. To return again to gun violence, the question we must ask ourselves is what we are missing when we are undone by the events in Newtown and not by those in Boston or Chicago. Thus far we can say that what we are missing is a “life.” The difference between a child killed in Newtown and a child killed in Chicago is that the child in Newtown had her “whole life ahead of her,” whereas the child in Chicago had no life to begin with. But the way in which this derealization happens is yet unclear. For this, we must turn to a different sort of analysis: of the content of the cultural imaginary itself.

Taking a cue from Butler’s mention of the “spectral” nature of the “you,” I want to ask about the specters of the cultural imaginary, and how the intersections of several factors—especially race, class, and geography—work to set the limits of intelligible lives, and to produce phantasms of those “outside” of those limits. My entry point into this entanglement is informed by Emilie Townes’s “fantastic hegemonic imagination.” Combining Michel Foucault’s concepts

12 Ibid., 23.
of fantasy and imagination with Antonio Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, Townes speaks of an imagination that “traffics in peoples’ lives that are caricatured or pillaged so that the imagination that creates the fantastic can control the world in its own image.”13 It does this through sculpting history and memory in such a way that certain images (e.g., Aunt Jemima or the Welfare Queen) become the default imaginary through which we understand the world and the people in it.14 The fantastic hegemonic imaginary creates a world wherein a black teenager walking down the street is not seen as a person who could be differentiated by a variety of factors, but incarnates the fantastic imaginary of the “gangbanger.” This is not limited at all to questions of race, but to its intersection with class and geography, insofar as those can be meaningfully separated.

These images become the basis for the apprehension of Black bodies at all, and of their possible representation in cultural discourse. Townes shows how these images, stretching from slave narratives and gathering strength through a politicized and racialized “history,” morph through time in their telling. One example of this is how “Mammy” became “Aunt Jemima.” Mammy, a mythological happy, maternal yet sexless, self-giving, domestic slave who provided an apology for slavery, “was and is largely a nostalgic figment of the White imagination that yearns for a past that never was. She is a mythical construction of the dominant culture that often claims her as a historical fact.”15 From Jim Crow onward, she became Aunt Jemima, a capitalist commodification of Black people and identity bought and sold on a global market, such that, in Townes’ words, “We are not there, but our alleged identities are.”16 Within our cultural epistemology, the reduction of Black lives to these fantastic imaginaries voids them of history, of memory, of humanity apart from their pseudo-historical development as stereotypes; they

14 Ibid.
15 Ibid, 35.
16 Ibid., 51, emphasis in original.
become mere phantasms. Read together with Butler, the spinning of the fantastic hegemonic imagination renders unreal, phantasmatic, the lives of Black people. To answer the question posed earlier: what we are missing in Boston or Chicago and not in Newtown is a real, livable, and losable life.

The upshot of this epistemological unreality of nonwhite lives is a particular feature of what Townes calls the “cultural production of evil,” here a public discourse where the loss of Black bodies is unmarkable. As Butler notes, violence can do no harm to a life that is already lost. How many of the lives of Black or Latino/a folks lost to violence make the front page of the local newspaper, or the top of the nightly newsreel? A viral picture on Tumblr noted that in the March 4, 2013, edition of the Chicago Tribune’s RedEye magazine, a column on overnight violence gave one person shot in a white neighborhood 370 words, while four shot in black neighborhoods received 23 words total, or 6 words per person. Butler’s treatment of the lack of obituaries in US newspapers for Afghans or Iraqis in the so-called “War on Terror” carries over: “Violence against those who are already not quite living, this is, living in a state of suspension between life and death, leaves a mark that is no mark. There will be no public act of grieving…in the silence of the newspaper, there was no event, no loss.” The lack of newspaper articles is not simply a question of “public interest” but the unmarkablity of Black life itself. Violence is a particularly spectacular example of this, but it is only a particular symptom of a general unreality. As Michelle Alexander points out in her book The New Jim Crow, the overwhelming mass incarceration of Black men can at least be blamed on the fact of this key piece of marginalization. Under slavery and Jim Crow, the body of a Black man was needed for labor. After the Civil Rights movement, “almost overnight, black men found themselves

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17 Butler, 33.
18 Ibid, 36.
unnecessary to the American economy and demonized by mainstream society. No longer needed to pick cotton in the fields or labor in factories, lower-class black men were hauled off to prison in droves.”¹⁹ The underlying logic is the same: a life cannot be lost to mass incarceration, for example, if it never registers as a life in the first place.

It may be contended that the shooting in Newtown is particularly salient; twenty children shot in one fell swoop at their elementary school is particularly more heinous than sporadic shootings in public housing. Or that the perceived “innocence” of the children in Newtown made the shooting heinous—as if children shot in Chicago or Boston are less “innocent.” This leads to the third factor in our public discourse of grief: geography. Here there is assumption that, in the case of Newtown, “this shouldn’t happen here.” On the day after the shooting, CNN was quick to report that Newtown had only experienced one homicide in the previous decade.²⁰ The assumption here is that it “would predictably” happen elsewhere, not in the bucolic suburbs of Connecticut, but namely in the inner city. When a child in the southern neighborhoods of Boston or Chicago is shot, where then is the wide-scale public mourning over the “innocent”? There are two margins at play here. The first is of this shooting vis-à-vis Newtown and other white communities. The other is of the “predictable places” of gun violence from those “normal” (read, white) ones. There is a mapping of (non)grievability not only onto bodies, but the land itself. The tragic truth is that the American public can grieve children thousands of miles away when it does not mourn the children killed in its own backyard. Especially if those backyards are redlined, polluted, “blighted,” or as is so common in today’s allegedly “colorblind” world, behind an

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invisible wall of privilege. Despite how physically proximate a lost life may be, the death of a life that is not lived cannot be mourned.

Yet, as a Christian social ethicist, this story cannot quite be the end for me. The good news comes—perhaps surprisingly—from Marx: we encounter society not as something received, but as something we do to ourselves.21 Townes and Butler both present strategies for combating this epistemological unreality. For Butler, we (that is, white public consciousness) need to allow ourselves to be undone by the recognition of the vulnerability of Black lives, that pre-grief loss.22 This allows us to muster a “we” that expands the epistemology of life; “our” identities must be confounded so that language breaks up: “You are what I gain through this disorientation and loss. This is how the human comes into being, again and again, as that which we have yet to know.”23 What this means is that we, the (white) American public, must learn (again) how to grieve. The “I” that we posit must be an “I” that does not cling to an identity, but is constantly open to understanding the “I” in relation to the “you,” but more importantly, to the “Other.” What is not true, thank God, is that black life is unmourned at all. Lives are mourned in communities in way that resists the ways in which phantasms replace people; it is a matter of paying attention. This new “I” will require a new life, as Ezekiel writes: “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezek 36:26 NRSV). Grieving anew allows us to muster a “we” that expands the epistemology of life, in which “our” identities must be confounded so that language breaks up: “You are what I gain through this disorientation and loss. This is how the

22 Butler, 43.
23 Ibid., 49.
human comes into being, again and again, as that which we have yet to know.”

In conversations with colleagues on the several iterations of this paper, NPR’s recent “This American Life” series on Chicago’s Harper High School was mentioned repeatedly, and this presents a step in the right direction of expanding the discourse of obituary such that loss of black life slowly is marked by public discourse, and can be epistemologically realized.

But this will not be enough. Expanding the bounds of cultural intelligibility does not entail an end to the process by which people fall through the cracks. The very makeup of culture as one in which people fall through the cracks must be confronted. Townes proposes that the fantastic hegemonic imagination can only be faced and dismantled through countermemory, a counterhegemonic reconstitution, a re-membering of history. History to this point has been construed by hegemony so that it conforms to the fantastic imaginaries we have constructed. The only solution is to divorce the two, and to remember differently, such that flesh and blood can be apprehended rather than the phantasms standing in their place.

We must remember against the cultural memories and histories that set the bounds of what life is thinkable. Remembering differently allows us to disrupt the received epistemological limits of discourse, to turn the fantastic hegemonic imagination, the spectral character of derealized lives, on their heads, and to be haunted by the ghosts of ungrieved lives.

At the end, the Christ of the cross, the Christ of the “least of these” provides a Christian resource to this situation of unreality. The words of Jesus promise, forebodingly, that Jesus is the eternally marginalized one, and the marginalization we render will come back on our own heads:

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24 Ibid., 49.

25 This is a major perspective within what has been called the “antisocial” turn of queer theory. For a searing polemic of Butler on just this point, see Lee Edelman, No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 102–109.

26 Townes, Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil, 21.
“You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me…Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. (Matt. 25:31-46, NRSV)

Too often the Jesus who is portrayed as the center of intelligibility, the center of the cultural epistemology, has existed as a fantastic imaginary. The white, male, European, heterosexual with wavy blond hair has become the way in which we apprehend a God who confirms the status quo, who judges black life as antithetical to being “washed white as snow,” policing who and what God hates both in churches and in the streets. But the Jesus of the “least of these” refuses this logic, refuses intelligibility as a recognizable messiah. Instead he comes as the illegitimate child of a peasant girl and dies as a political rabble-rouser in the backwater of the Roman Empire. As Marcella Althaus-Reid puts it:

Queer holiness may be the only option and real alternative open in a world which has neither options nor alternatives, because it might represent the different (hagios) which needs to be manifested in our lives in relation to God’s plans of justice. It is the quality of difference in making the world holy by embracing elements of difference and understanding the oddity of Jesus as a Messiah against the normal or common sense, that makes Christian holiness a Queer holiness…The Queer God may then show us God’s excluded face, which is the face of a non-docile God, a God who is a stranger at the gates of our existent loving and economic order.27

What we need to understand, as Christians, is that we have tried to place God firmly in the midst of our cultural epistemology, even as the arbiter of the status quo that this exclusionary epistemology secures. But if God is just, and those epistemologies are unjust, that “God” is nothing more than an idol. Rather Jesus the “least of these” calls us to the margins, to the corpses that do not “matter,” calls us to account for our ways of knowing that have danced epistemology and theology on the bones of the dead. Only then might corpses in Boston or Chicago be grievable for us alongside those in Newtown. Only then might we finally, at last, be undone. It is

time we take seriously the question posed to the prophet Ezekiel as a question posed to us, and to our death-dealing society: “Mortal, can these bones live?” (Ezek 37:3)