Relearning Our World: Grief, Loss, and Mourning-*with*

Jessica Lussier

The University of British Columbia

2020 has left plenty to mourn. As of May 15, 2021, the world had lost 3,361,176 human lives to Covid-19, over half a million of those deaths in the U.S. alone.[1] Those dying from Covid-19 are often forced to spend their final moments alone in the hospital, isolated from loved ones who are then asked to delay funeral gatherings because of the pandemic. Within the damage and loss of the pandemic, protests across the country resparked the Black Lives Matter movement into the public eye after the murder of George Floyd in Minnesota in May 2020. Shared witnessing of Floyd's death led protesters to the streets to mourn the deaths of Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Rayshard Brooks, Daniel Prude, and countless other Black Americans killed by police officers.

As forest fires ripped across the west coast this past summer burning over 5 million acres, many lost their homes and lives. Continued struggles for Indigenous sovereignty across the U.S. and Canada remind us that many more have lost their land and livelihoods due to forced removal. With 26 million refugees globally, displacement and forced homelessness across the Earth position us to mourn the loss of "home" for so many. Finally, a report on biodiversity and ecosystem services from the United Nations shows that 1 in 4 species in assessed animal and plant groups are threatened, suggesting that around 1 million species already face extinction, many within decades.[2]

I share these stories not to put my reader into a place of despair or

desolation, but as a reminder that these losses are *real*, that they are *irreversible*, but they are not the whole story. These stories require some form of response; this response cannot be denial or cynicism, nor can it be a sense of "hope" that leaps into the future while ignoring the messy realities we face today. Instead, I'd like to "stay with the trouble" and find ways to "nurture well-being on a damaged planet."[3] I believe that the practice of mourning-*with* others may aid us to face loss, not by forgetting, but by remembering *vitally* together, so as to make something vital with one another still possible.

In this paper, I consider the notion of "mourning-*with*" as a practicing of relearning our world; within the process of grief, we not only relearn our relationship with that which was lost, we must also become reoriented to the world left behind. I begin by introducing the concept of mourning-with others, drawing inspiration from Donna Haraway's concept of becoming-*with*. Becoming-with*,* for Haraway, refers to a practice of nurturing attachment sites, rendering one another capable of response. Next, I turn to Sigmund Freud's 1917 essay *Mourning and Melancholia,* to consider his description of the "work of mourning". In this section I identify the bifurcation of "grief" as both an *affective* state and its outward manifestation. In the following section, I draw attention to the way public narratives and spaces of mourning have *failed* melancholic subjects; to do this I look to Sara Ahmed's writing on queer grief and philosopher of education James Stillwaggon's work on melancholia and student identities. In my conclusion I outline how mourning-with adds three important elements to conversations around mourning. First, mourning is posed as a reorienting experience, one in which mourners must relearn their world; within this process, there is the possibility that the mourning

subject may become "disoriented" and struggle to find their place after loss. The practice of mourning-with others is posed as a relational phenomenon to help avoid such disorientation. Second, mourning-with is not merely an extension of "sympathy" or "empathy" toward the other, but the practice of rendering the other capable of mourning (without appropriating the other's grief). Third, mourning-with is posed as a shared process of learning and transformation, a practice that requires a sense of opening and responsive to one another in order to return to the question how to live and die well together.

The inspiration for the concept of "mourning-with" derives from Donna Haraway's concept of "becoming-with." Haraway's background in zoology, biology, and philosophy position her thinking against a rich and interesting backdrop; in her work, Haraway states that "the partners do not precede their relating," instead the experience of becoming is always relational, becoming-*with* others. [4] This is deeply tied up with her concept of "response-ability," or the process of rendering one another capable of response. This sense of responsibility is crafted in interaction, in relation-ships through which "entities, subjects and objects come into being."[5] These multidirectional relationships shape the capacity to respond of all entities in the process of becoming. Haraway's "becoming-*with*" is both an ontological and ethical practice of learning to live and die well together. I would like to extend this framework to practices of mourning, to consider mourning-*with* as a response-ability, a practice of rendering one another capable of mourning.[6] This practice involves "relearning our worlds," or as Haraway would put it "reworlding," co-making our worlds alongside the wider web of many other beings that make up the world.

There is potential harm in demarcating "mournable losses" without also speaking on the mechanisms that make some losses "grievable" and others not. This distinction can take place through erasure, where subjects are left out of mourning narratives, or through the use of emotion, where in some subjects are deemed "legitimate objects of emotion" while others are not. The extension of grief to some, through forms of sentimentalization, can allow the mourning subject to be moved by the suffering of some others (innocent children, the "deserving" poor, the injured hero) while remaining untouched by others (whose suffering is not converted into the other's sympathy). Sentimentalized responses to grief can have the effect of erasing difference, converting loss into an object to bond over and be shared ("our loss") rather than allowing for the recognition of the other as griever, or the *subject of* grief. I return to this distinction in the latter half of the paper. In the next section I turn to consider: what can the psychoanalytic approach to mourning teach us about facing loss?

<div align="center">THE WORK OF MOURNING</div>

Sigmund Freud describes mourning as 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."[7] The German word "trauer", translated as "mourning" in Freud's work, can mean both the *affect* of grief and its *outward manifestation*. Grief is thus posed as both an individual psychological process, as well as a relational phenomenon. The dual nature of mourning, its private and public iterations, becomes important as Freud attempts to distinguish it from the heavily pathologized version of "melancholia" he presents in this 1917 essay. The distinguishing mental

features of melancholia involve:

> a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside
> world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a
> lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance
> in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional
> expectation of punishment.[8]

Interestingly, Freud describes that all but this final feature, the disturbance
of self-regard, are present in mourning. Despite the intensely altered state
described above, at this time, Freud writes that mourning is *not* to be regarded
as a pathological condition, but a state that we expect to be overcome "after
a certain lapse of time" and that any interference with it is "useless or even
harmful."[9]

Mourning is, however, a laborious and painful process. The "work of
mourning" is described as a form of "reality-testing," where-in the mourning
subject, bit by bit, faces the reality that the loved object no longer exists. This
involves a sort of "revisiting" memories and expectations where the libido is
bound to the lost loved object, where-in each is "brought up and hyper-ca-
thected, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it."[10]
Anyone who has lost a loved one has had the experience of reencountering
a place, smell, food or other experience that was shared with their lost loved
one. Living with loss requires that we stay rooted in our mortality, resisting
the fantasy of infinity or deathlessness. Mourning practices of burial reflect
this acknowledgement by bringing the corpse to the earth. The corpse, Donna
Haraway clarifies, is not the body, as the body is "always in-the-making," a
vital entanglement, always becoming. Speaking of her father's death and burial,

Haraway explains: "My father is undone, and that is why I must re-member him. I and all those who lived entangled with him become his flesh; we are kin to the dead because their bodies have touched us."[11] Accepting the body's unmaking requires re-membering the ways of its becoming, recognizing the knots of human and nonhuman lives that tied it to this earth.

The mourning subject dwells with loss in order to assume a new orientation to their world, one that involves sustained remembrance of that which was lost in order to learn to live in a changed reality. During this time, Freud describes, the object is "psychically prolonged" until the work of mourning is completed and the ego becomes "free and uninhibited again."[12] Although Freud's language seems to imply a complete "letting go" of loss, I frame mourning as the struggle to relearn our relationship with those who have died, transitioning from "loving in presence to loving in separation."[13] This "reorienting" feature of mourning is one that I will pose, in my final section, as an educational practice.

COMPLICATING MELANCHOLIA

In his 1917 essay Freud positions the melancholic as one who fails to properly mourn their loss, by internalizing or retaining the loved object rather than offering up a public recognition. However, in this section I look at melancholia's relationship with language and identity and draw attention to the ways in which public narratives and spaces of mourning have *failed* melancholic subjects.

In the "work of mourning," the mourning subject is described as "testing reality" by affectively working through memories where the libido is bound to their loss. In this practice the mourner is able to face or confront their

loss as it involves, Freud asserts, nothing that is unconscious. Melancholia, however, is "in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness."[14] In his early work Freud pathologized these unmourned losses, describing how the ego, in an attempt to incorporate the lost object into itself, does so by "devouring it," wherein an "object-loss" is transformed into an "ego-loss."[15] Throughout his later work, however, Freud revises his understanding of the relationship between loss and identity, especially in his conception of the ego as "intermediary between the id and external world."[16]

With the ego acting as a form of mediator, the unspeakable or unrecognized loss of melancholia becomes central to the formation of the ego. In her description of queer grief, Sara Ahmed describes one such "unspeakable loss." Observing how gay and lesbian mourners are often not recognized *as mourners* by hospitals, families, and courts of law, Ahmed aims to identify how queer lives can be recognized, while resisting being simply assimilated into heteronormative structures. To do so she turns to look at the role of grief within queer politics. She writes,

> it is not that queer lives exist as 'ungrievable loss', but that queer losses cannot 'be admitted' as forms of loss in the first place, as queer lives are not recognised as lives 'to be lost'. One has to recognise oneself as having something before one can recognise oneself as losing something.[17]

Ahmed's characterization of "loss" returns us to consider the "unspeakability" of Freud's melancholia; within a heteronormative framework of mourning queer loss is "unregistrable," as compulsory heterosexuality fails to register queer life, including queer love, as desirable. The "work of mourning" thus is

interrupted by the unspeakability of queer grief within public heteronormative spaces. Unacknowledged losses such as these can provoke what is known as "disenfranchised grief," or "the grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourn-ed, or socially supported."[18] This type of grief often goes unacknowledged because either the *relationship* is not recognized, the *loss* is not recognized, or the *griever* is not recognized. This failure to recognize and value queer bonds holds grave consequences for queer partners dependent on hospitals, insurance companies, and government benefits.

Ahmed also examined public displays of grief in response to September 11th. Public narratives of mourning sought to unite the nation through shared loss, utilizing rhetoric such as "fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, sons and daughters," aligning the nuclear family and the nation state. This narrative of heteronormativity left little public space or public speech to memorial-ize the lives of those outside this narrative. Because of this erasure, some queer groups chose to name individual queer losses and described the event as a "loss for the queer community." Interestingly what Ahmed noticed is that statements such as these often added queer loss *onto* the losses already mourned by the nation, aligning the queer community into the "we" of the nation, and recreating the nation as the target of "the other's hate"; "the nation is reinstalled as a coherent subject within the utterance: together, we are hated, and in being hated, we are together."[19] Rather than mourning-with as a practice of supporting the queer community, this expression of grief "blanketed" the nation and queer lives were grieved *as* queer lives only in-sofar as they supported the grieving nation. This demarcation of "mournable

losses" worked to incorporate some while preserving the erasure of other, "ungrievable" lives, such as those lost in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In his article, "*A Fantasy of Untouchable Fullness": Melancholia and Resistance to Educational Transformation"* James Stillwaggon similarly looks to the ways in which a standardized curriculum can separate marginalized students from their home identities and how this loss can often remain unspeakable in the language of the curriculum. Stillwaggon takes up "melancholia" by turning to a lineage of Freud's interpreters, Judith Butler, David Eng, and Julia Kristeva. Challenging the notion of melancholia as an individual pathology, these thinkers aim to return it source to the domain of the social, posing it as a structural problem. Looking at the tradition of democratic schooling, Stillwaggon writes that the educational promise of "growth" or transformation requires that students "trade their untaught pasts for competent futures," where educational transformation presents itself as an inherent good. [20] His concern, however, is the loss that marginalized students may face when tasked to leave behind identities and attachments in order to become the "educated subject" that education promises. As an example, Stillwaggon introduces us to one of his students, "Amy", whose mother has been imprisoned for heroin. Amy must navigate not only this maternal absence but additionally the substitution of her grandmother in the parental role and the antidrug campaigns prevalent in elementary curriculum. Rather than returning to Freud's pathologized version of melancholia, Stillwaggon turns to Julia Kristeva's work. Kristeva highlights the melancholic subject's move away from language and toward a more affective space. The melancholic attempts to "protect" their connection with the signified object by "keeping

it untouchable, away from the influence of those who would threaten to draw it into language and destroy its unspeakable hold."[21]

This refusal of linguistic representation marks the melancholic's relationship with the signified object as outside or "untouchable" by official discourses. The mourning subject dwells with loss by engaging in the affective labor of re-membering their loss and is then able to take part in the "outward manifestation" of grief through language. In the example of Amy, we are reminded that "the moral discourses we teach children offer no way to mourn an incarcerated addict."[22] In asking our students to take part in "educational transformation," we are inevitably requiring that they suffer some form of loss in the process. Amy's loss was never fully lost as she lived within educational discourses that negatively judged her mother's addiction. Through the creation of a "found poem," using words cut from magazines and newspapers, Amy is able to discuss the subject of addiction, while maintaining distance from the problematic characteristics tied up in her maternal connection. This use of borrowed language allows Amy's mother to become a mournable object again, while maintaining an ineffability within educational discourses.

Melancholia, thus, is not a permanent state, but a site of resistance and struggle. Rather than position minoritized subjects as "victims" or "damaged," David Eng and Shinehee Han suggest that melancholia be understood as a mechanism that aids subjects in negotiating identities and difference. Inviting what Stillwaggon refers to as "partial mourning," or what Eng and Han describe as a "fluid negotiation between mourning and melancholia," perhaps we can begin to reframe melancholia less as a "failure of mourning"

and look more toward the ways in which narratives and spaces of mourning have failed melancholic subjects. [23]

MOURNING-*WITH*

The process of grieving, Thomas Attig describes, is not as simple as moving through stages or steps, it is a complex process of "relearning the world," including "our physical and social surroundings, our place in the greater scheme of things, our selves, and our relationship with the one who has died."[24] In a memoir recounting the year after losing her husband, Joan Didion describes this moment: "until now I had been able only to grieve, not mourn. Grief was passive. Grief happened. Mourning, the act of dealing with grief, required attention."[25] As Didion explains, mourning is an active state that requires labor from the mourning subject. The importance of mourning that I aim to hold onto in this paper is the ability of the subject to register real*,* and irreversible, loss in order to reorient themselves to their world. By turning to theorists that complicated Freud's notion of "melancholia," however, I began to realize that not all losses will be voiceable or even registerable to the subject who has experienced them. Rather than position the melancholic subject as a "failure" of mourning, I'd like to consider Stillwaggon's notion of "partial mourning" as a meaningful mediator between the possibilities of mourning and the ineffable losses that Kristeva describes. In this final section I'd like to pose mourning-with, or perhaps "partial mourning-with," as a practice of reorientation, of relearning our worlds together.

The work of mourning, which Freud described as coming at "great expense of time and cathectic energy," requires that the mourning subject confront their loss.[26] Part of this work is performed in the affective state of

bereavement; deprived from the presence of the one we loved, this painful, complex process can leave us feeling distraught, isolated and homesick for the familiar. However, it is in this state we, sometimes reluctantly, come to know that returning to life as it had been before is unthinkable. Recognizing there is no "returning to" after loss, the mourning subject must be reoriented to the world left behind. In this process we adjust our emotional responses, transform habits and behaviors and learn to respond to a changed reality. Although grief is experienced as an individual psychological process, it is also a deeply relational experience, inviting us into a knotted world of shared living and dying. If we picture our lives, human and nonhuman, as webs, our life stories are woven together and across, with sticky patterns of care and attachment. Loss ripples across these connections, disorienting and breaking our life patterns and assumptions. To meet our world again, to "reworld," requires mending; part of this mending means returning to aspects of our lives that are still viable, to some form of familiar that still sustains our daily life. But we also transform ourselves as we reshape our individual, family, and community lives, discerning new possibilities and connections to larger wholes. Within this process it is unrealistic to believe that the pain of grief will completely disappear. The mourning process involves learning how to carry our pain, recognizing there is no return to a sense of "wholeness" or undoing of loss.

Mourning-*with* others requires that we not simply recognize the grief of others, but recognize the other *as griever*. This becomes vitally important in situations where marginalized others have been excluded from networks of legitimation and support in the mourning process. In the example of queer

partners facing loss, this means breaking up heteronormative mourning spaces that fail queer mourners in the grieving process. As Haraway reminds us, accepting the body's unmaking in death requires re-membering the ways of its becoming, recognizing the human and nonhuman attachments that tied it to this earth. These ties cannot be squarely fit into the rhetoric of "brother/sister," "mother/father," or "daughter/son." To be able to render one another capable of mourning, our language of mourning-with must expand beyond these categories, recognizing that *loss* does not end at familial ties, but is something that reminds us of our shared mortality.

Mourning-*with* can be performed supporting others with time and space to grieve, while resisting the impulse to sentimentalize loss and extend it to align with a universalized or national "we." To mourn-with is not merely an extension of "sympathy" or "empathy" toward others, where loss is converted into an object to be shared ("our loss"). Instead, mourning-with others requires bearing witness to pain that we cannot know or feel ourselves. To "take in" the grief of others can work to conceal, rather than reveal, one's responsibility for loss. Expressions of shame within colonial discourses of reconciliation, for example, attempt to create a narrative of "recovery" by blanketing over Indigenous loss with the nation's "shame" or "regret."

A loss may provoke a disturbance of meaning, of intelligibility in one's life, leading to a fading sense of possibilities, of a way forward. In this process, there is the possibility that the mourning subject may become "disoriented" and struggle to find their place after loss. This, I believe, is the importance of mourning-*with* others as an ethical practicing of relearning our worlds. To witness violent loss, such as the murder of George Floyd, can be

one such disorienting experience. For those who knew George personally, the loss may lead to an extended affective state of bereavement as they re-member and work through memories of his becoming in order to face his undoing. For others around the country who witnessed his violent death, the murder of George came to represent the loss of something more abstract, such as "one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on."[27] Grief's outward manifestation led protesters across the country to gather in public spaces to keep alive the memory of George, and countless others, recognizing losses from police brutality require some form of response.

Dwelling with loss is required to come to appreciate how our world has changed, and how we must change in order to renew our relationships. Within the tremendous grief and loss of this past year, we were propelled into a new terrain of educational change. Schools, higher education insti-tutions, formal and informal educational spaces were disrupted, subverted or otherwise altered in disorienting ways. Amidst the pandemic, we cannot continue moving forward as if nothing has changed; the "work of mourn-ing" requires that we look toward one another with care and concern. Like Haraway's "becoming-with," mourning-with is posed as always relational, an ethical practice that requires a sense of opening and responsive to one another, opening ourselves up to circles of dependence in order to return to the question how to live and die well together. Mourning-with requires a shift from "learning about the world in order to act upon it, to learning to become with the world around us."[28] Learning to become-with others involves attending to our relations, including our histories, and identifying our unique response-abilities within these relations. Although mourning as an individual

act may require a "letting go" to come to terms with loss, mourning-with one another requires that we "learn to live with ghosts," by attending to histories of oppression and violence that continue to inform our relations to one another. [29] In this work both those who are grieving and those mourning-with are transformed in the undoing, relearning, and mending patterns of care and kinship. This work is not an alternative to practical action, rather it is the foundation of any thoughtful and sustainable response. As we anticipate the decline of the pandemic, we can continue to mourn-with one another, recognizing that our worlds have been reshaped in drastic ways that require attending to. By mourning-with one another we are tasked with relearning our world, reorienting ourselves and continuing to stay with the trouble.

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1 John Hopkins University, *Coronavirus Resource Center*, May 15, 2021. https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html

2 Sandra Díaz, Josef Settele, Eduardo Brondízio, et al., "Global Assessment Report," *Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*, May 6, 2019, https://ipbes.net/sites/default/files/downloads/spm_unedited_advance_for_posting_htn.pdf

3 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press), 2016, 76.

4 Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 17.

5 Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 71.

6 Importantly, Haraway's notion of "becoming-with" extends to include non-human animals. Within the scope of this paper, I pose mourning-*with*

as a relational practice, focusing mainly on human practices of mourn-
ing. However, I believe there is important work to be done in considering
mourning as a shared practice with other beings, especially in light of
mass numbers of extinctions. For example, see Thom van Dooren and
Deborah Bird Rose, "Keeping Faith with the Dead: Mourning and De-Ex-
tinction," *Australian Zoologist* 38, no. 3 (2017): 375-378.

7 Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological
Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press,
1953), 243.

8 Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, 244.

9 Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, 244.

10 Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, 245.

11 Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 163.

12 Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, 245.

13 Thomas Attig, "Relearning the World: Always Complicated, Sometimes
More Than Others," in *Complicated Grieving and Bereavement*, eds. Ger-
ry Cox, Robert Bendiksen, and Robert Stevenson (New York: Routledge,
2000), 12.

14 Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, 245.

15 Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, 250.

16 Sigmund Freud, *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. James Strachey
(New York: Norton, 1989), 14.

17 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh
University Press, 2004), 156.

18 Kenneth J. Doka, *Disenfranchised Grief: Recognizing Hidden Sorrow*

(Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989), 4.

19 Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 158.

20 James Stillwaggon, ""A Fantasy of Untouchable Fullness": Melancholia and Resistance to Educational Transformation," *Educational Theory* 67, no. 1 (2017): 54.

21 Stillwaggon, "A Fantasy of Untouchable Fullness," 60.

22 Stillwaggon, "A Fantasy of Untouchable Fullness," 64.

23 David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 10, no. 4 (2000): 693.

24 Attig, "Relearning the World," 7.

25 Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 143.

26 Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, 245.

27 Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, 243.

28 Common Worlds Research Collective, "Learning to become *with* the world: Education for future survival," paper commissioned for the UNESCO Futures of Education report (forthcoming, 2021).

29 Sam Durrant, *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), 9.