How Do We Live and Lose Together?

Considering a Politics of Grief for Anti-Racist Praxis That Tackles Oppressor Identity in Post-Colonial Spaces

By Kyla Hazell | Peer Review

Abstract

Exclusion from the category of full humanity constructs certain populations as 'ungrievable' or 'unworthy of grief' after death in a way that creates and reinforces radical vulnerability in the conditions they experience. This argument from Judith Butler resonates clearly with what decolonial thinkers have described as a fundamental feature of how racism emerges and operates in the modern world system. Building on these understandings, this article considers the potential and limitations of working with grief as a conceptual framework for tackling the apathy of whiteness as part of anti-racist work.

Introduction

In her book Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence (2004), Judith Butler argues that certain populations are culturally rendered 'ungrievable' or 'unworthy of grief' in a way that creates and reinforces radical vulnerability in the conditions they experience. Working from the belief that grief ordinarily attaches to the trauma of losing human life, ungrievability represents an exclusionary zone outside normative ideas of the human, a boundary beyond which certain lives are not granted full recognition or seen as worthy of grief after death. As part of theoretical research conducted between 2015 and 2017, I placed this understanding of differential vulnerability in conversation with decolonial thought. As a young, white, female, eight-generational settler in post-1994 South Africa, I wrote at a time when the legitimacy of our 'democratic' society was being critiqued in specifically decolonial terms that caused a disruption to the 'rainbow nation' myth.

My theoretical engagement was influenced by reflections formed while being embedded in both student and social movements driving these critiques during the period [1]. Observing responses to these shifting politics, I became interested in how a system and those who sustain it loosen their hold on survival of a particular kind so that space might be opened for the emergence of new futures. Exploring ungrievability as a dimension of coloniality, I considered the potential and limitations of working with grief as a conceptual framework, particularly for moving dominant or oppressor identities toward the work of structural transformation [2]. With race remaining a significant determinant of life possibility and experience in South Africa, this meant tackling whiteness.

In the years since undertaking that theoretical research, I have worked variously as a popular educator in the spatial injustice and land inequality sector and as a facilitator and board member for a small NPO that engages beneficiaries of colonialism/apartheid about the need for restitution in South Africa. Reflecting on the theory from my research in relation to these experiences, I would like to offer a few introductory thoughts about grief as a potentially transformative praxis for whiteness attempting to engage with anti-racist work in post-colonial contexts such as South Africa. As a thinker and practitioner who embodies multiple oppressor identities myself, my reflections are tentative and emergent, connected to both personal and collective experiences of loss, but cognisant that these could never be representative. As a process of profound change that is not chosen and cannot be controlled, grief may offer tools for moving beyond notions of 'transformation' that seek to contain change.

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Ungrievability and Differential Vulnerability

From all our different perspectives and positions, experiencing life means encountering loss. The grief we may feel reveals that we are vulnerable: at risk of suffering because we are reliant on each other and on the material conditions that sustain us. This is a common vulnerability, simply part of being human and interdependent. We need others and we also need certain economic and social conditions to sustain ourselves (Butler, 2009: 14). However, while all people are inherently vulnerable, social and political organisations have developed historically in order to 'maximise precariousness for some and minimise precariousness for others' (Butler, 2009: 2). The result is that certain populations find themselves more vulnerable than others because they are generally exposed to greater violence with fewer protections. This is what the theory of ungrievability interrogates. Vulnerability to loss – what fundamentally exposes us to grief and what ought to be shared as a reminder of our humanity – is unequally distributed due to

differential power within present structures, leading to a failure of economic and social support for some (Butler, 2004: xii; Butler, 2009: 25). As noted at the outset, Butler argues that the unequal distribution is possible because certain people are excluded from the dominant understanding of full humanity.

As a parallel, Argentinian decolonial theorist Walter Mignolo (1995: 8) understands racism as a hegemonic discourse that questions the humanity of people who are constructed as different from and lesser than those who assume the right to classify. From a decolonial perspective, this questioning – what Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007: 245) describes as 'misanthropic scepticism' – is central to how 'race' as we know it today [3] became the most significant determinant of a person's social and class position in the single-world order emerging under European expansion after 1492. [4]

Sylvia Wynter (1999) argues that a particular understanding of what it meant to be human – one that had emerged within a specific time/place as the result of particular cultural transformations and historical events – was imposed onto different civilizations and weaponised to set the foundations of a racialised global hierarchy. Colonisers attempted to justify the exploitation and elimination of those they encountered during expansion by proclaiming the absence of an equal human soul among indigenous people. This allowed for a form of social stratification that was entirely hierarchical and immutable because the oppressed were not seen as equally human, supposedly justifying radical violence against them (Morgensen, 2001: 61–63; Maldonado-Torres, 2007: 244). Although Butler's theory was developed as an analysis of war in the aftermath of 9/11, it quite clearly intersects with the way that racism as a structure of differential vulnerability is understood in the lineage of decolonial thought.

Augustine Park (2015) makes this connection when she puts the concept of ungrievability into conversation with settler colonial theory. Patrick Wolfe (2006) argues that the colonial project operates according to a 'logic of elimination' driven by the need to access and retain land. Simply put, in order to impose and sustain an external civilisation, one must destroy what already exists in a place. This might be through direct violence, through structural violence, or through multiple forms of assimilation that undermine the elements of identity that those marked for elimination might organise around to challenge the external power. I include here the elimination of cultural assets such as language, social formation, and spiritual practices that protect and reinforce collective identities, supporting life over time. For Park, the logic of elimination is what renders indigenous life ungrievable in settler colonial contexts. If a life is not seen as holding full human worth, but rather regarded as an obstacle to be removed from space, its loss or the loss of that which renders it irreplaceable will not be met with mourning (Park, 2015: 279). It must be noted that this is not to suggest that indigenous peoples are not intimately connected to the grief that flows from experiencing colonial violence. Nor is it to say that indigenous peoples are left 'hostage to grief', debilitated by pain and passively waiting for the day that settler society recognises their loss and the value of their lives (Park, 2015: 290). Either of these views would deny an entire history of radical decolonial struggle that has worked through pain to continuously challenge oppression. As Kēhaulani Kauanui (2016) puts it, the operative logic of settler colonialism may be to 'eliminate the native,' but indigenous peoples 'exist, resist, and persist' all the same. She argues that the logic of elimination must always be balanced by the truth of 'enduring indigeneity' (Kēhaulani Kauanui, 2016).

With that said, drawing a connection between ungrievability and the logic of elimination helps us to trace the continuities that bring differential vulnerability into the present. For Maldonado-Torres (2007: 247), as for Butler, casting doubt upon humanity justifies the injustices committed against certain peoples by normalising and radicalising their heightened vulnerability. He argues that existing as a racialised other means existing in a perpetual condition of war, permanently faced with the likelihood of either direct or indirect structural violence. Elimination, though always resisted and never complete, becomes a persistent challenge in varying forms. In A Dying Colonialism, Frantz Fanon (1959: 128) offers a description of the oppressed experience:

> There is, first of all, the fact that the colonised person…perceives life not as a flowering or a development of an essential productiveness, but as a permanent struggle against an omnipresent death. This ever-menacing death is experienced

> as endemic famine, unemployment, a high death rate, an inferiority complex and the absence of any hope for the future. All this gnawing at the existence of the colonised tends to make of life something resembling an incomplete death.

At certain points in history, elimination manifested in battles on the frontiers of settler and colonial states or in forced removal from land that supported life; today, it can be recognised in the disproportionate threat of police brutality faced by racialised communities or their lack of access to social goods such as decent education, healthcare, legal aid, and social support. Ungrievability as part of racist structures is powerfully articulated by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement's contemporary call to 'end the war on Black people' as 'an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise' (Black Lives Matter, 2021). For me, though, it is perhaps most perfectly captured by Malawian-born poet Upile Chisala (2005) when she says:

> so when black blood bleeds it is minor
> it is commonplace
> it is expected.
> so when black blood bleeds,
> a system doesn't cry.

Putting ungrievability into conversation with decolonial thought is useful for grappling with racism as a specifically embedded form of structural injustice in ostensibly post-colonial settings. In particular, it offers insight into the way that whiteness – a dominant dimension of the 'system' that does not cry – situates vulnerability away from itself through a process of elimination and erasure. Considering this here, in the world's most unequal society, we can trace that whiteness means holding privilege that flows from an historic ability to situate vulnerability away from ourselves. Dispossession meant looting, killing, and burning (Reddy, 2015) – as well as legislating to secure the land that would mean life (SAHO, 2019). Later on, the mechanisms of constructing vulnerability took subtler but no less deadly forms. Our grandfathers worked in jobs reserved for white people (Hepple, 1963) and bought homes in designated, well-located areas (SAHO, 2020), while communities were torn apart by forced displacement. Our fathers continued to rely on cheap domestic labour and educational opportunities that were closed to others (O'Malley/NMF), while a generation sacrificed their learning to fight for liberation (Naidoo, 2019; SAHO, 2020). As contemporary health and education systems struggle, our own debit orders reflect the turn to private school fees and medical aid. In choosing as we do, we continually distance ourselves from the vulnerability that inheres in the society we are part of, implicitly turning attention away from the fact that this so often concentrates it onto others. We disinvest from the need to fix what's been broken. We close our eyes to the loss others carry and too often forget the subtle threads that historically bind us to that suffering.

Anti-Racist Work and Grief as a Potentially Transformative Praxis

Can this be overcome? As part of her initial theorisation of 'ungrievability', Butler argues that grief may lead us to consider ethical responsibility in new ways because it makes us acknowledge that relations and social conditions are deeply part of our personhood. This metaphysic isn't foreign in traditional African cultures where 'I am because you are' is what makes most sense (Mangena/IEP). But for those embedded in the more individualist worldviews that dominate Western capitalist modernity, Butler urges that personal and social grief can help us to identify with the vulnerability others face. Park (2015) goes a step further by proposing a 'politics of grief' for settler colonial contexts. She argues that working to overcome ungrievability has the potential to both decolonise the mind of the settler and ground a push towards transformative structural justice (Park, 2015: 277). This is very interesting when thinking about anti-racist work that focuses on the oppressor or dominant identity. According to Park, a politics of grief reconstitutes the individual and collective, literal and figurative death of indigenous persons as grievable, allowing settlers and indigenous peoples to honour one another's existence in a manner that fundamentally alters the relationship because it rejects the foundational logic of elimination (Park, 2015: 286).

The politics of grief is proposed as a resource through which a grievable person – in Park's formulation, the settler, but this could more broadly be understood as applying to dominant identities or whiteness

generally in a racist world order – is potentially able to join the work of internal and external change to create a more human world. 'The work' is not about feeling bad; instead it must mean fighting against the construction of disproportionate vulnerability that results when some monopolise the material resources for liveable life at others' expense. This requires looking at issues like shelter, work, medical care, food, and legal protection. Butler (2009: 28) says:

> For populations to become grievable does not require that we come to know the singularity of every person who is at risk or who has indeed, already been risked. Rather, it means that policy needs to understand precariousness as a shared condition, and precarity as the politically induced condition that would deny equal exposure through the radically unequal distribution of wealth and the differential ways of exposing certain populations, racially and nationally conceptualized, to greater violence.

I am drawn to Park's vision of a grief-centred politics that turns dominant identities toward the work of structural transformation, but it is unclear how that politics could emerge practically. Given the discussion above of elimination and erasure, it seems any politics of grief would need to involve critical education: challenging and introducing knowledge that disrupts erasure. Anti-racist popular educators in this area would need to focus on conscientising those embedded in whiteness about the history of elimination in different spaces so as to surface what has been lost and reveal the mechanisms through which vulnerability is historically differently allocated. Particularly when working with dominant or privileged identities that might deny confrontations with structural injustice, experiences of loss and tangible measures of differential vulnerability can be powerful pedagogical tools. However, knowledge alone might not be enough. When elimination operates continuously over time, a significant problem is that the absence is not felt even if it becomes recognised. Cocks (2012: 224) says:

> The lack of a sense of loss of what has been erased, on the part of persons whose sensibilities have been molded within a new order of things, means that the critic must find a way not merely to conjure up a world that is no longer there but also to elicit a felt concern for its absence. This is especially difficult when the absent world belonged to some other people's ancestors. [My emphasis]

The pathology of ungrievability is essentially a systemic failure by those who enjoy greater protection from vulnerability to be moved by the more radical vulnerability and elimination others experience. It is an absence of feeling – what might be described as apathy or indifference – and an associated failure to act. As an example – in her book What Does It Mean to Be White? – anti-racist scholar Robin DiAngelo argues that white people seldom register or lament the lack of meaningful diversity in dominant culture. Whiteness is accepted as the norm in their neighbourhoods, schools, media products, mentors, and relationships, so there is little felt need to take action toward change. My core work targets how this operates in space, focusing on the legacy of spatial apartheid and the continued exclusion of poor and working class, Black and coloured people from well-located areas that were reserved for those classified as white under apartheid. 'Good' neighbourhoods remain predominantly white and their lack of transformation – or increasing exclusivity – is rarely seen as problematic. As fellow popular educator Nicola Soekoe (2019: 48) interprets: homogeneity is often felt to be a privilege, not a lack. The absence or erasure of an oppressed group from dominant culture results in their potential influence being rendered 'ungrievable' because that which was different was seen as lesser from the start. The destruction or absence of languages, cultures, knowledge systems, spiritualities, and various forms of social organisation outside of white supremacy is not mourned as loss because it is not in the first

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instance seen as part of the same human collective. This is a serious obstacle for practitioners working for anti-racist structural transformation.

Al-Saji (2014: 147) specifically emphasises the importance of targeting racism at the level of affect. Some protest that this plays into the emotionally over-determined and irrational nature of racism, and argue that anti-racist work should rather be undertaken at a cognitive or rational level targeting people's beliefs. While cognitive work that challenges racism is essential, we must also be willing to recognise that affect is what moves people to take political action (Nussbaum, 2013) or at least believe that action is necessary. One can shift a rational understanding without actually undoing the affective structure that underlies the point of view or developing the desire to act differently. There is an immediacy to the (non)-response of indifference. It affects what we do and do not notice and what we turn attention toward or choose to dedicate energy to. Al-Saji argues that 'anti-racist transformations need to occur at the affective, perceptual, and bodily level, the pre-reflective level of habit, and not merely at the reflective level of cognition or belief' (2014: 162).

A politics of grief that pursues affective transformation must be able to disrupt the indifference of ungrievability for whiteness to experience a meaningful felt response that will actually move people to action. The social and structural security of whiteness reinforces ungrievability, so introducing a 'politics of grief' would take an initial act of rupture to allow for moments of opening in which the dominant way of being can be critically engaged and possibly shifted. As popular educators in the social justice sector, one might be able to achieve this through sharing knowledge or activating protest action that confronts and challenges complacency.

This raises a further issue, however, in that disrupting indifference risks resulting in highly reactive and resistant responses. In the book The Cultural Politics of Emotion, critical race and postcolonial theorist Sara Ahmed argues that emotions may invest people so strongly in social structures that they experience a challenge to the system as a sort of existential threat. Emotional responses shape our action in ways that either allow for opening, or violently reject it. Confronted with disruption, privilege likely attempts to restore prior comfort as quickly as possible. Butler's (2004, 2009) thinking on violence, mourning, and vulnerability emerged in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, from seeking to understand the American public's response to sudden and unforeseen trauma. 9/11 was a moment characterised not only by physical loss of life within the nation's borders, but also by the symbolic loss of a particular sense of what life in that society meant. Entangled and multidimensional, grief flowed openly from a wound that tore into the nation's understanding of self. The 'break in first world complacency' ruptured the relative security of life in a Northern superpower (Butler, 2004: 8), connecting to varying forms of loss for the individual and the society and disrupting a status quo that sought to be seen as secure. Considered as an example of privilege confronted, it is revealing that its consequence was the so-called War on Terror. Butler (2004: 29–30) points out that in cases of disruption, privilege likely 'shores itself up, seeks to reconstitute its imagined wholeness, but only at the price of denying its own vulnerability, its dependency, its exposure, where it exploits those very features in others thereby making those features 'other' to itself'.

The uncertainty and vulnerability of disruption can be rejected in repressive or violent ways if we experience it as something to be escaped or overcome, rather than embraced as a resource for opening ourselves and our structures to change. As practitioners, we must be able to not only break through complacency, but sustain the opening created by disrupting indifference in order to build different politics. A politics of grief may need to introduce vulnerability, but then also hold and support people so that they can accept it. Vulnerability should, at all times, be introduced and navigated in ways that reconnect us to it as a connector, a shared part of our human experience. Exploiting vulnerability is dehumanising; embracing and redistributing it may hold the potential to be humanising. Here I align strongly with Soekoe's (2019) move to develop a facilitation style or approach to anti-racist education that creates spaces of uncertainty and vulnerability. When it comes to doing this practically, we might take seriously the emotional tools and perspectives that help people navigate confrontations with grief and vulnerability generally, drawing on contextually appropriate traditions for these where necessary.

This for me is perhaps most honestly the place of any politics that considers grief in relation to the pathology of ungrievability: thinking about how to nurture moments of opening in structures that are ordinarily closed and supporting people to accept uncertainty as a space of possibility. A politics of grief could open us to conversations about the material effects of trauma, the actional work of healing, the love and the anger that urge individuals towards justice, and the deeply unequal apportioning of vulnerability in the modern world. It also compels us to recognise how very present both the past and future are in how we inherit and enact structures, allowing us to look to our history and to see the continuities that inhibit meaningful change moving forward. But for any of this to be possible, whiteness must be willing to embrace the necessity, inevitability, and unknowable potential of change. Grief is always indeterminable and has a certain transformative potential that cannot be controlled, as captured when Butler (2004: 21) says:

> Perhaps, rather, one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly forever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say submitting to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance.

If ungrievability is a question of power revealing the individuals or institutions that have the ability to situate vulnerability away from themselves, then asking for this submission is not about wanting people to be less protected. It's about reflecting on the question: if we could not other this human vulnerability, how would we want our systems set up?

Notes

[1] These movements were the Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall student movements, to which I was an active ally participant, as well as the Reclaim the City social movement, which I remain closely part of today.

[2] Any attempt to bifurcate a population into 'oppressor' and 'oppressed' necessarily collapses the complexity of the multiple intersecting identities all people embody. Aware of this, I still use the bifurcation in this analysis to recognise race as a primary construct used to divide between the coloniser and the colonised, or oppressor and oppressed (Quijano, 2007; Gordon, 2005; De Sousa Santos, 2007). This does not discount the role of complex class formations, divisions between core and periphery areas, and hierarchies based on gender, sexuality, religion, belief, language, and looks.

[3] Racism is inherently a question of power and of structure which may have varying articulations across space and time, but retains an essential logic of hierarchy with different markers (for example, race as phenotype in certain spaces and as religion in others).

[4] To read more on this, see generally Wynter, 1995; 1999; 2003; Morgensen, 2011; Dussel, 2002; Grosfoguel, 2007; Quijano, 2007; and Mignolo, 2011.

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