Chapter 4

GRIEVABILITY FOR THE LIVING

IN MY book *The Force of Nonviolence* (2020), I argue that the distinction between the grievable and the ungrievable is part of the very operation and meaning of social and economic inequality but also the effect, if not the expression, of violence.[1] What does it mean to be grievable? We may think that someone or something lost is grievable or ungrievable by which we mean that it is either publicly marked and acknowledged or it passes without a trace, with no, or little, acknowledgment. Of course, a smaller group may grieve a loss with intensity and duration, but the loss and the mourning do not show up on the dominant radars tracking human value. Arguments such as mine depend on a conception of "acknowledgment" that may seem ambiguous. I draw on Freud's argument in "Mourning and Melancholia" that mourning consists of acknowledgment of loss, of registering the reality of loss and undoing the ramparts of defense against knowing the event of loss itself. Acknowledgment of this kind is

a struggle that takes time, a syncopated effort to touch upon a loss repeatedly that may be difficult to fathom or accept. Freud claims that it usually happens bit by bit as different moments of reality confirm that someone or something is irreversibly gone. Only in time do we come to see or feel that someone is really gone; in Freud's language, the "verdict of reality" is delivered over time as the not-thereness of the person is marked in different situations.[2] In phenomenological language, one might say that a person is now present only in the mode of being irreversibly gone. Melancholia, for Freud, is often described as the failure to acknowledge that a loss has happened, usually a form of denial unconsciously and fiercely held that takes outward form as complaint, despondency, or self-vilification.

The difference, then, between mourning and melancholy seems to turn on the question of acknowledgment. Since *Gender Trouble*, I have sought to extend the analysis of melancholia beyond the individual psyche to understand as a broader cultural form that takes hold when certain kinds of losses cannot be marked or valued. Under conditions where one's love or attachment cannot be acknowledged and one loses that love, one can acknowledge neither the love nor the loss. And that leaves a person in a melancholic condition, one that includes elements of both depression and mania or is characterized precisely by the oscillation between the two.[3] When considering melancholia, it matters *what* one loses; it can be a person or the love of that person, but Freud is clear that it can be an ideal, a fantasy of who that person should have been, or indeed an ideal of a nation. The loss of white demographic advantage in various U.S. states implies that white supremacists have to lose their

fantasy of supremacy, an ideal that was never possible and should have never been entertained. As they rail against equality, they refuse a loss that they are now compelled to mourn. Let us hope they finish that process soon.

Earlier in my career I suggested that gender itself may be partially constructed through melancholia to the extent that some versions of cis-masculinity depend upon the denial of any love for other men. For some, to be a man means precisely never having loved another man and never having lost a man.[4] This "never having" loved and lost is a denial that gets built into the gender at issue, a melancholic formation that forms an unconscious bond among those who dwell in that version of masculinity. Similarly, the claim that one would never be gay and never have been gay is a kind of protest suggesting that another voice coming from elsewhere is promoting a countervailing view. The protest deflects the acknowledgment of a loss, but it may also be read as a disfigured form of acknowledgment. What if feelings of gay desire were regarded as relatively common, "endemic" to the social fabric? One question I asked decades ago was whether gender melancholia of this sort has a certain cultural generality, and whether we might speak of a cultural melancholia, one that is commonly found among straight men whose masculinity depends more or less on a steadfast denial of the mere thought of their possibly gay desires. Of course, we know that a wide range of masculinities exist in cis-, queer, and trans life that do not correlate with this kind of denial, but perhaps there is one normative sort that still fits the profile. At the time, I was in part guided by the study authored by Alexander Mitscherlich and Margarete Mitscherlich, *The Inability to*

Mourn, which documents a pervasive melancholia in German culture during the postwar years.[5] It appears that they could not acknowledge or mourn their own losses or, indeed, their own destructiveness, and yet they were haunted by experiences of destruction and loss that they could not quite name. The rush to move beyond the Nazi years into the economic boom of the 1950s brought with it a mania for the market and its specific sense of futurity, along with a pervasive sense of depression, what Freud—following early modern precedents—had called melancholia, now emerging as a cultural condition.

In recent years, I've tried to think about wars and public attacks on human life and asked the question *whose life is a candidate for public mourning, and whose is not?*[6] It struck me as significant then that the United States never mourns those they kill but only its own citizens, and mainly those who are white and propertied and married more easily than those who are poor, queer, Black or brown, or without papers. Living humans bear a sense of whether they belong to the grievable classes, as it were. To say of a living person that they are grievable is to say that they would be grieved were they to be lost. It is also to say that the world is, or should be, organized to sustain that life, to support the open-ended future of that life. And those who live with the sense that there is no certainty about food or shelter or health care also live with a sense of their dispensability. Living with a somatic sense of dispensability is the feeling that one could die and pass from the earth leaving no mark and without acknowledgment. It is a lived conviction that one's own life does not matter to others or, rather, that the world is organized—the economy is organized—so that the lives of

some will be safeguarded and the lives of others will not. When the economy starts up following a pandemic surge, knowing full well that some people will die, a class of dispensable people is being identified and created. This is a fascist moment that emerges amid a market calculation, and we are living in a time when this form of calculation threatens to become the norm. It is, in fact, a rationality and a power that we must fight at quotidian and global levels.

Thus, to live as someone with a sense of being ungrievable is to understand that one belongs to that class of the dispensable and to feel abandonment as basic institutions of care either pass one by, once again, or are withdrawn. One is oneself the loss that cannot be mourned. This kind of melancholia belongs to the sense of foreclosed futurity that goes along with having perpetually fallen through a safety network, perhaps burdened with unpayable debt, in pursuit of elusive health care, or subject to sporadic housing and uncertain income. If this life is not regarded as worthy of safeguarding, then is this a life without value? Or has "value" itself been hijacked by a metric whose value we must radically question? And what sense of value is, and should be, accorded to lives, and to what metric does it belong?

I have argued that it is not possible to understand social inequality without understanding how grievability is unequally distributed. That unequal distribution is a key component of social inequality, one that generally has not been taken into account by social theorists. It follows that the designation, whether explicit or implicit, of a group or population as ungrievable means that they can be targeted for violence or left to die without consequence. Such a targeting can be implied by a set

of policies and theories and does not have to be discovered as the deliberate wish of any social actor. Hence, the kind of social inequality established by differential grievability qualifies as a form of institutional violence. In my view, the struggle for a nonviolent politics is at once a struggle for the equal value of lives and against the lethal logics, the necro-political metrics, that continue to mark (or leave unmarked) populations as dispensable, lives as not worth safeguarding, lives as not worth mourning. To recapitulate the two parts of my argument: (1) The struggle against social inequality has to be a struggle against differential grievability; and (2) This struggle is also part of a nonviolent politics. For nonviolence is not only opposing this or that act of violence, but violent institutions and policies and states that adopt as their policy the targeting of populations for death or policies for letting people die in conditions of duress. We can think here, surely, about the European Union's cruel policy toward migrants and its hideous criminalization of humanitarian actors who seek to preserve the lives of those seeking to cross the Mediterranean when nation-states refuse.

Under conditions of pandemic, it may be that we are all suffering from some version of melancholia. How does it become possible to mourn so many people? Do any of us know how to name what we have lost? What kind of public mark or monument would begin to address this need to mourn? Everywhere we sense the absence of the mark, the gap within the sensible world. Where gatherings are themselves highly restricted and are anxious or intermittent and designed as a way to mourn, what ways are left to connect? Many have now attended the Zoom memorials and know the difficulty of this practice. The

inability to see someone close in a hospital before they die, the inability to gather with those who knew that person, these make for truncated experiences of loss where acknowledgment cannot happen openly and communally with ease. Many people who have suffered loss have been returned to the household as the exclusive site for mourning, deprived of more public gatherings in which such losses are marked and commonly registered. The internet has more fully claimed its place as the new public sphere, but it can never fully substitute for those gatherings, both private and public, that allow losses to be fathomed and lived through with one another. And if we do gather, we keep our distance, strain to hug in awkward ways, kiss with a generalized sense of anxiety. And in the spring of 2022, memorial gatherings became another place where people contracted the virus. A purely private form of mourning is possible, but can it release or assuage the open cry, the stories, the songs that petition the world to bear witness to this loss in its singularity within a social fabric of interwoven lives? As is the case with public losses of such magnitude and quick succession, there are always political questions that are linked with the demand for public mourning. Earlier in the pandemic, the images of bodies piled high in Ecuador or stacked in closets in New Jersey or Northern Italy let us know in graphic terms how overwhelmed and underfunded the infrastructure of hospitals have been, deprived of the power to care for those in distress. Too often the images of the dead and dying flit by as sensational clips. Sequestering enforces both a sense of ambient death and a shared practice of deflection: "let's not focus on the negative!" The task, though, is to convert that ambient sense of

loss into mourning and demand. Learning to mourn mass death means marking the loss of someone whose name you do not know, whose language you may not speak, who lives at an unbridgeable distance from where you live, insisting on a global frame for our disorientation. One does not have to know the person lost to affirm that *this was a life*. One does not have to have all the details about a life to know that it existed. The right to belong to the world is anonymous but no less obligatory for that reason. In public discourse, it is the life cut short, the life that should have had a chance to live more, that captures our attention. The elderly are on their way to death (and the rest of us are not?). Whatever the age, the value of that person is now carried in the lives of others, a form of acknowledgment that becomes an incorporation, a living echo, an animated wound or trace that transforms those who live on. Just because someone else suffers in a way that I have not suffered does not mean that the other's suffering is unthinkable to me. Our bonds are forged from echoes, translation, and resonances, rhythms, and repetitions, as if the musicality of mourning makes its way past borders by virtue of its acoustic powers. The loss that the stranger endures echoes with the personal loss one feels, even as it is not the same. Because it is not the same, it echoes. An interval becomes a link. Strangers in grief nevertheless have formed a kind of collectivity.

The modes of market calculation and speculation that have accepted death for many as the price to pay for supporting the "health" of the market are accepting the sacrifice of some lives as a reasonable price, a reasonable norm. And, yes, such a consequence has come to qualify as "reasonable" within that

particular rationality. Because market rationality does not exhaust rationality, because the calculating rationality founders on its own limit, we can—even without a firm or single definition of life—assert the incalculable value of lives. The quandary is to construe a notion of social equality that incorporates rather than negates that incalculable value.

It was, in fact, in Jacques Derrida's reading of Husserl's *Crisis of the European Sciences* that he derives the incalculable value of life through recourse to Kant. In seeking to understand "the possibility of an incalculable that is neither irrational nor dubitable," Derrida suggests

> that a rational and rigorous incalculability presented itself *as such* in the greatest tradition of rationalist idealism. The rationality of the rational has never been limited, as some have tried to make us believe, to calculability, to reason as calculation, as *ratio*, as account, an account to be settled or an account to be given. . . . The role that "dignity" (*Würde*), for example, plays in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* belongs to the order of the incalculable. In the kingdom of ends, it is opposed to what has a price on the market (*Marktpreis*) and so can give rise to calculable equivalences. The dignity of a reasonable being (the human person, for example, and this is, for Kant, the only example) is incalculable as an end in itself.[7]

Although I wish that Kant had invoked this argument to challenge his support for the death penalty (where he argued that our lives belong to the state and so can be justifiably taken away

by the state[8]), we can turn his view in a more Arendtian direction. Remember that Hannah Arendt told us that Adolf Eichmann had no right to decide with whom he would cohabit the earth.[9] He could not say that he wanted to live in a world without Jews or any other group of living humans since that choice is not given to humans. Humans, according to Arendt, lack any such right, and when they seek to obliterate a group of people from the earth, they are exercising a genocidal prerogative for which there is no justification. For Arendt, human creatures are born into a condition of common cohabitation, marked by a persistent heterogeneity or plurality, and this given plurality is the horizon within which we choose and act. But if we act against this given plurality, we commit a crime against the very condition of human life, understood as a social and political life. Of course, we may not love or savor the connections into which we are born—very few of us actually get to choose our families, for example. But the obligations of cohabitation are not always born from love or even choice; the relations between us, this sociality goes beyond kinship, community, nation, and territory. It takes us, rather, in the direction of the world. Of course, Arendt's well-known love of the world may well name this disposition to secure the conditions of cohabitation, but even then, what do we make of the enormous potential we carry to destroy that upon which we depend for life itself? What kind of creatures are we, or what kind of creatures have we become, who can so easily destroy the conditions of our own living?

I have suggested that interdependency describes a condition of life awkwardly and necessarily shared—the perils and

passions of bodily exposure, of porosity, taking or letting something in, letting something out, existing, as it were, in that threshold and through such passages. When social inequality implies a greater likelihood of dying, then the portal to the future is opened by more radical and substantive social equality, a more mindful form of collective freedom, and a mass mobilization against violence in its explicit and fugitive forms. If we seek to repair the world or, indeed, the planet, then the world must be unshackled from the market economy that traffics and profits from its distribution of life and death. A politics of life would not be the reactionary one, nor would it reduce to a simple vitalism. Rather, it would be a critical reflection on the shared conditions of life for the purposes of realizing a more radical equality and honoring a nonviolent mandate of a global character. Perhaps this is a way to begin the world again, even as that world is already under way, to repair forward, as it were, as a new imaginary emerges from the hauntings of the present, the liminal horizon of this world.