

on more sustaining grounds. This means, in part, hearing beyond what we are able to hear. And it means as well being open to narration that decenters us from our supremacy, in both its right- and left-wing forms. Can we hear that there were precedents for these events and even know that it is urgent to know and learn from these precedents as we seek to stop them from operating in the present, at the same time as we insist that these precedents do not “justify” the recent violent events? If the events are not understandable without that history, that does not mean that the historical understanding furnishes a moral justification for the events themselves. Only then do we reach the disposition to get to the “root” of violence, and begin to offer another vision of the future than that which perpetuates violence in the name of denying it, offering instead names for things that restrain us from thinking and acting radically and well about global options.

## 2

## VIOLENCE, MOURNING, POLITICS

I propose to consider a dimension of political life that has to do with our exposure to violence and our complicity in it, with our vulnerability to loss and the task of mourning that follows, and with finding a basis for community in these conditions. We cannot precisely “argue against” these dimensions of human vulnerability, inasmuch as they function, in effect, as the limits of the arguable, even perhaps as the fecundity of the inarguable. It is not that my thesis survives any argument against it: surely there are various ways of regarding corporeal vulnerability and the task of mourning, and various ways of figuring these conditions within the sphere of politics. But if the opposition is to vulnerability and the task of mourning itself, regardless of its formulation, then it is probably best not to regard this opposition primarily as an “argument.” Indeed, if there were no opposition to this thesis, then there would be no reason

to write this essay. And, if the opposition to this thesis were not consequential, there would be no political reason for reimagining the possibility of community on the basis of vulnerability and loss.

Perhaps, then, it should come as no surprise that I propose to start, and to end, with the question of the human (as if there were any other way for us to start or end!). We start here not because there is a human condition that is universally shared—this is surely not yet the case. The question that preoccupies me in the light of recent global violence is, Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, *What makes for a grievable life?* Despite our differences in location and history, my guess is that it is possible to appeal to a “we,” for all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody. Loss has made a tenuous “we” of us all. And if we have lost, then it follows that we have had, that we have desired and loved, that we have struggled to find the conditions for our desire. We have all lost in recent decades from AIDS, but there are other losses that afflict us, from illness and from global conflict; and there is the fact as well that women and minorities, including sexual minorities, are, as a community, subjected to violence, exposed to its possibility, if not its realization. This means that each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies—as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of a publicity at once assertive and exposed. Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure.

I am not sure I know when mourning is successful, or when one has fully mourned another human being. Freud changed his mind on this subject: he suggested that successful mourning meant being able to exchange one object for another;<sup>1</sup> he later claimed that incorporation, originally associated with melancholia, was essential to the

task of mourning.<sup>2</sup> Freud's early hope that an attachment might be withdrawn and then given anew implied a certain interchangeability of objects as a sign of hopefulness, as if the prospect of entering life anew made use of a kind of promiscuity of libidinal aim.<sup>3</sup> That might be true, but I do not think that successful grieving implies that one has forgotten another person or that something else has come along to take its place, as if full substitutability were something for which we might strive.

Perhaps, rather, one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly for ever. 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. There is losing, as we know, but there is also the transformative effect of loss, and this latter cannot be charted or planned. One can try to choose it, but it may be that this experience of transformation deconstitutes choice at some level. I do not think, for instance, that one can invoke the Protestant ethic when it comes to loss. One cannot say, “Oh, I'll go through loss this way, and that will be the result, and I'll apply myself to the task, and I'll endeavor to achieve the resolution of grief that is before me.” I think one is hit by waves, and that one starts out the day with an aim, a project, a plan, and finds oneself foiled. One finds oneself fallen. One is exhausted but does not know why. Something is larger than one's own deliberate plan, one's own project, one's own knowing and choosing.

Something takes hold of you: where does it come from? What sense does it make? What claims us at such moments, such that we are not the masters of ourselves? To what are we tied? And by what are we seized? Freud reminded us that when we lose someone, we do not always know what it is *in* that person that has been lost.<sup>4</sup> So when one loses, one is also faced with something enigmatic: something is