Do the Dead Matter? Identifying Mourning and Funerals As a Political Act

The rise of the hyper-nationalist conservative right, the refugee crisis, state sponsored torture and prison abuse, wars, climate change, and the continued presence of racism, sexism and queer-phobia have left society with plenty to mourn. Yet there remains a certain uncertainty about the political relevance of mourning. For mainstream (read realist) international relations theorists, the very fact that mourning is inherently linked with emotions makes it an uncomfortable topic to deal with. However, is mourning only about emotions and in consequence, about 'irrationality'? Is mourning not also about political resistance? Is it also not about creating civic identity? Is it not also about understanding human vulnerabilities and making politics less-violent? This paper, in an attempt to answer this series of rhetorical questions, aims to analyze the polyvalent political potential of mourning. By analyzing funerals as sites of mourning, I attempt to argue that funerals play an important role in negotiating, at the individual and systemic level, politics in international relations. I problematize the question of whose deaths can be mourned, by employing the use of two case studies located on two ends of a continuum- one of a body that cannot be grieved (in the case of funerals of HIV positive individuals) and one of a body that must be grieved (in the case of the state funeral of Konstantin Chernenko)- to frame mourning and in consequence, locate funerals as a site of political action.

The Politics of Mourning

Sigmund Freud, in "Mourning and Melancholia", describes mourning as the reaction of the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction like one's country, liberty, an ideal and so on so forth (Freud 1955: 243). Hence, mourning is the response to death and/or loss. Closely attached to mourning is the emotional response to loss in the form of grief. However, mourning must not be seen as being rooted only in grief, instead, it should be seen as evoking multifarious responses. Freud furthers his argument and describes melancholia as "mourning without an end," where there is an adamant refusal of closure (Freud 1955: 245). Thus, the politics of mourning is a creative process mediating a hopeful or hopeless relationship with loss. And this relationship, I argue, performs itself at the site of the funeral. Thus, analyzing funerals helps investigate the nature of mourning but also in a way reinforces the political, cultural and economic dimensions of how mourning is apprehended.

Mourning, also, closely negotiates with the idea of identity and belonging. Identity politics, as Kwame Anthony Appiah argues, manifests itself in the way that "there are conflicts about who's in and who's out" (Appiah 2006: 22). Mourning then helps with creating this distinction between the inside and the outside by identifying the losses of those they see as belonging and dismissing the losses of those who do not belong. Hence, mourning marks a moment where political standing is created, confirmed and contested. Funerals that remain largely invisible are of those who do not *belong* to the polity and hence, do not deserve to be mourned. In a sense, then, death becomes a moment when the social identity of the deceased is finally established- by regulating and engaging with social rites, with those invited to mourn and by reinforcing the formerly held social roles (Durham & Klaits 2002: 777-795) the deceased is marked with identities that shapes the way they would be mourned. Funerals should be seen as not only performing the identity of the individual but also creating an acceptable audience of who is allowed to mourn for the deceased.

As a consequence, funerals, though acting in the sphere of the public, also conjure up a space that is private. Here, I

Do the Dead Matter? Identifying Mourning and Funerals As a Political Act
Written by Varun Vivian Mallik

use 'public' and 'private' in purely Habermasian terms wherein public undergirds a notion of unrestricted-ness and commonality and private necessitated seclusion (Durham & Klaits 2002: 778). By regulating who is allowed to mourn and be mourned, funerals create an exclusive space. However, simultaneously, funerals also become a place where sentiment is shaped through discourse of mutuality (McIvor 2012: 418). Here, we focus our attention to the idea of the public, by reviewing one another's actions and sentiments in terms of what they reveal and conceal about their connections with the deceased and the living, funerals force individuals to confront the ways their sentiments engage with those of others. Hence, funerals must be seen as negotiating with both the public and the private.

It is with keeping in mind these features of mourning that Judith Butler ascribes to mourning the power of disruptive resistance. Butler codes mourning as "a potential eruption of unspeakable losses into public life that would revise the frames by which grief is organized" (McIvor 2012: 411). Established norms regarding certain identities guides which bodies can be grieved and which cannot. While understanding how these norms are created is not the objective of this paper, what becomes important is to see how norms prescribe both *who* can be mourned and *how* the others should be (not) mourned. Norm diffusion is very often attached to the creation of stigmas (Adler-Nissen 2014: 147) that mark certain bodies as being 'not normal' and hence, undesirable. And it is because of this imposition of the stigma that then mourning and conducting funerals for these bodies is frowned upon. So in a way the production of a stigma helps separate 'us' from 'them' and as a consequence, guides the grief attached to the loss of which bodies become prohibited. This leads to the creation of 'disprized mourners' where the bereaved are denied the rites, the honor and the dignity of public mourning and their losses are instead shrouded in silence, shame and disgrace (Woubshet 2015: 4). Butler uses this 'inability to mourn' for certain people to argue that funerals can become a place where (a) one can mobilize rage against the material and discursive powers (McIvor 2012: 415) and that by mourning for those that cannot be grieved (b) one can re-signify the conditions of grievability. Thus, funerals become "aberrant temporalities in the norm" (McIvor 2012: 416) and, I argue, the mourners take up the function of norm entrepreneurs as they attempt to propose a norm that allows for these bodies to be mourned. Thus, in this context, mourning becomes subversive by claiming the prohibited loss.

While the view of subversive mourning dominated the scholarship surrounding mourning, in the later parts of the twentieth century, we see a shift towards mourning being an act of dispossessing identity. Here, by looking at universal precariousness of life and corporeal vulnerability, scholars argue that mourning allows us to debunk the 'us' and 'them' and instead, identify with only suffering, which eventually guides ethico-political dispositions of universal human rights, generosity, humility etc. (McIvor 2012: 419-420). Rather than focusing on who can be mourned or not, shifting our gaze to the loss itself becomes an important act of destabilizing the norms that prohibit certain mourning. Recognizing this, Butler hopes that it will help individuals lead to a "presumptive generosity for those who are marginalized or persecuted" (McIvor 2012: 421). Mourning then helps individuals to be reminded of their inherent human-ness and discern frames by which norm is organized. Hence, mourning, as both subversive and dispossessed, helps destabilizing the order of grief that the norm creates.

Thus, I argue that mourning, in its ability to negotiate with identity and norms, helps manage stigma. This is done by countering the norms of grievability and in a sense, by displaying their unspeakable losses through funerals- they turn those stigmatized bodies to an emblem of assertion, pride and identification. Thus, understanding this question of who can be mourned and who cannot must take into account norms and stigmas attached to certain bodies and identities. Given this, through the following two case studies, I attempt to see how funerals, which are sites of mourning, help negotiate politics.

Can we mourn those afflicted with AIDS?

"Bruno's funeral took place and no mention was made of AIDS. He had died bravely. In the congregation of some 40 people, there were two other gay men beside myself, both of whom had been his lover. They had been far closer to Bruno, yet their grief had to be contained within the confines of manly acceptability. The fact that we could not celebrate Bruno as he had lived- as a magnificently affirmative and life enhancing gay man, was unbearable" (Crimp 1989: 8).

Simon Watney's anecdote helps contextualize what was happening to mourning- rather than trying to preserve

Do the Dead Matter? Identifying Mourning and Funerals As a Political Act

Written by Varun Vivian Mallik

Bruno's world, an attempt was made to silence it owing to the social opprobrium attached to his way of living. The acts of silencing in his funeral must be located in context of the AIDS crisis in the late 1970's and onwards. Deeply ingrained in most societies were norms concerning the appropriateness of 'natural' heterosexual sex and within that, the abnormality and hence, undesirability of homosexuality. The diffusion of such a norm was accompanied with the creation of a stigma that characterized their most basic, life-sustaining desires and pleasures as fraught and legitimized the exclusion, violence and discrimination meted out upon them (Crimp 2003: 198). This stigma is further strengthened when the fact that 'their' sexual encounters might lead to the transmission of the deadly HIV virus came to be *socially* accepted. For instance, a physician remarks, "we used to hate faggots on an emotional basis. Now we have good reason for it" (Woubshet 2015: 25). Thus, in this case, HIV positive gay men became doubly stigmatized and the stigma meant that their perverse bodies could not be included into the list of bodies that can be mourned. The inability to grieve the death of HIV positive gay men is a product of the aforementioned norms and stigmas and in a way, further reinforces the silences and omissions at funeral spaces. It is within this context that I attempt to show how funerals help subvert norms surrounding sexuality and as a consequence, funerals become sites of queer activism and political discourse. It is through funerals, I argue, that the HIV positive body makes an appearance in the public space.

Dagmawi Woubshet argues that AIDS mourning creates "poetics of compounding loss" where the narrative is deliriously obsessed with rage over the serial and repetitive nature of the losses they confront (Woubshet 2015: 3). Here, they mourn not only those who have died, but also mourn the impending ones, including their own deaths- for that was the nature of disease they were dealing with. Given this, Douglas Crimp in "Mourning and Militancy" argues that "the violence of silence and omission we encounter is almost as impossible to endure as the violence of unleashed hatred and outright murder. Because this violence also desecrates the memories of our dead, we rise in anger to vindicate them. For many of us, mourning *becomes* militancy" (Crimp 1989: 9). Crimp's words accurately capture the violent conditions under which early AIDS grief occurred and why that grief took on a political character. By using the words 'we' and 'many of us', mourning became not a private undertaking, but a collective enterprise and a radical way of asserting group agency. In a sense, then, mourning became a way of affirming not only their survival, but also strengthened their political stance of belonging to a community of HIV positive gay men. Understanding these imperatives, we see how death that has been constantly ruled out of the normal picture is drawn attention to.

What is so evocative and provocative about the AIDS funeral was the way it reanimated the body of the dead to concretize deaths that the public refused to see. For instance, the funeral procession of Tim Bailey to the White House was met by scores of activist-mourners who used the occasion of the funeral to demand sexual rights. However, there also were armed uniformed police who attempted to keep the corpse of 'a person with AIDS' from appearing in public (Woubshet 2015: 2-4). The fear that the body would be brought out led to the police to attack and tear up the group leading to the arrest of most mourners. The use of a body marked with AIDS helped bring into the consciousness, the otherwise silenced, fatality and commonality of AIDS. This meant that the AIDS funerals turned into a focusing event that allowed the 'audience of normals' (heterosexual men) to pay attention to a loss that would 'normally' not be grieved. By making the body the linchpin of a political demonstration, AIDS funerals materialized what a hateful public refused to see. In a way, by attributing the object of the stigmatization- the body, a powerful political afterlife, the mourners were able to react to the dominant stigma. For instance, the first political funeral conducted by ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) involved throwing the cremated ashes of the dead onto the grounds of America's most politically sacred house- the White House. By turning the seat of the government into a graveyard, the funeral necessitated a way of enfranchising the dead and mitigating the "chilling threat of erasure" (Woubshet 2015: 14). Furthermore, there were scores of private funerals that became political when friends rose up and interrupted the service to demand recognition of the deceased sexuality, the cause of death and the deceased's queer survivors, facts that were often suppressed by the family (Woubshet 2015: 14). Judith Butler argues that "the public sphere is constituted in part by what can appear, and the regulation of the sphere of appearance is one way of establishing what will count as reality, and what will not" (in Eng & Kazanjian 2003: 16). By carrying out funerals in the streets, or by reclaiming the dead at private burials, mourners deregulated the sphere of appearance that had previously made the 'AIDS dead' invisible. Thus, the mourners were able to engender the public in which queer deaths counted as deaths and queer lives were marked as lives.

To mourn deaths that are publicly marked ungrievable, as disprized mourners do, takes enormous political will and

Do the Dead Matter? Identifying Mourning and Funerals As a Political Act
Written by Varun Vivian Mallik

imagination. Through the aforementioned examples we see how, through funerals, individuals used forms of mourning and commemorating that allowed them to counter-stigmatize the stigma surrounding gayness and AIDS. Rather than seeing the disease as a marker of disgrace, the mourners embody AIDS with a fierce agency, refusing to live in silence and shame and to let their dead go ungrieved. The idea of AIDS, then, takes a new meaning and is instead projected as a badge of honor. In counter-stigmatizing, these AIDS funerals then not only become aberrations in the norms surrounding sexuality but also, actively perform to challenge and change these norms. But it is also important to note that the funerals were not just sites of queer activism. For the LGBTQI+ community, along with the loss of particular forms of sexual contact and sexual culture, AIDS was also a specter of death (Woubshet 2015: 19). It was also about losing their friends, their partners, their family. And it is because putatively 'normal' practices of mourning are foreclosed for gay men, it is because they are faced with the prospects of their own death and it is because gay identities are erased at funerals organized by families that challenging the norms and stigma around sexuality become so important for the gay community. Given this, these funerals, in a way, protest the foreclosures that make certain lives unlivable and certain losses unmournable. Therefore, I argue that AIDS funerals (a) help reinforce one's belonging to the queer community, (b) help subvert the norm and counter the stigma attached to AIDS and homosexuality and (c) become the site of queer activism and political discourse.

Diplomacy after Death?

On March 10, 1985, Konstantin Chernenko, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, passed away after a series of prolonged illness. He was the third leader of the USSR to have died within the last two years (Schmemann 1985). Following his death, an immediate proclamation announced Mikhail Gorbachev as his successor. Interestingly, most Soviet national dailies, first announced the name of the new premier and only in the following pages that the news of the death and eulogies for the late General Secretary were published (Schmemann 1985). Chernenko's death was immediately followed with the creation of a planning commission that would overlook the organization of the state funeral and set out to invite delegations from at least 80 countries. Using Chernenko's funeral, I attempt to show how state funerals become a space where diplomacy takes place.

Summitry has become an established part of political interactions of states in the twentieth century. Marked by 'pre-summits', 'base camp' meetings, summits are carefully and thoroughly planned for they are "ceremonial occasions of exceptional national importance" (Dunn 1996: 4). Through the 1960's, funerals became the most important of these ceremonial occasions. The growth in funeral diplomacy can be attributed to (a) the improvement in speed, comfort and safety of air travel, (b) the advance in embalmment and refrigeration technologies and (c) the secularization of diplomacy that reduces the taboo of conducting business on such somber occasions (Dunn 1996: 7). Given this, G. R. Berridge coins the term 'funerary summits' wherein the funeral of major political leaders, died either in office or in retirement, becomes an occasion of diplomatic business (Berridge 1996: 107). Provided that there were incentives for diplomacy, the atmosphere in which the funeral is conducted does not make much difference. For instance, there was a series of meetings that took place even in the supercharged climate of the funeral of President J F Kennedy, a young leader cut down by an assassin (Berridge 1996: 109). While this study is not an attempt to question the morality of conducting business at funerals, instead, I attempt to see how the working funeral becomes an institution of the world diplomatic system.

Funerals of incumbent or retired leaders that coincide roughly with a transfer of power are usually the most valuable for diplomacy, for they provide the visiting dignitaries with probably their first opportunity to meet the new government. And in the case of Soviet Union- a major power, aid donor and key ally, this was important as it became an occasion to establish a personal rapport with the new leadership and seek reassurance that there will be no change in policy to their disadvantage. Chernenko's funeral became an occasion where Margaret Thatcher, the then Prime Minister of the United Kingdom could have a private conversation with Mikhail Gorbachev (Berridge 1996: 111-112). Through her meetings on the day after the funeral, she clearly advanced the idea of Britain having a cordial relationship with the Soviet Union. Thatcher's presence at the funeral is interesting, for she was a rival, if not outright enemy, of the politically bereaved. According to her memoir, Thatcher writes that she hoped to use the occasion of the funeral to explore the possibility of a rapprochement with the host (Berridge 1996: 112). This is of special significance, for then funerals signal a political truce where state leaders, keeping their suspicions regarding the other leaders aside, met and attempted to negotiate political strife. Hence, Chernenko's funeral became an occasion of a

Do the Dead Matter? Identifying Mourning and Funerals As a Political Act
Written by Varun Vivian Mallik

diplomacy of reconciliation. And funerals are then crucial for they allow for the possibility of discussions of this kind without arousing excessive public expectations.

Moreover, state funerals also provide for a good opportunity for various side meetings between the 'mourners'. Scholars have argued how Chernenko's funeral was an important occasion for bilateral diplomacy. Interestingly, it was at his funeral that the two leaders of divided Germany, West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and East German leader Erich Honecker, conducted fruitful meetings for the first time (Berridge 1996: 113). These meetings were, coincidentally, a successor of their almost-reconciliatory meeting during Yuri Andropov's funeral. It is widely acknowledged that these encounters spearheaded the improvement of relations between the two countries, which eventually helped pave the way for reunification in 1991. Chernenko's funeral was also the scene of a private meeting between Thatcher and President Samora Machel of Mozambique, a country which was soon to become the latest recruit to the British Commonwealth (Berridge 1996: 113). Given this, the funeral also provides for great opportunities for diplomatic signaling. These opportunities existed for both the bereaved and the mourners, though as hosts, the former had more scope for subtlety. The invitation and the decision to attend the formal wake was the country's first step at negotiating the scope of signaling. At the Soviet funeral, the new leaders signaled their desires to improve relations with particular states by giving them manifestly warm welcomes in the Kremlin and the earliest and longest private audiences. The new Soviet leaders' 85-minute meeting with the US Vice President Bush and Secretary of State Shultz must then be seen in this context (Schmemann 1985). Mikhail Gorbachev, in an attempt to improve his relationship with China and India, whisked Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Vice Premier Li Peng's delegation ahead in line to shake Gorbachev's hand at the reception at St. George's Hall (Berridge 1996: 115). He also signaled his goodwill towards Western European states by devoting more attention to them at bilateral conversations than to the Soviet Union's on allies.

Thus, we see that Chernenko's funeral becomes an important occasion of conducting diplomacy. This study shows how funerals, as a site of rapprochement, bilateral diplomacy and diplomatic signaling, become a crucial institution in the world diplomatic system. Rather than seeing funerals as just grounds for mourning, it becomes important to also see them as occasions where political discourse can be negotiated. Hence, I argue that funerals become public ceremonies that offer more of a convenience for the living than a tribute to the dead.

Conclusion

It is important to move away from mainstream international relation theory's conception of mourning as irrational, and rather focus on mourning and its performance through funerals as creating hopeful or hopeless political relations and identities. The dead, through mourning and funerals, become a powerful source of negotiating norms, identity and politics. A significant line of enquiry in my paper is the question of the spectrum of grievability and consequently, the question of *who* can be mourned and *how* can they be mourned. Identifying the theoretical fallacy that funerals are just rooted in the emotional response of grief, I show how funerals become occasions of mourning as political action. This then allows us to imagine diplomacy and political discourse from non-traditional lenses. While this paper specifically focuses on the expression of mourning performed through funerals, it becomes imperative for scholars to also look at mourning, in spaces like war memorials, mass demonstrations or commemorative events, and its effect on the actor's negotiation potential. At the dawn of the twentieth century, as mourning remains, it urges us to conceive of itself as a mode of political speech that remains relevant for the purpose of diplomacy and international relations.

References

Amitav Acharya. "How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism," *International Organization,* vol. 58, 2004, pp.239–275.

Dagwami Woubshet. *The Calendar of Loss: Race, Sexuality, and Mourning in the Early Era of AIDS* , Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015.

David H Dunn. "What is Summitry." Diplomacy at The Highest Level: the Evolution of International Summitry, edited

Do the Dead Matter? Identifying Mourning and Funerals As a Political Act
Written by Varun Vivian Mallik

by David H Dunn. Great Britain: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1996, see. 3-23

David L. Eng & David Kazanjian. "Introduction: Mourning Remains" edited by David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, *Loss: The Politics of Mourning,* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, pp. 1-28.

David W. McIvor. "Bringing Ourselves to Grief: Judith Butler and the Politics of Mourning," *Political Theory*, vol. 40, no. 4, 2012, pp. 409-436.

Deborah Durham & Frederick Klaits. "Funerals and the Public Space of Sentiment in Botswana,"*Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 28, no. 4, 2002, pp. 777-795.

Douglas Crimp. "Mourning and Melancholia" edited by David L. Eng and David Kazanjian,*Loss: The Politics of Mourning,* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, pp. 188-202,

Douglas Crimp. "Mourning and Militancy," *October,* vol. 51, 1989, pp. 3-18.

G.R. Berridge. "Funeral Summits." Diplomacy at The Highest Level: the Evolution of International Summitry, edited by David H Dunn. Great Britain: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1996, see. 106-118.

Kwame Anthony Appiah. "The Politics of Identity," *Daedalu*s, vol. 135, no. 4, 2006, pp. 15-22.

Rebecca Adler-Nissen. "Stigma Management in International Relations: Transgressive Identities, Norms, and Order in International Society," *International Organization*, vol. 68, no.1, 2014, pp 143 – 176.

Serge Schmemann. "Chernenko Buried in Red Square to the Funeral Strains of Chopin." *The New York Times*, March 14, 1985, Last Accessed 8 May, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/1985/03/14/world/chernenko-buried-in-red-square-to-the-funeral-strains-of-chopin.html.

Sigmund Freud. "Mourning and Melancholia," from *Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume XIV, (1914-1916).* London: The Hogarth Press, 1955.

Written by: Varun Vivian Mallik
Written at: Ashoka University
Written for: Ananya Sharma
Date written: May 2019