

On Postcolonial Suffering: George Floyd and the Scene of Contamination

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If, as Eric J. Cassell suggests in *The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine*, “Suffering occurs when an impending destruction of the person is perceived; [and] continues until the threat of disintegration has passed or until the integrity of the person can be restored in some manner,” and that suffering is due to both emotional and physical conditions, then there has been much suffering concentrated into the year that was 2020.¹ All definitions of suffering have to find a way of aligning two central vectors: the Self as category has to be defined in all its variegated possibilities and contradictory levels and then correlated to the category of World. But often Self and World are not easily separable even for heuristic purposes given the boundaries of one overlap with the other and the two are often completely co-constitutive. Although the Self may disintegrate in direct response to reversals of fortune, it may also, properly speaking, suffer an experience of painful biographical discontinuity simply at losing the capacity to produce a coherent account of the world to itself and to others.² This sense of incoherence is central to the conditions that were experienced under colonialism and its aftermath in many parts of the world, where the instruments for making meaning both communally and individually were often seen to have been compromised by the impositions of colonial history. When Frantz Fanon writes in *Black Skin, White Masks* that under the racial economy of colonialism he experiences a disruption of his bodily schema and asserts that “in one sense, if I were asked for a definition of myself, I would say that I am

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1 Eric J. Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 32. Cassell draws for his definition of suffering from both antiquity and more modern conceptions. See also the biographical details pertaining to Cicero’s grieving response to the loss of his daughter Tullia in childbirth and his subsequent Stoic meditation on the concept of grief in his *Tusculan Disputations*, where he parses suffering in a similar way to Cassell. See *Cicero on the Emotions: Tusculan Disputations 3 and 4*, trans. Margaret Graver (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 73–128.

2 On the complications of self-accounting from different philosophical perspectives, see Judith Butler, *Giving and Account of Oneself*, (New York: Fordham, 2005); Daniel Dennett, *The Intentional Stance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989); Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, (London: Routledge, 2000); and Kwame Gyekye, *Unexamined Life: Philosophy and the African Experience*, (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1988).

one who waits; I investigate my surroundings, I interpret everything in terms of what I discover, I become sensitive,” he is also integrating a definition of suffering into the psycho-existential drama that is inherent to Black life.³

When taken in its everyday sense of “terribly sad,” tragedy is universal. As Terry Eagleton puts it in his recent book on tragedy, “Grieving over the death of a child, a mining disaster or the gradual disintegration of a human mind is not confined to any particular culture.”⁴ It is interesting to note, however, that Eagleton conflates individual and collective suffering (death of a child, mining disaster, fraying sanity) with the response of those who express some form of grief in bearing witness to that suffering. While death and catastrophe are not essential to literary tragedy (think of Aeschylus’s *Eumenides*, Sophocles’s *Philoctetes*, or even Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*), images of suffering are inescapable part of the tradition. The dyadic relationship between suffering and the responses to it are endemic to definitions of tragedy and can be traced as far back as Aristotle’s *Poetics*. However, the paucity of references to literature from the postcolonial world in Eagleton’s *Tragedy* as well as in *Sweet Violence*, which was published in 2005, is hard to explain.⁵ South African Athol Fugard had toured the United Kingdom and Europe with *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*, *The Island*, and *Master Harold and the Boys* regularly from the early 1970s, while Chilean Ariel Dorfman’s *Death and the Maiden* premiered to much acclaim at London’s Royal Court Theatre in 1991. Gabriel García Márquez won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982, with Soyinka following in 1986, Naguib Mahfouz in 1988, Nadine Gordimer in 1991, Derek Walcott in 1992, Toni Morrison in 1993, V. S. Naipaul in 2001 and J. M. Coetzee in 2003. And many of their works provide diverse examples of the relationship between sacrifice and tragedy, which is at the core of Eagleton’s argument, meaning that by the time of *Sweet Violence* postcolonial writing should have been impossible to ignore in any serious work on the subject. Eagleton discusses Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* but does not mention Achebe’s well-known 1977 critique of Conrad, never mind the classic *Things Fall Apart*, which was first published in 1958.⁶ Given the fact that in both the more expansive *Sweet Violence* and in the new offering there are almost no references to any of the substantial tragic examples to be found in postcolonial writing, one wonders whether the theorizing on tragedy in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has not been somewhat impoverished from adopting a culturally limited set of exemplars. This is especially important if, with George Steiner, Raymond Williams, and Eagleton himself along with many other tragic commentators, we strive to claim that literary tragedy possesses universal significance and that joining the two halves of the representation of suffering and our responses to it may help to illuminate something of our continuing struggles to shape humanistic values at the present time.

3 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove, 1967), 120.

4 Terry Eagleton, *Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 1.

5 Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

6 Chinua Achebe, “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*,” *Massachusetts Review* 18.4 (1977): 782–94. The essay was reprinted in *Heart of Darkness: An Authoritative Text, Background Sources and Criticism*, 3rd ed., ed. Robert Kimbrough (London: W. W. Norton, 1988) but subsequently reprised in various anthologies and collections.

Between them the articles in this special issue expand the purview of tragic suffering by giving us ample indices to the question of suffering in the postcolonial world. Whether with the social typology that denominates some persons as citizens, subjects, or terrorists, as we find in Ankhi Mukherjee's reflections on Kamila Shamsie's reinterpretation of *Antigone* in *Home Fire*; or in the discourse of fraying self-presentation in the decolonial writings of the Zimbabwean Samkange as discussed by Jeanne-Marie Jackson; or in the literature of post-revolutionary disappointment and torpor in Irish modernism that Ronan MacDonald reads through the discourse of philosophical cynicism; or in the recurring news and literary representations of the deaths of indigent Africans as they attempt to cross the Mediterranean into Europe as examined by John Kerrigan, everywhere we find indices of suffering in the postcolonial world worthy of our sustained empathy and attention. But the feeling of disintegration and thus of suffering has proliferated with terrible intimacy for many people because of the events that have unfolded in 2020. Terrible conditions have been magnified as though out of a nightmarish dystopian movie and projected close to our own existence by the COVID pandemic, making the year a true Year of the Plague if ever there was one, and whose dastardly effects have impacted Black and ethnic minority communities in the United States and Europe more profoundly than it has other groups. The inordinate impact on such communities is due to what the American Centers for Disease Control (CDC) simply describes on its website as the "long-standing systemic health and social inequities" that "have put many people from racial and ethnic minority groups at increased risk of getting sick and dying from COVID-19."⁷ To the constraints imposed on our freedom of movement and the severance of in-person interactions brought on by the pandemic was added the incompetence of political regimes and the news of death and rumors of death that were circulated relentlessly from different parts of the world. The many graphs, tables, and figures that suddenly populated our newsfeeds telling us about rising caseloads and the difficulties of contact tracing, the shortage of hospital beds and the poor distribution of test kits, and the many scenes of mass burials in New York City, Ballari (India), Bolivia, and other places were the objective correlatives of the unprecedented uncertainty that the world community faced. The metaphor of living under siege was commonplace in 2020, and by implication also the idea that the virus represented a direct assault on entire societies, national economies, and on the essential fabric of collective and individual freedoms everywhere. Sometimes command economies such as China and Singapore have instrumentalized the pandemic to impose further surveillance and restrictions on their citizens, while in Western countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States the restrictions were the products of poor planning on the part of their governments and the obstinate noncompliance of large swathes of their populations. Democracy was put under pressure in many places as the balance between individual rights and governmental biopolitical interventions into the very domain of privacy became at once issues for bitter debate and sometimes violent disagreement, as in Trump's America, or simply of weary and frustrated interrogation, as in Italy.

7 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Health Equity Considerations and Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups" (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/race-ethnicity.html>).

Many also saw COVID and the unprecedented speed of its spread as a wake-up call for the world to confront the continuing man-made threats to our natural environment and the related effects on the most vulnerable. As Alan Badiou notes in his think-piece on the matter: “The discipline of those who can obey the imperative ‘stay home’ must also find and propose means for those who have barely any ‘home’ or none at all so that they may nevertheless find a secure shelter.”⁸ For Manya Lempert, also writing in this special issue, the thematic of environmental tragedy provides an opportunity to closely examine what she calls “climate Cassandras,” the many unheeded or misread warnings from women and marginalized figures about the indifference to environmental degradation and the negative outcomes on well-being that come from that throughout the history of tragedy. But, even more poignantly, 2020 also brought us footage of the killing of George Floyd. This terrible event that took place in Minnesota on May 25th focused intense attention once again on the relationship between race, police violence, and the state in America. To be sure, this was not the first time that images of Black deaths at the hands of the police had been projected onto our screens or appeared in our newspapers and newsfeeds. Before George Floyd there was Ahmaud Arbery, and before him Breonna Taylor, and before her Alatianna Jefferson, Aura Roser, Eric Garner, Philando Castille, Michael Brown, and the many many others who have expired without comment or commemoration at the hands of the police.⁹ But this time the moving image we were invited to view seemed different. The visceral outpourings of grief and reaffirmation that Black lives do matter that rang out from Minnesota to Accra, from London to Tokyo, and from Addis Ababa to Vancouver and throughout various other parts of the world registered the scale of the difference from other cases of police killings of Black folk and ethnic minorities before George Floyd.¹⁰ The reactions cannot be accounted for simply by the fact that his killing occurred during imposed lockdowns and coincided with the deep desperation that most people struggled with at the time.

Given all what has just been noted about 2020, there seems to be no better time than now for resorting to the idioms of tragedy to frame the feelings of suffering and disintegration that extend from the pages of literature to the world around us. In opening his piece on “Migrant Tragedy” in this special issue, John Kerrigan suggests that Greek tragedy gives us the “preshocks of the suffering of migrants from Afghanistan, Syria, East Africa, and other places in trouble.” But how does the genealogy of tragedy from the Greeks through Shakespeare and to our own times allow us to understand the specific case of postcolonial suffering, and how might such a genealogy also help illuminate the

8 Alain Badiou, “On the Pandemic Situation,” Verso blog, March 23, 2020 (<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4608-on-the-epidemic-situation>).

9 For a list of twenty names of African Americans killed by police going back to 2014, see <https://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/2020/know-their-names/index.html>. This list is of course only selective and would be substantially longer if it went back to the start of the century. And then there are similar cases reported in the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, and other places going back over a similar timeframe.

10 For one out of the many reports that were published on the global responses to Floyd’s death, see Javier C. Hernandez and Benjamin Mueller, “Global Anger Grows over George Floyd’s Death and Becomes an Anti-Trump Cudgel,” *New York Times*, June 1, 2020 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/01/world/asia/george-floyd-protest-global.html>).

most pressing questions regarding suffering in general? As we noted earlier, limiting our purview exclusively to Western examples impoverishes the very conception of tragedy. For a provisional answer to these various questions, I would like to place at the foreground for discussion certain aspects of tragic theory regarding tragic form, witness-bearing communities, and the sense of contamination that come from being placed before scenes of intense suffering.¹¹ And to bring together the broken halves of the representation of suffering and the responses to that representation I want to think through the Akan concept of *musuo* in relation to Aristotle's notion of catharsis. In our highly mediatized age- scenes such as those of Floyd's killing are also the product of highly saturated images that call up other images in an almost endless chain of inference, with the eight-minute and forty-six-second footage of his death providing a chilling example of both the possibilities and weaknesses of any simple genealogies of tragedy we might turn to. For the shock of the familiar that is produced by such images serves to challenge the idea of tragedy as exclusively entailed in formal literary structures. This resonates with Raymond Williams's position in *Modern Tragedy*, which has made a great impression on debates about tragedy and everyday life.¹² Although Williams's influential book was mainly focused on the relationship between the history of tragedy and the loss of meaning that was being exposed in a ravaged postwar Europe, for my part there is something raw and visceral about some media images available to us that transcends the constraints of tragic form to draw us into the very heart of suffering. And this is what I propose to read contrapuntally.

In the poem "Musée des Beaux Arts," what the Old Masters understood of suffering is depicted by Auden as taking place on at least two different levels of signification. First is inside of the paintings themselves, such as that of the crucifixion, where, while "the dreadful martyrdom must run its course/Anyhow in a corner" dogs "go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse/Scratches its innocent behind on a tree." The juxtaposition in the painting is between a momentous event—for Christians the very possibility of salvation is begat from the death of the Son of God himself—that is set against the unreflexive relief of the natural burdens and itches of animal life which seems completely impervious to the event unfolding in the same moment. The coincidence of the sacred and the profane in the various paintings also implies the possibly mutual blindness of one domain to the other, or, to put it another way, the assimilation of what is judged to be of universal significance into diametrically opposed and somewhat incompatible structures of feeling. Auden's poetic persona discerns this set of contradictions not once, but at three different times during the course of the poem, the third and last being in relation to the painting of Brueghel's Icarus in the second stanza. Brueghel's Icarus is also about how art sublimates the horror and suffering of a young death, "a boy

11 For a more comprehensive account relating literary tragedy to postcolonialism, see Ato Quayson, *Tragedy and Postcolonial Literature*, already cited, in addition to the various episodes on tragedy from the Greeks, to Shakespeare and Joseph Conrad, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Toni Morrison, Tayeb Salih, J.M. Coetzee, Arundhati Roy, Tsitsi Dangarembga, and various on the YouTube channel Critic.Reading. Writing with Ato Quayson (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjoidh_R_bJCnXyKBkypP_g).

12 Raymond, Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, ed. Pamela McCallum, new ed. (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2006).

falling out of the sky,” in myth or cautionary tale. Just like the quotidian life surrounding this extraordinary event within the painting, we typically do not shed tears for Icarus’s overreaching, treating it as a case study for manic ambition leading to an inescapable fall instead. In all three paintings representation mediates and edifies suffering by evacuating the scene of suffering from the pain inherent to it. Thus, myth and legend as encapsulated in painting tends to inoculate us from the pain of the suffering being represented, and this contrasts sharply with the representation of suffering in tragic theater, where the embodied dimension of suffering in the person of the living actor also serves to foreground the pain of it in a way that renders it unmediated, or at least, that has to be acknowledged. At any rate, in Auden’s poem we are not shown what feelings of shock, or horror, or simply of amazement or even disgust that the poetic persona might be experiencing as he views the paintings. What we get is a sense of quiet meditation that is amply buttressed by the formal devices of the poem, with the uneven run-on lines and the concomitant leakage of meanings from segment to segment in the first stanza mimicking the perambulatory process of browsing through an art gallery, while the second stanza encapsulates the still pause before a specific painting for more focused attention. But it is the processes of gentle internal monologue that dominate the flow and undertow of the entire poem. The poem then illustrates a strict perspectival modulation that is at once thoroughly infused with the knowledge of European art history and yet also emotionally impervious to the scale of suffering depicted within the paintings themselves. In other words, if there is any perturbation of spirit in the poem, it is contained within the purview of reflection rather than in that of strong affective responses that might have tipped over into the Aristotelian pity and fear that necessitates catharsis. In “Musée des Beaux Arts,” there is none of the open-mouthed horror of the kind depicted for example in Edvard Munch’s “The Scream” (originally titled “The Scream of Nature”). Typically interpreted as encapsulating the anxiety of the human condition, we might shift our focus to imagine the figure in Munch’s painting watching with us the footage of George Floyd’s killing and focalizing his scream as the reaction to a specific social disorder now made palpably visible on screen. The immediate reaction of many people on first seeing the video footage was to hold their heads in their hands, or to cover or pass their hands over their eyes, and, almost without exception, to open their mouths in full-blown horror at what they were seeing. Some people also screamed in pure shock or sprang back spontaneously from where they were sitting to shake their heads in utter disbelief. These reactions, I want to suggest, are the visceral responses to the horror and contamination that saturated the scene of Floyd’s killing. Munch’s “The Scream” seems entirely appropriate in this respect. The footage drew us together as a community to bear witness to the scene of injustice and death, and by this also intensified our feelings of shock and horror in the face of what was being enacted before us.

Any notion of the horror and contamination that may be found at the scene of suffering has to be read through a prism that establishes a necessary relationship between the suffering individual and a witness-bearing community. Aristotle’s insistence on catharsis as the outcome of the pity and fear that inhere in the tragic action was originally suggested as a safety valve for the aroused emotions. Aristotelian catharsis is ultimately a form of relief or the restoration of equilibrium. But sometimes the sense of horror and contamination at the scene of suffering is not to be procured without some active effort

on the part of the viewer-witness, something that Bertolt Brecht and Antonio Boal amply tried to demonstrate in their theater. Among the Akan, however, the idea of contamination is understood as automatically entailed in the participant-observation status of the witness-bearing community. This is what they understand by the concept of *musuo*. Among them the term *musuo* is both singular and plural and is used to designate a series of infractions that pertain to “harms to the soul” that also encompass harms to the community. The philosopher Kwame Gyekye has defined *musuo* as “extraordinary moral evils” akin to social taboos but lists under its general rubric several transgressions that have a socially oriented character in addition to producing harmful effects on the individual.¹³ While *musuo* pertain to the culpable actions of an individual, that is to say, that they are not free from taint, the effect of certain *musuo* is thought to call for expiation by the entire community. Because of the perceived poisoning of the sources of generally held beliefs, *musuo* also signify an attenuation of the shared sense of collective values that may then come to impact upon the community in general. (“One finger dipped in palm oil,” say the Akan, “can end up soiling all the other fingers of the hand”). Like taboos (murder, appropriating sacrifices for the gods), the Akan also consider such harms to the soul as sometimes requiring acknowledgment and propitiation as a means of repairing the disrupted ties of *philia*, familial and friendly both for the psychic adjustment of the individual and so that the entire community of *philia* undergoes a form of ritual restoration. The duality encoded in the Akan concept also means that individual tragic choices are always judged to have an automatic social or communal ramification and that although it is the individual that may experience the reversal of the capacity to act or to make ethically salient choices, the community is not entirely excluded from the existential malaise or threat brought on by the *musuo*. This fusion of individual culpability with collective existential malaise is appealing because it restores an idea of collective responsibility that is often foreclosed by the exclusive Western focus on individual agency in most theories of the tragic. It is not merely the contrasts between the two categories of self and society that *musuo* helps us to visualize, but also the fluid and interacting contours of the two.

We may also want to translate the Akan *musuo*, and other concepts like it from diverse religions and cultures, as extending the purview of Aristotelian catharsis to encompass the requirements of real-world communal restoration, especially in the face of extreme injustice as was seen in the killing of George Floyd. This translation is important because it would be a mistake to assume that a thoroughly secular world is not impinged by metaphysical verities, especially on the encounter with a major sense of social disjuncture. This is not to argue for a collapse of the secular domain into that of the religious or spiritual, but to suggest that often the extreme disruption of social order often invokes feelings of dissolution that are not merely individual but also communal and that at such times the secular idioms require additional strengthening and augmentation even from the religious and spiritual domain.¹⁴

13 Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 131–33.

14 For a fuller discussion of *musuo* and its possible implications for tragic theory, see Ato Quayson, *Tragedy and Postcolonial Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 10–14.

Although Aristotle proffered pity and fear and their relationship to catharsis as being the effect of the formal structuring of tragedy upon the audience, it has to be noted that the shock and horror of actually bearing witness to the extreme emotional anguish of the hero on seeing his or her life stripped bare of meaning was frequently attested to by the Greek chorus itself in terms as equally charged as what might be interpreted through the discourse of Akan *musuo*. Witness for example the words of the chorus in Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* when Oedipus emerges from Jocasta's chamber with blood streaming from his eyes:

This is a terrible sight for men to see!
 I never found a worse!
 Poor wretch, what madness came upon you!
 What evil spirit leaped upon your life
 to your ill-luck—a leap beyond man's strength!
 Indeed I pity you, but cannot
 look at you, though there's much I want to ask
 and much to earn and much to see
 I shudder at the sight of you.¹⁵

What invokes pity from the chorus hovers between their sense of bearing witness to a perceived madness (and by implication a disintegration of the protagonist's self) and the work of a disquieting ill-luck (named here as an evil but actually a surrogate for determinism). What is of interest, however, are not these perfectly predictable ideas about the causes of Oedipus's terrible reversal of fortune, but rather that in this particular exposure the chorus "cannot look" and "shudder at the sight of you." The almost uncontrollable impulse of turning away from the scene of suffering and the open-mouthed horror that is implied here by the chorus clearly distinguishes them both from the scenes depicted within the Old Masters (indifference and obliviousness), and also, in the poetic persona's own intellectual responses to the paintings in Auden's poem. As we see with respect to his clansmen's responses to Okonkwo's killing of the messenger at the end of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Iyaloja's vociferous reaction to Elesin Oba's failure in undertaking the ritual suicide in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, and Baby Suggs's anguished response to Sethe's cutting of her daughter's throat in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the response to the scene of tragic choice and its concomitant reversal of fortunes can also be one of epistemological crisis and great pain for the witness-bearing individual or community. Sethe's killing of Beloved is a *musuo* that breaks Baby Suggs's big heart and makes her faith collapse completely. The infanticide acts like a *musuo* because it threatens in its very decisiveness to undo all the bounds of sociality that have helped to shape the newly freed Black community of

15 David Green and Richard Lattimore, *Oedipus the King, Greek Tragedies*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991), lines 1298–1306. Other such reactions can be gleaned from the Argive chorus's description of Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, and also, in a more individual register, in Neoptolemus's response to Philoctetes's uncontrollable screams of pain in Sophocles's *Philoctetes*. In each instance, the bearing of witness to either the enactment of consequential tragic choice or to the unbearable pain of another triggers feelings of potential disintegration in the observers themselves.

Cincinnati, and for Baby Suggs discombobulates her entire world. “What I have to do,” she tells Stamp Paid, as he tries to encourage her to go back to the Clearing, “is get in my bed and lay down. I want to fix on something harmless in this world.” The conversation continues:

“What world you talking about? Ain’t nothing harmless down here.”

“Yes it is. Blue. That don’t hurt nobody. Yellow neither.”

“You getting in bed to think about yellow?”

“I likes yellow.”

“Then what? When you get through with blue and yellow, then what?”

“Can’t say. It’s something can’t be planned.”¹⁶

For someone whose entire life has been spent healing others and giving of her mighty heart, this is an excruciating recognition. But the point is that for Baby Suggs neither judgment nor *catharsis* is available to her; she recognizes that Sethe’s act is both necessary and repugnant, both fated and willed, and a gesture of freedom and its destruction at one and the same time.

Even though the examples from Auden, Sophocles, and indeed of the Akan *musuo* we have turned to derive from different aesthetic and cultural registers, there are principles that we can extrapolate from them for thinking about the horror and contamination that was encapsulated in the killing of George Floyd. To start with, as many people noted after the incident, if Floyd was culpable of anything at all it was simply for being Black. The complete banality of the original circumstances (a report of him using a \$20 bill to buy food at a nearby store) should not have led to his demise. He was no “Scarface” Al Capone returning fire at police coming to arrest him, or indeed someone resisting arrest or anything even close. A similar observation can be made about the banality of the circumstances surrounding various other deaths of Black people at the hands of the police (jogging, eating ice cream on a couch in front of the television, at a routine traffic stop, etc.). It is the banality of these circumstances that makes us see that what they were culpable for is something that transcends the circumstances of the encounter with the police itself, namely, their race.

Omar Lizardo has argued with reference to Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus that from a cognitive sociological perspective there is evidence of both hard and soft embodiment of culture that shows that the body acts as a “living memory pad” and “the substrate of the cognitive unconscious where culture is embodied in a particularly durable way.” He suggests that “there is a systematic nonarbitrary link between the meaning (encoded in ‘analog’ or ‘iconic’ form) in bodily posture and the abstract high-level meaning (or emotional quality) elicited by that posture.”¹⁷ What Lizardo illustrates with the ample support of cognitive linguists such as Lakoff and Johnson and Glenberg and Robertson is that our bodily postures encode responses to frames of socio-cultural signification that themselves imply social hierarchies and sundry forms of acquiescence

¹⁶ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Random House, 2004), 179.

¹⁷ Omar Lizardo, “Pierre Bourdieu as Cognitive Sociologist,” *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Sociologist*, eds. Wayne H. Brekhus and Gabe Ignatow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 70–71.

or rebellion against these hierarchies.¹⁸ The footage of George Floyd's death reveals the unsettling distribution of power that is automatically encoded in embodied postures and attendant gestures. First there is the disconcerting image of a white uniformed police officer with his knee firmly planted on the neck of a prostrate Black man. The police officer puts his hand casually in his own left trouser pocket, as if in a semblance of everyday insouciance, like when asking about the neighbor's missing cat over their shared fence. The utterly banal gesture of hand in pocket takes its force from the overall totality of the scene because, as in Auden's poem, it is a gesture utterly out of place in the face of the dying of the man on whose neck he has placed his knee. To this vertical/horizontal orientation to the image that invokes an entire history of the white oppression of Black and ethnic people, we also have to add the presence of the police car to the left foreground of the frame and behind which lies the prostrate Floyd with the policeman's knee firmly on his neck. The police car is at once the symbol of the state's security apparatus but also, as an automobile, the symbol of modernity and progress. But its juxtaposition to the scene of injustice and death means that the car has been corralled into a site of atavistic violence that has been recoded in the idiom of law and order to disguise deep injustice. The policeman (policemen, given there are four of them in the frame) and their car also define a possible mode of interpellation that works differently from what Althusser describes in his essay on "Ideological State Apparatuses."¹⁹ For in Althusser's account, the policeman that hails the citizen is not known in advance to be unjust. The policeman in the video footage may also not be known to have been unjust before he placed his knee on the neck of the prostrate Floyd, but once he does that the action invokes all the other images of police violence against Black and ethnic minorities that have been available in movies, newspapers, and social media platforms for decades prior. The policeman's action and its accompanying gestures are recoded as the repetitions of other oppressive gestures, such that he seems to be retroactively recoded as deeply unjust, irrespective of what may have been going through his mind at that precise moment. The scene is a site of repetition, even if it occurs for the very first time. When Floyd calls out for his mother (whom we later discover on the news is already dead), we shudder in horror because his muffled wails recall the most universal cry known to humankind, which is the cry to our mothers when we are in need of sustenance or scared or in need of succor. That he was calling out to his mother in the full knowledge that she was already dead made it even more poignant and unsettling. While the diegesis of the footage presented to us automatically entails a long hinterland of significations that reaches into other images of police brutality in America, we must also connect it to other images beyond the United States that have also produced an equal measure of shock, horror, and a sense of contamination for a community of viewers. We might recall

18 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); Arthur M. Glenberg and David A. Robertson, "Symbol Grounding and Meaning: A Comparison of High-Dimensional and Embodied Theories of Meaning," *Journal of Memory and Language* 43.3 (2000): 379–401.

19 The entire apparatus of interpellation is famously introduced by Louis Althusser in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Toward an Investigation," *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London: Verso, 1971), 85–125. Judith Butler critiques Althusser's formulation and extends it to cover the area of gender interpellation. See her *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

in this regard the 2015 photograph of the dead body of Alan Kurdi, the two-year-old Syrian being lapped by gentle waves on a beach in Turkey. This caused outrage all over the world and led to calls for ending the war in Syria and for more humane treatment of refugees who had been forced to flee their homeland. More than twenty years earlier Kevin Carter's 1993 photograph of a vulture waiting for a starving child to die in war-torn Sudan also triggered similar responses, and like the image of Alan Kurdi also led to calls for increasing relief efforts to stem the starvation in Sudan and the Horn of Africa. The George Floyd video and the two photographs referenced here suggest a spectrum of social and political disjunctures that elicit strong emotional responses: there is injustice and police brutality, there is mindless war and refugees, and there is also the collocation of war, environmental disaster, and food insecurity in one infernal whole. One thing they all share in common despite their stark contextual differences is that they each not only acted as portals into larger zones of signification but also incited people to act to relieve themselves of the sense of horror and contamination revealed in them. Each of the images is a site of *musuo* that requires expiation by everyone privy to them. And yet the expiation is not to be sought through any simple ritual. Unlike the scene of suffering in a tragic drama, the tragic suffering that occurs in real life requires not a simple catharsis but a quest for justice, and this is its true expiation. We may feel contaminated and soiled and we may even scream like the figure in Munch's painting. But the only relief from whatever nightmares that are triggered by such unbearable images of suffering is to set things right not just by our lonely ourselves but also as part of a larger community of shared values. If the articles in this special issue, *On Postcolonial Suffering*, tell us anything, it is that the sufferings depicted in the aesthetic domain also modulate our responses to the real world, but that the real world requires action and not merely contemplation.