In this essay I want to reflect on the issue of mourning and melancholia in Derrida’s and Butler’s work. I am interested in the question of mourning because it is one of those dense spots where an in-depth encounter between Derrida and feminist philosophers could have happened and yet did not occur. Why then should we revisit this missed encounter? I would like to do this for two reasons: First, not merely a common concern of feminism and deconstruction, mourning raises the very question of the encounter with the other, problematizes the ethics and the politics of such an encounter, and foregrounds its relation to language and thought. Second, the juxtaposition of Butler’s and Derrida’s work will allow us to trace an intersection between the ethics, sexuality, and the politics of mourning. What is at stake in this intersection is the question of how gender politics renders an ethics of mourning impossible and what kind interventions are required to affirm the ethics of impossible mourning. Consequently, the encounter between Butler and Derrida shifts the reflection on ethics and politics from the register of the possible to that of the “impossible.”

Impossible: Ethical Injunctions and Psychic Disavowals of Mourning

Both Butler and Derrida foreground the impossibility of mourning but from two very different perspectives. Derrida affirms the possibility of mourning as the aporia of the ethical injunction to preserve both the memory and the alterity of the dead friends. It is thus an ethical impossibility that opens the ethical relation to the other. As he puts it, “this singular . . . affirmation [of mourning] must affirm the impossible. . . . The impossible here is the other.”1 By contrast, Butler exposes a very different impossibility, which is intertwined with psychic and social operations of power in the spheres of sexuality, kinship, and subject formation. The impossibility of mourning in her texts is an effect of the disavowal of loss and the unconscious prohibition of grief. Hardly the affirmation of the other, the impossible manifests instead the force of psychic conflicts and prohibitions which “demand the loss of certain sexual attachments, and demand as well that those losses not be avowed, and not be grieved.”2 Such disavowal of loss, according to Butler, produces melancholic culture in which homosexuality is “unlivable passion and ungrievable loss.”3 The impossible in this case is intertwined with prohibition and ungrievable losses. Consequently, Butler examines the circumstances in which psychic and social antagonisms render impossible the ethical injunction of impossible mourning.

We could say that in contrast to Derrida’s ethical affirmation of impossible mourning, Butler explores the impossibility of the impossible, or to put it in a different way, the disavowal of an ethical affirmation. The juxtaposition of Butler’s and Derrida’s work on mourning presents us, therefore, with two mutually exclusive injunctions, with the clash of the political and ethical modalities of the impossible. And this in turn provides a new insight into the relation between ethics and power: one effect of the political regulation and prohibition of mourning would be a resolution of the aporia of an impossible ethical task. As we shall see, such “resolution” can take different forms of violence, ranging from the repudiation of loss through the identification with the dead to the exclusion of ungrievable lives beyond the boundaries of the polis.

Let us first focus on the affirmation of the ethical impossibility of mourning. As is well known, Derrida’s deconstruction of the psychoanalytic distinction between mourning and melancholia4 is motivated by the ethical relation to the other, in particular, the ethical relation to a dead friend. Consequently, the ethical aporia of mourning echoes and restages Levinas’s dilemma of how the absolutely other
can be inscribed in consciousness without being assimilated or constituted by the subject. While still fundamentally concerned with this question, Derrida’s analysis of mourning nonetheless reinscribes the Levinasian face to face encounter—an exposure to the other that shatters the unity of the ego and calls the subject to responsibility—within the problematic of finite memory. Conversely, Derrida rethinks the finitude of memory in the context of infinite alterity. Mourning is one of the experiences where the ethical relation to the other and memory are closely intertwined yet remain incompatible. Consequently, one of Derrida’s main questions is, “What does it tell us this impossible mourning about an essence of memory?” In other words, the problematic of mourning reveals how the ethical respect for alterity, registered in the face to face encounter on the level of sensibility, is both preserved and betrayed by memory: “Upon the death of the other we are given to memory, and thus to interiorization, since the other, outside us, is now nothing. And with the dark light of this nothing, we learn that the other resists the closure of our interiorizing memory. With the nothing of this irrevocable absence, the other appears as other . . . upon his death . . . since death constitutes and makes manifest the limits of a me or an us who are obliged to harbor something that is greater and other than them; something outside of them within them.”

“Outside of us within us”—is it not what in the Lacanian discourse is called “extimacy”?

Yet, what kind of memory can do justice to the ethical experience of mourning? How can it preserve within the psyche something utterly other which nonetheless remains other only because of its inscription within interiority, since the dead other “outside us is nothing”? What kind of memory can preserve within interiority the exposure to the radical outside? In what sense memorialization, instead of “doing justice to the dead,” risks different forms of betrayal? As Derrida asks, “as concerns the other in us . . . where is the most unjust betrayal? Is the most distressing, or even the most deadly infidelity that of a possible mourning which would interiorize within us the image, idol, or ideal of the other who is dead and lives only in us? Or is it that of the impossible mourning, which, leaving the other his alterity, respecting thus his infinite remove, either refuses to take or is incapable of taking the other within oneself, as in the tomb or the vault of some narcissism?”

Following the ethical injunction to mourn and remember the dead friend does not release us from this dilemma—it neither assuages the pain of loss nor gives us the salace of the fulfillment of ethical obligation.

As the risk of betrayal suggests, instead of disclosing an “essence” of memory, the impossible task of mourning confronts us with the aporia of memorialization: on the one hand, the future and the legacy of the dead are entrusted to memory and thus depend entirely upon certain interiorization; yet, on the other hand, such resuscitating preservation deprives the other of its otherness. The impossible mourning imposes on memory a contradictory injunction: it has to fail in order to succeed because it succeeds only “when it fails.” Recollection has to fail because, by resuscitating the other, it appropriates the dead, makes them a part of the subject: “then the other no longer quite seems to be the other, because we grieve him and bear him in us.” And conversely, the failure of interiorization succeeds only when its impossibility signifies “a respect for the other as other, a sort of tender rejection, a movement of renunciation which leaves the other alone, outside, over there, in his death, outside of us.”

Thus, in response to Derrida’s question, “What does it tell us this impossible mourning about an essence of memory?” we could argue that the ethical aporia of memory consists of the two opposite movements—interiorization and rejection. Only this double movement allows the dead to persist “outside us within us.” Yet, how should we understand this “tender” rejection and renunciation that Derrida considers an indispensable part of mourning? More importantly, what is the libidinal dynamics of these movements? In the context of the Freudian theory of mourning, renunciation corresponds to the tedious, repetitive and partial withdrawal of libido from the recollected memory traces—the withdrawal never complete but carried out “bit by bit”—mediated by the negative judgment of existence. The withdrawal of libido does not necessarily imply the forgetting of the other but a partial decathexis of dispersed memory traces—a painful process, which prevents the hallucinatory satisfaction of libido through

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recollection. Thus, what Derrida calls the re-suscitating function of recollections, Freud defines as the erotic “clinging” to the lost object through “a hallucinatory wish-psychosis.” By suspending reality testing, hallucinatory satisfaction revives unconscious memory traces of the past as present perceptions of wish fulfillment. What prevents the regression of mourning into hallucination—in other words, what sustains renunciation, or withdrawal of libido from memory traces—is the intervention of reality testing, which repetitively declares the non-existence of the object.

In his 1925 article “Negation,” Freud redefines this specific function of reality testing as the negative judgment of existence. By repeatedly declaring the loss of the object, the negative judgment struggles against the hallucinatory satisfaction and eventually prevents the conversion of memory traces into perception. According to Freud the negative judgment is derived from the movement of the rejection of the death drive: “negation, the derivative of expulsion, belongs to the instinct of destruction.” The very possibility of the negative judgment depends on two psychic developments: first, on the transformation of the rejection of the death drive into a symbol/signifier of negation; and, second, on the separation between the memory trace, perception, and the referent so that the recollected memory trace no longer guarantees the existence of the object. Since the function of judgment, or reality testing, is to find out whether the referent of recollected traces can be rediscovered in reality, its precondition, and thus the precondition of mourning, is the loss of the other who used to provide satisfaction. A circular loop, no doubt: a precondition of the mourning of the other is precisely the loss of the other. In the context of Freud’s libidinal theory, we can redefine the impossible work of mourning as follows: what counters the hallucinatory tendency to resuscitate the dead, what enables the renunciation of libido and the painful decathexis of memory traces, is the rejection of the death drive transformed into the linguistic symbol of negation. Consequently, Derrida can speak of a “tender” rejection because the violence of the death drive is sublimated/transformed into symbol formation.

Characteristic of the ethics of mourning, the double movement of the internalization and the “tender” rejection of the dead other repeats the double function of preservation and erasure Derrida ascribes to the Freudian notion of memory trace. As Derrida and Freud agree what is recollected in the work of mourning are countless memory traces. According to Freud the painful, repetitive, and slow process of mourning consists in the separation of libido not from the unified memory image but from “innumerable single impressions (unconscious traces of them).” The implication of this passage is that the work of mourning performs a double decomposition—first, the metonymic decomposition of the unconscious thing presentation of the dead into the multitude of memory traces, and then equally partial withdrawal of libido from them “bit by bit.” Both the work of the dispersal of the thing presentation into traces and the separation of libido from them “bit by bit” are hallmarks of the operation of the death drive, which, in opposition to the unifying work of Eros, consists in fragmentation, disconnection, and decomposition. Thus, the Freudian theory implicitly presents mourning as the work of the death drive mediated by the signifier of negation. Derrida makes this connection between mourning and the inscription of death in the psyche explicit and locates it in the very notion of the memory trace: The ethical task of memory is to “stay with traces.” Such memory “‘preserves’ . . . traces of a past that has never been present, traces which themselves never occupy the form of presence.” Similarly to the movement of fragmentation and dispersal Freud associates with the death drive, memory trace qua trace preserves the erasure bearing the mark of death: “The Freudian concept of trace must be radicalized and extracted from the metaphysics of presence. . . . The trace is the erasure of selfhood, of one’s presence, and is constituted by the threat or anguish of its irremediable disappearance. . . . An unerasable trace is not a trace. . . . This erasure is death itself.” Irreducible to the hallucinatory resuscitation or to the melancholic identification with the dead, the internalization of the dead other as a memory trace preserves within the psyche the possibility of “irremediable disappearance” of alterity prior to the event of death.
By shifting our analysis of mourning from Derrida to Butler, we confront another modality of the impossible, namely, the super-egoic prohibition of the ethical injunction of mourning and, I would add, the erasure of the alterity of an erotic object. The “impossible” in question—which we can rephrase as the repudiation of the ethical impossibility of mourning—is one of the main effects of “the psychic life of power.” How is the ethical affirmation of the impossible mourning rendered impossible and what are its effects? Butler’s analysis of the impossible explores a certain vacillation in Freud’s theory of melancholia: in his 1917 “Mourning and Melancholia” essay Freud stresses the suicidal tendencies of melancholia; in 1923 The Ego and the Id he also underscores its role in the character building of the ego. Butler explores this tension in the context of gender formation in homophobic culture. According to Butler, the ethics of mourning is rendered impossible by the transformation of the disavowed loss and grief into melancholic identifications structuring the gendered character of the ego. Because she is frequently misread, I would like to stress two implications of her analysis. First, heterosexuality is not inherently melancholic but only in so far as heterosexual identifications arise in the aftermath of the disavowed loss and foreclosed grief for the prohibited homosexual attachments. Furthermore, homosexuality itself is not immune to melancholia; on the contrary, melancholia might be one of the effects of gay identity politics. Second, Butler does not reduce sexuality to the model of identification, melancholic or otherwise, but critiques melancholic identifications as one of the psychic effects of power. Thus, while the model of identification can elucidate the relation between gender, libido, and power, it cannot explain what she calls “the psychic excess” of sexuality and what I’ve analyzed as the alterity of the other. Such an excess, or alterity, cannot be accounted for in terms of alienation, misrecognition, the loss of being, or by the distinction between the imaginary and symbolic identifications, for, in the Lacanian context, it implies a relation to the real.

Butler’s theory of melancholic gender follows Freud, who explains the disorder of melancholia in terms of the psychic denial of loss and its subsequent transformation into an identification with the lost object of love. By incorporating the lost object not in the form of a trace but through the narcissistic identification with the lost other, the melancholic ego seeks both to deny and to preserve its lost love. Consequently, in melancholia the denied loss of the other reappears as the alteration of the ego itself. In contrast to the inassimilable structure of the trace, which is the limit of internalization, the transposition of loss into identification both obliterates the alterity of the other and transforms the “character” of the ego. By becoming an “open wound,” the ego turns into a substitute target of the cruelty of the super-ego. Melancholic identification turns the destructive negativity—the violence of the death drive—upon the ego rather than transforming it into the symbol of negation. Such a turning of destruction upon oneself is facilitated by the ambivalent love/hate relation to the dead, the diffusion of instincts and the suspension of the linguistic function of negation. The internalization of ambivalence not only transforms “the struggle surging round the object” into the conflict between the ego and the super-ego but also causes the diffusion of instincts: thus, when Eros regresses into identification, it can no longer bind the death drive. Nor is the violence of the death drive bound by the judgment of negation. As Butler puts it, by turning the violence of the death drive inward, melancholia reenacts the very death it cannot mourn: “Melancholy is both the refusal of grief and the incorporation of loss, a miming of the death it cannot mourn. Yet the incorporation of death draws upon the death instinct to such a degree that we might well wonder whether the two can be separated.” Needless to say, such sadomasochistic miming of death, the turning of violence on the ego by the cruelty of the superego, is very different from the renunciation at work in the impossible ethics of mourning. The difference in question is not only between the structure of the trace and identification, but also between the transformation of the violence of the death drive into the linguistic function of negation and the absorption of such violence by the cruelty of the superego.

Butler’s theory of gender melancholia draws in significant ways on Freud’s revision of melancholia in The Ego and the Id where, instead of the suicidal violence, melancholic identifications with abandoned objects build...
the character of the ego: “We succeeded in explaining the painful disorder of melancholia by supposing that . . . an object cathexis has been replaced by an identification. At that time, however, we did not appreciate the full significance of this process. . . . Since then we have come to understand that this kind of substitution has a great share in determining the form taken by the ego and that it makes an essential contribution towards building up . . . its ‘character.’”22 Expanding on Freud’s later insight that the ego acquires its character by transforming the abandoned and ungrieved object cathexis into identifications, Butler proposes to read this theory of melancholia as one of the “foundational” moments in the formation of heterosexuality; that is, “to think through the question of ungrieded and ungrievable loss in the formation of what we might call the gendered character of the ego.”23 As she argues, “When certain kinds of losses are compelled by a set of culturally prevalent prohibitions, we might expect a culturally prevalent form of melancholia, one which signals the internalization of the ungrieved and ungrievable homosexual cathexis.”24 At this point in her argument, Butler treats the prohibitions of the superego as the psychic representatives of the cultural prohibitions, and not, as Freud would have it, as also the representatives of the Id, haunted by the countless immemorial traces of the dead from previous generations. Consider, for instance, one of the most “gothic” moments in Freud, resonating with Derrida’s “hauntology”: “In the id . . . are harbored residues of the existence of countless egos; and, when the ego forms its super-ego out of the id, it may perhaps only be reviving shapes of former egos and may be bringing them to resurrection.”25 In both The Ego and the Id, and The Psychic Life of Power melancholic identifications become part of the Oedipal structuration of desire. Yet, there is another difference in Butler’s and Freud’s accounts of Oedipus: while Freud foregrounds the double Oedipus complex in which heterosexual and homosexual object choices co-exists with the maternal and paternal identifications, Butler stresses the spectral double of prohibition itself. Speaking of a little boy, Freud argues that “at the dissolution of the Oedipus complex the four trends of which it consists will . . . produce a father-identification and a mother-identification. The father-identification will preserve the object-relation to the mother . . . and will at the same time replace the object-relation to the father which belonged to the inverted complex; and the same will be true, mutatis mutandis, of the mother-identification,”26 which will preserve the object relation to the father and replace object relation to the mother. Freud’s account of the double Oedipus as well as his suggestion of the melancholic origin of the super-ego enables Butler’s argument that the transformation of the contradictory sexual trends into the heterosexualization of desire is achieved through the prohibition, loss, and the refusal of grief for homosexual attachments—an account of the subject formation she later criticizes as perhaps “too punitive.”27 In particular, there is an interesting correlation to be explored between the melancholic origins of the super-ego and the spectrality of prohibition, which produces the spectral “aberration,” or excess, within the psychic norm it institutes. As this spectrality suggests, melancholic identifications produce heterosexual subjects desiring and haunted by what they cannot become, and becoming what they cannot desire. In this account, one becomes a heterosexual woman by repudiating the mother and her substitutes as objects of desire, by incorporating into the ego this prohibited and unmourned love, and by being haunted by “the ungrieved loss of homosexual cathexis.”28 Structured by prohibition, loss and the repudiation of mourning, the dominant heterosexual gender identification “embodies the ungrieved loss of homosexual cathexis.”29 Be-
coming a man is marked in turn by the repudiated identification with the feminine. The man thus desires a woman he cannot be; “his wanting will be haunted by a dread of being what he wants,” just as the feminine being is haunted by the unmourned loss of a desired homosexual object.

One of the implications of the melancholic formation is the repudiation of the ethics of the impossible mourning. Since gender “character” is marked by a refusal to acknowledge love and mourn its loss, this Bildung is intertwined with the difficulty of mourning subsequent losses as well. Butler’s discussion of the melancholic gender formation as well as Freud’s account of social feelings as sublimated homosexuality raise a question about the relation between Derrida’s concept of friendship, mourning, and sublimated homosexuality. In his 1914 essay “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” Freud tells us that the Ego Ideal has a social side, binding not only narcissistic libido “but also a considerable amount of the person’s homosexual libido, which in this way becomes turned back into the ego.” The non-fulfillment of this ideal can liberate homosexual libido but in the form of guilt or “the dread of the community.” And in The Ego and the Id, he locates social feelings, for instance, the feelings of friendship, in the transformation of the rivalry into identification, which in turn is a substitute for “an affectionate object-choice which has taken the place of the aggressive, hostile attitude.” Although Derrida criticizes the predominantly masculine and homosocial character of the politics of friendship, marked by the exclusion of the feminine, nonetheless, he hardly ever raises a question about the sublimated homoeroticism of male friendship and its impact on the ethics of mourning. In this context we might want to ask in what sense Derrida’s recurrent work of mourning for dead friends is itself haunted by the specter of melancholia and thus re-enacts a displaced form the impossibility diagnosed by Butler, namely, the impossibility of mourning homosexual erotic attachments.

**Hauntology: From Gendered “Character” Formation to the Desubjectivation of Experience**

For both Derrida and Butler ethics and politics of the impossible mourning are not merely one subjective experience among others, however painful and devastating it may be; they are also the very condition of the emergence of the subject of experience. This “foundational” status of mourning and melancholia seems to be more evident in Butler’s account of the formation of gender, yet, it also plays a crucial role in Derrida’s explication of the ethical character of mourning. For instance, when Derrida observes that upon the death of the other all that remains are painful memories “in me,” he very quickly questions the unproblematic presupposition of the interiority and even autonomy of “me” such a formulation might imply. The ethical task of mourning is not only given to the subject but in a certain paradoxical sense constitutes and precedes subjectivity. The very terms “in me” “between us,” or “interiority” acquire their meaning only through “this experience of the other who can die.” Paradoxically, one’s own relation to oneself and the structure of reflexivity depend on the trace of the other’s death, the possibility of which is prior to subjective memory: “But we must also recall, in another turn of memory, that the ‘within me’ and ‘within us’ do not arise or appear before this terrible experience. Or at least not before its possibility....The ‘within me’ and ‘within us’ acquire their sense and their bearing only by carrying within themselves the death and memory of the other; of an other who is greater than them.”

Constitutive of subjective experience, the ethics of mourning is intertwined with the temporality that precedes experience and cannot be made present through memory. As Derrida puts it, although given to my memory, mourning the other precedes what we “call ‘me,’ . . . ‘subjectivity,’ ‘intersubjectivity,’ ‘memory. The possibility of death ‘happens,’ so to speak, ‘before’ these different instances and makes them possible.” The very possibility of “‘being-in-me’ . . . is constituted out of the possibility of mourning.” Yet, since we become ourselves through a mourning that is “older” than ourselves, it is impossible for us to recall, bear,
and interiorize such a formative “primal” scene. Older than the subject, the impossible memory has the temporality of the trace that has never been present or could be made presentable through recollection or anticipation. Inscribed within the structure of subjectivity, the trace of the past that is yet to come both enables the ethics of impossible mourning and marks the limits of interiorization, recollection, experience. If we re-read Derrida’s insight in the psychoanalytic context of Melanie Klein or Julia Kristeva, the trace of primordial mourning “older” than the subject is intertwined with the separation from the pre-Oedipal (m)other and the entry into language in the so called “depressive position.”39 Needless to say, such a separation at the very dawn of subjectivity is a precondition of sexual difference, Oedipus, and negative judgment.

If the trace of the lost (m)other is what constitutes the subject and entrusts the dead to its memory, then the subject of mourning is haunted by the ghostly apparition of the other. What the apparition and the trace have in common is that they are not given to experience, that they cannot be made present through recollection or anticipation, and yet they beseech and disturb the very subjectivity they constitute. Subjected to what cannot be experienced, the haunted subject is provoked by the very breakdown of experience to the task of mourning: “the infinite speed of a furtive apparition, in an instant without duration, presence without present of a present which, coming back, only haunts. The ghost, le re-venant, the survivor, appears only by means of a figure or fiction but its appearance is not nothing, nor is it a mere semblance.”40

As we have seen, Butler also explains the emergence of gendered subjectivity through melancholia and haunting. Because gender identifications emerge out of the transformation of the repudiated homosexual love into identification, both femininity and masculinity are “haunted” by lost loves they cannot acknowledge and grieve. Haunting for Butler is therefore intertwined not with the preservation of the immemorial trace of the other but with the defensive disavowal of such a trace. One of the effects of the melancholic disavowal is the negation of the negation of the lost object relations and of the lost possibilities of being: “‘I never loved her and I never lost her,’ uttered by a woman; the ‘I never loved him, I never lost him,’ uttered by a man.”41 As this ‘never never’ implies, heterosexuality is haunted by the repudiated identifications and losses it cannot mourn—it creates its own specters it creates. As Butler puts it, “his wanting will be haunted by a dread of being what he wants, so that his wanting will also always be a kind of dread.”42 Similarly the being of heterosexual femininity is haunted by the loss of the ungrieved love and by the gender panic the avowal of such love can provoke: “if one is a girl to the extent that one does not want a girl... within this matrix, homosexual desire thus panics gender.”43 Since it is the effect of prohibition and defensive repudiation of loss, haunting within compulsory heterosexuality manifests itself as dread and gender panic rather than as an ethical affirmation of alterity.

In Butler’s account, both the masculine and the feminine assumption of gender are haunted by the love they cannot grieve, by the foreclosed and dreaded identifications, because spectrality is inscribed in the prohibition itself as its ‘innermost’ possibility. As she argues about the incest taboo in Antigone’s Claim, prohibition “does not simply prohibit... but rather sustains and cultivates incest as a necessary specter of social dissolution, a specter without which social bonds cannot emerge.”44 Such spectral “aberration” as “innermost possibility” of the law “requires a rethinking of prohibition itself, not merely as a negative or privative operation of power but as one that works precisely through proliferating” that which it prohibits in displaced forms.45 Butler concludes, therefore, that both masculinity and femininity are consolidated and disarticulated through the spectral excess of prohibition itself.

In contrast to Derrida, Butler argues that being haunted by the lost other does not always facilitate an ethics of mourning. On the contrary, when it occurs as an “aberrant” effect of prohibition, it tends to produce a homophobic culture in which the threat of spectrality is projected on homosexuality. As a result, both in social and in psychic life homosexuality is “haunted by the specter of a certain unreality, a certain unthinkable.”46 Because such haunting is nonetheless internalized as a part of the psychic reality of gender, any confrontation with homosexual desire tends to produce the
crisis of being, which might open up new possibilities of desire or provoke homophobic panic. Furthermore, we could add that given the originary melancholic structure of its gendered character, the melancholic ego can assume the ethical task of mourning the death of any other only with great difficulty, if at all. Rather what seems more probable is that each subsequent loss will revive and repeat the originary melancholic disavowal of loss, dread, panic, and self-denigration that accompanied that earlier scene.

From Recognition to Allegories in Drag: Toward a Politics of Impossible Mourning

The crisis and difficulty of mourning, particularly visible in contemporary culture in the context of AIDS epidemics, is compounded by the absence of a public discourse of mourning. Because homosexuality is “haunted by the specter of a certain unreality, a certain unthinkable,” the urgent ethical and political task of mourning the death of AIDS victims is often denied public recognition. “And where there is no public recognition or discourse through which such a loss might be named and mourned then,” Butler argues, “melancholia takes on cultural dimensions of contemporary consequence.” Yet, even though the ethical dilemma of mourning, and the different forms of betrayal and fidelity to the other it entails, are inseparable for both Butler and Derrida from the contestation of the existing norms and the invention of more just political discourses of mourning, it is nonetheless an open question about what kind of public discourse would offer a redress for the unspeakable and unmourned losses.

What makes this question particularly difficult is the fact that both Butler and Derrida refuse the distinction between the violence of melancholia and the ethical resolution of “successful” mourning, diagnosing instead different forms of violence in the public regulation of mourning. Consequently, they ask us to consider not only the violence of the exclusion of certain lives from public mourning but also the violence of different forms of inclusion. For instance, in his memorial essay for Lyotard, Derrida exposes the violence of the Greek concept of “beautiful death,” that is, death granted the most prestigious meaning in the polis and thus negated as loss by public remembrance. Butler’s relentless critique of the hierarchies of public mourning and of the repudiation of grief in the very discourse that seeks to redress it follows a similar line of inquiry. In her work following September 11, for instance, she diagnoses aggression and war unleashed by national mourning in terms of the denial of vulnerability through the fantasy of national mastery. And in her interpretation of Antigone she points out that even the contestation of political prohibitions that establish the boundaries between grievable and ungrievable lives can still repeat the repudiation of unspeakable losses within the public performance of mourning. For instance, Antigone’s melancholia “seems to consist in this refusal to grieve that is accomplished through the very public terms by which she insists on her right to grieve. . . . Her loud proclamations of grief presuppose a domain of the ungrievable.” The paradox here is that melancholia and the domain of the unspeakable haunts not only the instituted public norms of mourning but also the political contestations of these norms.

Violence unleashed through public rituals of mourning and the reproduction of the melancholic repudiation of loss in the very discourse that seeks recognition for the ungrieved lives raises the question about what kind of politics of mourning, and what kind of discourse, could follow the ethical injunction of impossible mourning. I would like to suggest that the just politics of mourning, though often mobilized by the demand of public recognition for the repudiated losses, exceeds the limitations of such discourse and assumes instead a form of allegory.

Unlike other participants in the debate on the post-Hegelian politics of recognition, Butler never quite abandons the call for the public recognition of the repudiated losses but relentlessly exposes its limitations and refines its stakes. Seeking either equality and equal rights, or the public acknowledgment and respect for cultural differences, the two dominant types of recognition presuppose the separation between the self and other and the formation of identity prior to the linguistic terms that confer recognition. Needless to say,
in so far as the cultural politics of recognition is based on these presuppositions, it fails to address the melancholic transformation of repudiated loss into an unconscious identification with the lost other. Since the melancholic ego fundamentally misrecognizes its own identity, altered by the incorporation of the other within, as well as the nature of its loss, the public acknowledgment of its complaint would only perpetuate such misrecognition. Consequently, it is doubtful whether the politics of recognition can address and redress the social effects of the melancholic repudiation of grief—a repudiation that not only perpetuates disrespect but creates the domain of unlivable specters haunting the public sphere. As Butler asks, what political discourse can “grasp this dilemma of language that emerges when ‘human’ takes on this doubled sense, the normative one based on radical exclusion and the one that emerges in the sphere of the excluded, not negated, not dead, perhaps slowly dying . . . Dying, indeed, from the premature circumscription of the norms by which recognition as human can be conferred, a recognition without which the human cannot come into being but must remain on the far side of being”?54

Butler’s most important corrective to the politics of recognition is that such politics, far from merely acknowledging the already existing cultural identities, not only constitutes these identities but, more fundamentally, creates the very divide between the human and nonhuman, identity and non-identity, livable and unlivable. It is this divide that determines which lives are worthy of grief and which are not. Second, as the pain of grief implies, what is at stake in recognition is not primarily an entitlement to equal rights or to the public legitimation of different identities but the acknowledgment of bodily vulnerability disclosing the subject’s constitutive exposure to the Other.55 The denial of such vulnerability unleashes violence against others whereas its acknowledgment opens a chance of an ethical encounter, which shifts “the narcissistic preoccupation of melancholia . . . into a consideration of the vulnerability of others.”56 Once redefined in the context of grief and the ethical encounter with the Other, the politics of recognition would first of all have to acknowledge that “we are constituted by virtue of the address, a need and desire for the Other that takes place in language in the broadest sense, one without which we could not be. To ask for recognition, or to offer it, is precisely not to ask for recognition of what one already is. It is to solicit a becoming . . . to petition the future always in relation to the Other . . . This is perhaps a version of Hegel that I am offering, but it is also a departure.”57

However, even such a capacious and generous revision of recognition might not do justice to the ethical task of mourning for the foreclosed specters. What the politics of recognition does not account for are the two different senses of “the impossible” discussed in this essay, namely, the impossible as the affirmation of the alterity of other and the impossible as the defensive repudiation of such affirmation (the impossible of the impossible). To sustain the impossible as a paradoxical condition of public mourning, the politics of recognition, like bereaved memory, would have been caught in the aporia similar to that discussed by Derrida: it too would have to fail in order to succeed and it would succeed only when it risked failure. Such aporia of public mourning safeguards the dead not only against oblivion but also against the appropriation by the polis or even by the oppositional groups demanding public recognition for the repudiated losses. Although Butler does not explicitly consider what kind of discourse would preserve this necessary aporia of public mourning, she implicitly points to the rhetorical structure of allegory. In The Psychic Life of Power, for instance, she briefly suggests that what is at stake in the performance of drag is the allegory of foreclosed mourning. By allegorizing the repudiated losses, the performance of drag discloses the fantasy of melancholia that both stabilizes and haunts heterosexuality. In contrast to the “acting out” of the melancholic ego, the performance of drag “allegorizes a loss it cannot grieve, allegorizes the incorporative fantasy of melancholia.”58 By registering what is barred from the normative structuration of gender, allegory in drag performs what the politics of recognition fails to register, namely, “the impossible within the possible.”59

To suggest briefly how allegory can sustain “the impossible within the possible” as the condition of the ethical affirmation of alterity, I would like to return to Derrida’s analysis of this figure in relation to mourning. For Derrida
the affirmation of the impossible mourning on
the public and the political level of language is
also intertwined with the trope of allegory, or,
more specifically, with the transformation of
prosopopeia into allegory. By creating a fic-
tion of voice beyond the grave prosopopeia is
intertwined with the hallucinatory function of
memory under the sway of pleasure principle.
As Derrida puts it, quoting De Man, “proso-
popeia is hallucinatory.”60 We might argue,
however, that this resuscitating and hallucina-
tory function of prosopopeia is also in service
of the politics of recognition in so far as it per-
sonifies the abjected specters, resurrects the
dead, but at the price of appropriating and as-
similating their disquieting alterity into collec-
tive identifications. What according to Derrida
enables the bereaved memories to pass/tra -
verse this seductive but highly ambiguous
function of prosopopeia is the fragmentary,
discontinuous and disjunctive character of al-
legorical discourse, which repeats on the level
of public discourse the double movement of
rejection/preservation Derrida associates with
both the trace of the other and the ethics of im-
possible mourning. Only such discourse could
prevent public mourning from being
mobilized for the sake of the consolidation of
collective identities.

Evoking Walter Benjamin’s recovery of al-
legorical fragments against romantic organ-
icism, Derrida’s discussion of allegory explic-
itly refers to Paul de Man’s mobilization of
allegorical disjunction against the closure and
the synthesizing power of the Hegelian sys-
tem.61 In Aesthetics, Hegel denigrates allegory
as an inferior trope of disconnection between
the particular and the universal, the inside and
the outside, subject and the predicate—indeed
as a “hollow,” “cold,” and “frosty” figure of
vanished individuality, and thus particularly
unsuitable for poetry.62 Not surprisingly, his
main examples of allegory, such as the allegor-
cal statues on memorials and sarcophagi, ulti-
mately associate it with the mute places of the
burial for dead. Thus, in contrast to the
interiorizing recollection or the fantasy of the
voice beyond the grave, the allegorical discou-
se exposes exteriority, disconnection, void,
and partiality of collective memorialization of the dead. As Walter
Benjamin puts it, “allegory goes away empty-
handed. . . . It means precisely the non-exis-
tence of what it presents.”63 Since allegory ex-
poses “the non-existence of what it presents,”
it can preserve the immemorial trace of the
other qua trace without personifying it into
presence, repudiating it, or absorbing it into
collective identifications. Resisting the clo-
sure of interiorization, such inscription of the
traces of death within public life allows alle-
gory to dramatize the rhetoric of spectrality
and impossibility we encounter so frequently
both in Derrida and Butler’s discussion of
mourning: the spectral memory of the dead,
the spectrality of prohibition, the exclusion of
ungrievable lives beyond the scope of the “hu-
man,” or even the spectral character of “giving
an account of oneself” in response to the
other.64

Evocative of the double movement of mem-
ory discussed by Derrida, the disjunctive rela-
tion between loss and preservation, expropria-
tion and internalization in allegorical form
respects the inassimilable alterity of the
dead.65 That is why Derrida associates be-
reaved memory with “an allegorical
metonymy . . . which says something other
than what it says and manifests the other
(allos) in the open but nocturnal space of the
agora—in its plus de lumiere; at once no more
light and greater light.”66 As Derrida’s play on
the etymology suggests, allegorical discourse
manifests the dead (allos) in the public sphere
of the agora without either repudiating their
loss or assimilating them into the collective
identifications structuring public sphere.
Irre-
ducible to phenomenality, representation, or
identification, such manifestation is merely a
trace eluding all attempts at appropriation.
Consequently, allegorical structure of public
discourse mourns and memorializes the other
as “the non-totalizable trace which is in-ade-
quate to itself and to the same. This trace is
interiorized in mourning as that which can no
longer be interiorized . . . in and beyond
mournful memory—constituting it, traversing
it, exceeding it, defying all reappropriation.”67
Such a political allegory of the impossible
morning casts within the public space its “plus
de lumiere”—at once no more light and greater
light—on the domain of abjected specters,
which haunt the “arbitrarily closed domain of
subject positions.”68
ENDNOTES

3. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 6–7
9. Ibid., 35.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 34.
14. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 135.
24. Ibid., 139.
26. Ibid., 29.
27. Such self-criticism is offered in Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Forham University Press, 2005), 14–16. As she writes, “in *The Psychic Life of Power*, I perhaps too quickly accepted this punitive scene of inauguration for the subject” (15). One of the ways this “punitive scene of inauguration” is complicated is through the account of the address and exposure to the other—that is, through the account of that which “I cannot give an account of” (35).
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid., 137.
32. Ibid.
33. Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 34.
34. For a critique of the phallogocentrism of the three main traditions of friendship—the Greek, Christian, and the secular one of the Enlightenment—see, for example Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 263–94. As Derrida argues, it is the authority of the brother that dominates the history and the philosophy of friendship (293).
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid., 34.
42. Ibid., 137.
43. Ibid., 136.
45. Ibid., 65. In contrast to certain versions of the Lacanian psychoanalysis, Butler is concerned not so much with the malfunctioning of the paternal law or, with the “obscene supplement” of *jouissance* accompanying the law, but with the question whether these spectral possibilities produced by prohibition can lead to the invention of “other forms of social life.” For argument with psychoanalysis see for instance (ibid., 67–75).
47. Ibid., 139.
49. In his meditation on the phrase “there shall be no more mourning,” Derrida focuses on the two extremes that make mourning impossible—the Greek “beautiful death” and the “exception of the ‘worse than death’” that happened in Auschwitz (ibid., 236–39).
50. For an excellent discussion of Derrida’s critique of “beautiful death” in the context of the state regulation of mourning and the contemporary political consequences of this critique see Michael Naas, “History’s Remains, Of Memory, Mourning, and the Event,” *Research in Phenomenology* 33 (2003): 76–84. Naas points out how already in Plato’s philosophy mourning is a political issue, regulated by the state for the purpose of “consolidating the body politic” (83).
52. The limitations of this essay make it impossible to do justice to the richness of this debate on post-Hegelian politics of recognition in feminist, political, and poststructuralist philosophies. For the application of the politics of recognition (recognition understood in the second sense, as recognition and respect for cultural distinctiveness) to multiculturalism, see Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and “The Politics of Recognition,”* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). For the socialist revision of the politics of recognition, see Nancy Fraser, who argues for combining “cultural politics of difference” with “the social politics of equality,” or politics of recognition with the politics of redistribution. *Justice Interruptus: Critical reflections on the “Post Socialist Condition,”* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 12. And finally for the ethical critique of recognition, see Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), who argues for the replacement of the primacy of recognition by the politics of witnessing.
56. Ibid., 30.
57. Ibid., 44.
59. Ibid., 47.
61. As Derrida argues, Paul de Man “sees in Hegelianism a specific allegory; not, as is often believed, the allegory of synthesizing and reconciliatory power, but that of disjunction, disassociation, and discontinuity” (ibid., 74).
64. Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 37. The spectrality of discourse is implied in Butler’s discussion of the function of life and death in the discourse purporting to give an account of oneself: “the account of myself that I give in discourse never fully expresses or carries this living self” (ibid., 36).
65. One figure that escapes further critical integration in Derrida’s discussion of the rhetoric of mourning is the figure of pregnancy and abortion: by mourning and remembering the other we bear him “like an unborn child” (*Memories for Paul de Man*, 35); and conversely, by leaving the other outside, we “abort” interiorization (ibid.).
66. Ibid., 37.
67. Ibid., 38.