

Grieving and Grievance

Francis Frascina discusses the politics of public grieving and asks why some lost lives are deemed worthy of official remembrance and others are not, from the deaths of those mourned by the Black Lives Matter movement to those of Bobby Sands and his fellow hunger strikers in Belfast's Maze prison.

Between February and June, the New Museum in New York presented 'Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America', an exhibition of artists concerned with 'the concept of mourning, commemoration, and loss as a direct response to the national emergency of racist violence experienced by Black communities across America'. Why are some lives lost grieved for in public discourse and not others? Why are some losses regarded as monumental in the politically orchestrated grievances of ruling elites, along with their resentments about economic, ethnic, political, racial and social otherness? In the catalogue, Judith Butler distinguishes between losses that, on the one hand, claim the media narrative of tragedy and 'unite the nation' and, on the other, 'nameless lives lost' whose chance of being 'grieved within the dominant media is very slim'. Occasionally, 'they become a number, or a flickering image'.

Recent interventions expressing black grief in the face of current and historic manifestations of politically orchestrated white grievance are exemplified in the exhibition catalogue by a 2015 photograph of Black Lives Matter (BLM) graffiti on a monument to the Confederacy in Rockville, Maryland. Donated by the United Daughters of the Confederacy in 1913, the 20ft-tall, 13-ton statue of a Confederate cavalryman mourns/commemorates the 'Heroes of Montgomery County' who fought on the side of slave states that feared the end of white supremacy. Defences of the grim realities of exclusion include suppression, selective memory, denial, delusion and myth creation. Normalised defences are also lethal, as evidenced by Claudia Rankine's catalogue essay 'The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning' and contemporary representations including *Judas and the Black Messiah*, a 2021 film directed by Shaka King on the police assassination of Fred Hampton, chairman of the Black Panther Party, on 4 December 1969 as part of the FBI's Counter Intelligence Programme (COINTELPRO). Another example is Darnella Frazier's mobile phone video of the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer on 25 May 2020, which received a special citation from the 2021 Pulitzer Prize board for 'highlighting the crucial role of citizens in journalists' quest for truth and justice'.

I was drawn, with this exhibition and Butler's text in mind, to historic instances of 'grief and grievance', of visual vicissitudes, flickering images and artists' engagements with divisive remembrance. The first was the 40th anniversary of a contentious death. Bobby Sands, an IRA hunger striker, died in HMP Maze Prison/Long Kesh outside Belfast on 5 May 1981 in protest against the British government's refusal to recognise his status as a political prisoner. Although described by then prime minister Margaret Thatcher as a criminal and a member of a terrorist organisation,



Melvin Edwards, *Texcali*, 1965, from the series 'Lynch Fragments'

Sands was elected Westminster MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone on 9 April 1981, during his 66-day hunger strike. Nominated as the 'Anti-H-Block/Armagh Political Prisoner' candidate, his defeat of the Ulster Unionist Party candidate by over 1,000 votes with a turnout of 86.9% was a nationalist act of defiance to the historic institutions of the UK, the country that colonised Catholic Ireland during the 17th century. Another anniversary on 3 May was the centennial of the UK government's partition of Ireland in response to the Irish War of Independence, 1919-21, a liberation conflict between the IRA and British forces. The implementation of the 1920 'Government of Ireland Act' divided the island between Northern Ireland, which was largely Unionist and Protestant following colonisation, and Southern Ireland, which was largely Catholic. Although this division formalised ethnic divisions, created and exacerbated by imperial rule, the Act included a provision for eventual reunification. After further anti-colonialist and communal violence, the 1921 'Anglo-Irish Treaty' led to Southern Ireland becoming the Irish Free State in 1922 but left unresolved tensions in Northern Ireland, exacerbated by sectarian abuses against Catholic nationalists by the predominantly Protestant Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), the British militarised police force. These tensions re-irrupted in 1969 after the death of nationalists following RUC beatings - the first of 'The Troubles' - and the 'Battle of the Bogside' which occurred in August when loyalist marchers and the RUC clashed with Catholic residents of the Bogside area of Derry, leading to two days of wider continuous fighting and the arrival of British troops on 14 August. The troops remained until 2007.

In the context of this strife, the Provisional IRA was formed after breaking away from the Official IRA in 1969 to advocate violence as the only way to end colonisation and achieve a united Ireland. Appalling atrocities by paramilitaries on both the

republican and loyalist sides as well as by forces of the British state were only ended with a negotiated ceasefire and the 1998 ‘Good Friday Agreement’. Post-Brexit, this Agreement is under enormous threat, as are processes of investigation into some 3,000 unsolved killings of ‘The Troubles’. Malcolm Sutton meticulously recorded details, including photographs, of the 3,532 people killed between 14 July 1969 and 12 December 2001, which appears as a searchable database on Ulster University’s CAIN Archive. Sutton began his project to test Thatcher’s assertion that the vast majority of murders during ‘The Troubles’ were by the IRA. His and others’ scholarly work (including David McKittrick et al, *Lost Lives*, 1999) attribute about half to the Provisional IRA, the rest to loyalist organisations and agents of the British state. In July 2021, the Conservative government announced its controversial intention to introduce an amnesty for murderers in the British Army and security forces as well as those in both the loyalist and republican paramilitary groups. Arguably this attempt to draw a veil over lives lost is designed to prevent investigations into the state’s involvement in past killings and to divert attention in Northern Ireland from the disastrous effects of the Tory’s botched Brexit deal.

Grieving for lives lost depends on the subject positions of grievance and identity. For Thatcher, images of IRA hunger strikers from 1981 – in all, ten died – or of miners on strike from 1984–85 were the opposite of what Butler calls the dominant media narrative of ‘unite the nation’. Thatcher referred to miners and trades unions as the ‘enemy within’, and to ‘beat the IRA’ her government condoned state assassination of UK citizens. Repressive legislation, MI5 covert operations, militarised police tactics and black propaganda were used in attempts to crush dissent, protest and rebellion, whether on the streets of Belfast or Derry or at Orgreave in South Yorkshire. In both cases, the government employed the media rhetoric of criminalisation for what were political and civil rights struggles. Jeremy Deller’s 2001 re-enactment of the confrontation between striking miners and the police at the Orgreave Coking Plant on 18 June 1984 reanimated critical exploration of state tactics and media myth creation. An examination of the narratives of the actual event and Deller’s re-enactment is facilitated by his *The Battle of Orgreave Archive (An Injury to One is an Injury to All)*, 2001. In 2016 the Conservative government again refused a public inquiry into the events at Orgreave.

Artists have also examined the ‘flickering images’ of H-block prisoners and hunger strikers. Richard Hamilton saw the first TV pictures of the ‘dirty protest’ in Robin Denselow’s BBC *Newsnight* report of 27 October 1980 on the 351 IRA ‘non-co-operative prisoners’, including Hugh Rooney from Short Strand in East Belfast and Freddie Toal from Armagh city wearing only blankets in their excrement-covered cell. Non-co-operation began after 1 March 1976 when the British government’s ‘criminalisation’ policy denied

newly convicted paramilitary prisoners ‘special category’ or political status. Increasing violence by prison officers led to prisoners’ refusal to wear prison clothes and the beginning of the ‘blanket protest’ that escalated to the ‘no wash protest’/‘dirty protest’ in March 1978. The latter ended the day after Sands began his hunger strike. Wearing only a prison blanket, the prisoners smeared cell walls with their excrement and communicated with one another in Irish. Hamilton edited a still from the TV report to focus on Rooney for his diptych entitled *The Citizen*, 1981–83, with its symbolism of the abject and the male martyr. Hamilton added two further diptychs, *The Subject*, 1988–90, depicting a parading loyalist Orangeman, and *The State*, 1993, based on a British soldier on patrol in Northern Ireland. In 2008, the last days of Sands’s life were the focus of Steve McQueen’s film *Hunger* in which the ghostly absence of Thatcher – only her voice is heard – contrasts with her vivid full-face presence in Marcus Harvey’s *Maggie*, 2009, evoking his *Myra*, 1995 (see my ‘White Cube, White Culture, White Riot: Identity, Ambivalence and Non-Belonging’, *Third Text*, September 2011).

In different ways, McQueen and Harvey addressed the media image of Thatcher in which the discourses of women, nationalism and political subjectivity intersect. Part of this intersectionality includes a 1980 photograph of Mairéad Farrell on ‘dirty protest’ in her cell in Armagh, the only women’s prison in Northern Ireland. Begoña Aretxaga, in *Shattering Silence*, 1997, explored conflicting processes of gender politics during ‘The Troubles’ and identified Irish women’s ‘need to find a creative space in a country where women had been made emblems of both a dispossessed people and a grieving history’. Their relationship to the nation and to feminism meant resistance to becoming mythic heroines of male-dominated nationalist liberation politics while contending with British feminists’ ambivalence because they were members of a group advocating violent struggle. The IRA was not alone, with both the Black Panthers in the US and Nelson Mandela’s ANC in South Africa abandoning non-violence.

In support of the Maze/Long Kesh male ‘dirty protest’, Irish women prisoners, who were subjected to brutalised and degrading treatment by female and male British guards (beatings, threats of rape and sexual humiliation, no access to toilet and washing facilities), found a creative space in bodily defiance by smearing menstrual blood as well as excrement on their cell walls. This material signifier of gender and sexual identity disturbed taboo norms of both the IRA leadership and British prison authorities. As Aretxaga argues, the republican leadership opposed women joining the ‘dirty protest’ and hunger strikes because they would challenge the male heroics of historical narrative and patriarchal assumptions about female autonomy. Nevertheless, on 1 December 1980, Farrell, together with Mairéad Nugent and Mary Doyle, the only three prisoners of the 29 republicans in Armagh jail weighing

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over eight stone, joined the seven male prisoners who had begun the first H-Block hunger strike on 27 October (ending 18 December). Farrell explained why 'political status' was a feminist issue for the women prisoners in Armagh jail: 'I am oppressed as a woman but I am also oppressed because I'm Irish. Everyone in this country is oppressed and we can't successfully end our oppression as women until we first end the oppression of our country.' In one of Stuart Brisley's short series of IRA paintings, he used part of the 1980 photograph of Farrell in the modestly scaled *Dirty Protest, Armagh*, 1993-96, to show in his words 'that there was no gender division to the struggle to be rid of colonial rule'.

There is a second, more media saturated, photograph of Farrell: her covered dead body alongside those of Sean Savage and Daniel McCann, all members of an IRA active service unit assassinated by undercover members of the SAS in Gibraltar on 6 March 1988, unarmed and, according to witnesses, shot without warning. Pathologists confirmed that Farrell was shot three times in her back and five times in her head, face and neck, Savage was shot 16 times in a 'frenzied attack' with at least four shots fired into his head as he lay bleeding face-up on the ground, and McCann received three shots to his head and two in his back. After the coroner at the Gibraltar inquest instructed jury members to avoid the 'ambiguity' of an open verdict, they returned a 9-2 verdict of lawful killing, the smallest majority allowed. The British government, which had an unofficial 'shoot-to-kill' policy against IRA members, saw this as vindication. Dissatisfied with British justice, the relatives of the 'Gibraltar Three' took their case in 1995 to the European Court of Human Rights, which found by a 10-9 majority that Farrell, Savage and McCann had been unlawfully killed. Their families grieved for their deep personal loss. The Republican leadership grieved for patriotic martyrs in heroic struggle against British oppression and its normalising narratives. Women grieved the loss of Farrell as the model, Aretxaga argues, of a new female nationalist hero 'particularly attractive to republican feminists for not only her leadership qualities but also her open rejection of traditional female images of nationality'. Grief and grieving differently perceived and felt, with these differences related to conflicting senses of grievance.

On 21 May 2021, the 50th anniversary of Marvin Gaye's album *What's Going On* returned me to Rankine's essay and the 'American tendency to normalise situations by centralising whiteness'. Gaye's album narrated a song cycle of a black Vietnam War veteran, who had fought in a violent US foreign war - claimed by the state as heroic liberation of Indochina - to return home to the same racism, poverty and injustice of his pre-army experience. These were the conditions that had led to the formation of the Black Panthers and the state's response with the FBI's COINTELPRO operations and assassinations. Twenty years later, the title song of Gaye's album was used by Adrian Piper in her installation *Black Box/White Box*, 1992, on the infamous police beating of Rodney King on 3 March 1991 by LAPD officers. Strangely, there is no Piper artwork in 'Grief and Grievance' but it includes Danny Tisdale's *Rodney King Police Beating (Disaster Series)*, 1992, referencing Andy Warhol's 1960s series on disasters, deaths and the police suppression of race riots. Included, too, are examples of the 'lynch fragments' sculpture series produced by Melvin Edwards in



Stuart Brisley, *Dirty Protest, Armagh*, 1993-96

the 1960s. The latter represent black 'nameless lives lost' as counters to the lives celebrated in monuments devoted to imperialism, colonisation, slavery and racism. Following anti-racism protests, the aforementioned Rockville Confederate Statue was moved in 2017 from public land next to the Courthouse to land owned by White's Ferry, a privately run Potomac River ferry named after a Confederate General. Grief and grieving - as well as grievance - differently perceived and felt.

Parallels in the UK produced BLM protests when, on 20 May 2021, Oriel College Oxford decided to reject the recommendation from an independent commission that it should remove the prominently displayed statue of the college's famous alumni and benefactor Cecil Rhodes, who is regarded by post-colonialists as an imperialist and 'father of apartheid' in South Africa (Artnotes AM448). By 4 June, the statue of the slave trader Edward Colston, which had been pulled down by BLM protestors in Bristol a year earlier (Artnotes AM438), was on display at the city's M Shed museum. Still covered in red and blue graffiti, the statue, which is so damaged it cannot be displayed upright, lies supine



Richard Hamilton, *Maps of Palestine*, 2011

on a wooden stand together with BLM placards from the protests. Colston's statue lies horizontal in political quarantine on a museum sickbed.

And the month of May was full of devastating images of Gaza stricken by a coronavirus spike, and being bombed again by the Israel Defence Forces (IDF). Another of Hamilton's artworks, *Maps of Palestine*, 2011, is one way of locating Gaza and historic sources of grievance about Israeli 'occupation', 'land grab' and 'apartheid' rooted in the ending of the British Mandate, a hangover of empire, and the 1947 UN Partition Plan for Palestine. In May, a landscape of imperialist debris was literally represented by Gaza-based photojournalists entering the terrain of Alfredo Jaar's *Lament of the Images* installation, from 2002, and the brutal effects of repressive militarised supremacy in the time of Covid-19. In 2009, I wrote ('Gaza', *AM325*) about Jaar's critique of contemporary visual communication as a 'regime to be managed' in relation to media reports of the bombing of Gaza by the IDF, which began on 27 December 2008. The Palestinian sense of loss, grief and grievance from 2008 was repeated in 2021 as a continuing lethal story. Mohammed Salem, from Reuters, photographed Palestinians sheltering in makeshift tents amid the rubble of their homes in Gaza, destroyed by IDF airstrikes. Mohammed Abed, from Agence France-Presse, photographed a Palestinian barber, wearing a Covid-19 mask in an area medically deprived by oppressive Israeli sanctions, working amid the ruins of buildings destroyed in similar airstrikes. In Abed's photograph of missile destruction and signifiers of a rampant virus, a salvaged mirror and plastic chairs seemingly enable the rituals of everyday work to continue. Grief and grieving differently perceived and felt, conflicting grievances at their heart.

George Szirtes in *The Photographer at Sixteen*, 2019, writes: 'Photographs are skin. Sometimes the skin is healthy and fresh, at other times it is hardly there.' The photograph is 'not the presence, it is only the skin

of presence'. A life reconstructed from photographs is all 'skin and scent'; somewhere within 'are bones and organs, an operating system like any body, however wasted'. More photographs, more 'skin and scent': on 11 May 2021, family members held photographs of the ten civilians shot dead by the British Parachute Regiment in Ballymurphy in August 1971 as they received the long-awaited/delayed coroner's report, which found all the slain to be innocent, unarmed and that they posed no threat to the soldiers who claimed that some of their victims had been armed and shooting. Five months after this atrocity, on 'Bloody Sunday', 30 January 1972, the same regiment shot 26 unarmed Catholic civilians who were on a civil rights march on the Bogside of Derry, Northern Ireland, demonstrating against government internment of suspects without trial. The soldiers killed 13 outright with a further victim dying of his injuries four months later. The British state's role in the Ballymurphy killings and its delayed justice is similar to the findings of the Bloody Sunday Inquiry, also known as the Saville Inquiry, begun in 1998 and published on 15 June 2010.

To examine the politically orchestrated grievances of ruling elites it is necessary to remember and explore the flickering images of those whose chance of being 'grieved within the dominant media is very slim'. In relation to my examples, that task is aided by materials in catalogues such as *Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America* together with historic publications including Trisha Ziff's *Hidden Truths: Bloody Sunday 1972* (International Centre of Photography, New York, 2002) and more recent Gaza-related investigations/exhibitions by Forensic Architecture. Such an examination is not without divisive risk, but looking within photographs and representations for 'bones and organs, an operating system like any body' is to counter the pervasive deceptions of power.

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