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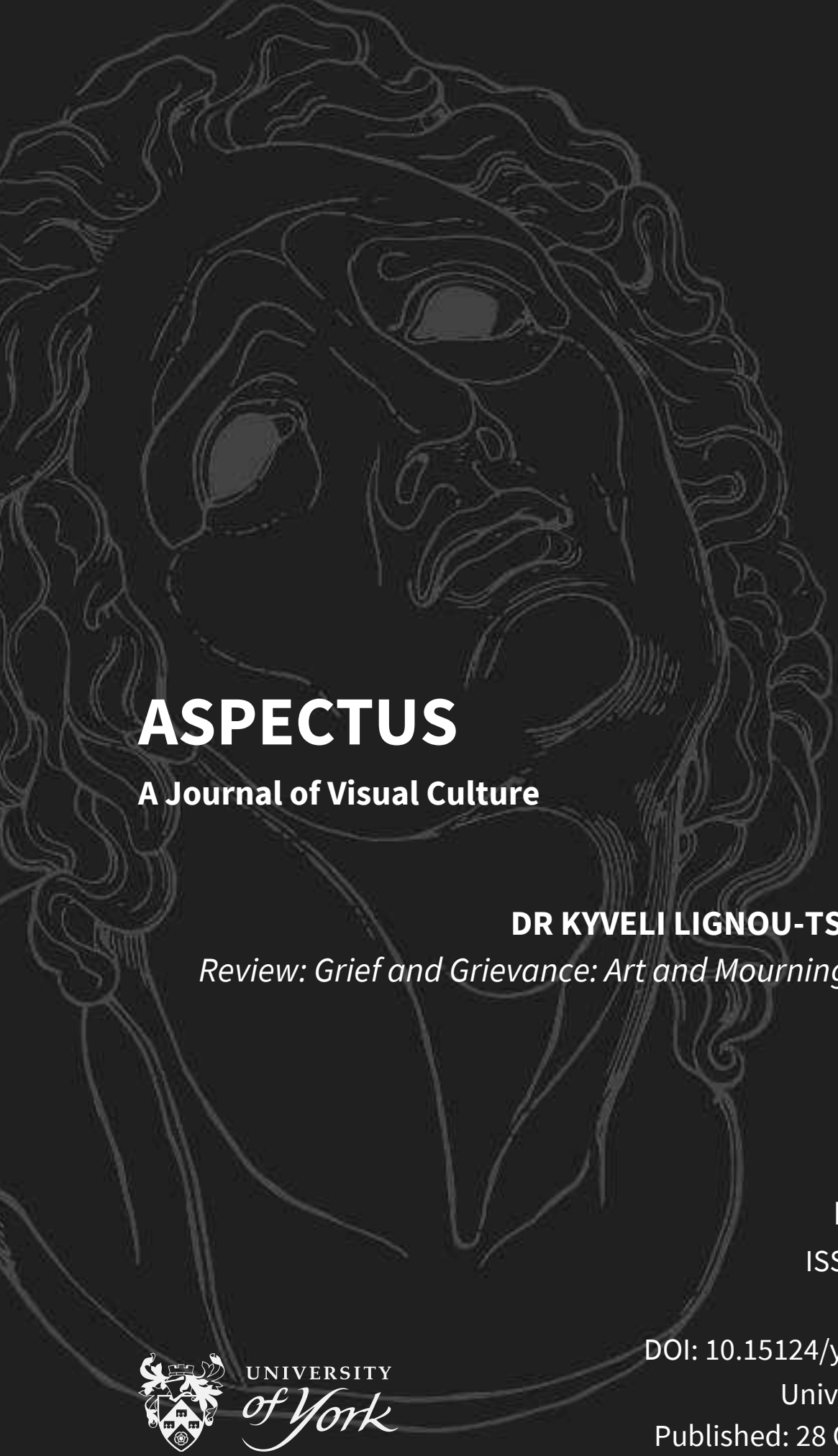


# ASPECTUS

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**DR KYVELI LIGNOU-TSAMANTANI**


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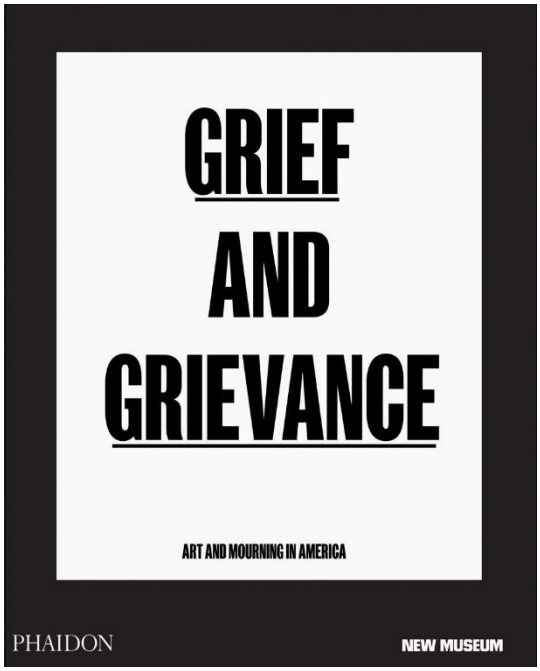
**Book Review**

# Eds., Naomi Beckwith, Massimiliano Gioni, Glenn Ligon, Mark Nash and Okwui Enwezor, *Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America*




**DR KYVELI LIGNOU-TSAMANTANI**

*Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America* is an exhibition catalogue that was published to accompany the homonymous show at the New Museum, New York (17 February 2021–06 June 2021). The show, which included artworks by thirty-seven Black artists, was conceived by the late Okwui Enwezor (1963-2019). According to Enwezor, the exhibition aimed to underscore "[t]he crystallization of black grief in the face of a politically orchestrated white grievance".[1] Enwezor started working on this show in 2018.[2] However, the brutal killing of George Floyd in May 2020 and the resurgence of Black Lives Matter made this exhibition and the accompanying catalogue even more topical.

Twelve essays, written by influential thinkers, writers and curators, comprise this rich catalogue. These written contributions are by Elizabeth Alexander, Naomi Beckwith, Judith Butler, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Okwui Enwezor, Massimiliano Gioni, Saidiya Hartman, Juliet Hooker, Glenn Ligon, Mark Nash, Claudia Rankine and Christina Sharpe. All these can be read in two different ways: as a supplement to the show, or as a book with its own merit, which provides an essential lesson on African-American history, black grief, racism in America, and the artistic responses they provoke. This second 'reading' – which this review follows – is further validated by the decision to publish the catalogue in Autumn 2020 to coincide with the US presidential elections as Enwezor wished, although the opening of the exhibition was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.[3]

[1] Okwui Enwezor, "Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America", in *Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America*, ed. Naomi Beckwith, Massimiliano Gioni, Glenn Ligon, Mark Nash and Okwui Enwezor (London: Phaidon, 2020), 7.
[2] Massimiliano Gioni, "Postscriptum", in *Grief and Grievance*, 9.
[3] "Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America", New Museum, accessed 2 August 2021, https://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/grief-and-grievance-art-and-mourning-in-america-1.

The essays can be grouped into two categories. Some engage critically with the exhibition's artworks, which are beautifully illustrated in the catalogue, while the rest provide a philosophical, poetic or political analysis of racial injustices and crimes in African-American history. Two thought-provoking examples of the latter are Ta-Nehisi Coates's text which examines the racial politics of Trump's presidency – "The First White President" – and Saidiya Hartman's essay on resisting the fragmentation of the archive when thinking of "black death".[4] As one cannot do justice to the philosophical complexity of all these essays in a short review, a few key examples shall be discussed.

The first essay of the catalogue, "Between Grief and Grievance, a New Sense of Justice" by Judith Butler, provides the core conceptualisation of the terminology utilised throughout the book – "[g]rief and grievance: loss and the call to justice".[5] According to Butler, "justice" can be found through "reparation, acknowledgment, or punishment, but when the law is the problem", one does not know where or how to find justice.[6] At the basis of Butler's argument lies the issue that not all lives are perceived as "grievable".[7] Therefore, "grief" is transformed to "grievance" when its aim is "to assert the value of that lost life".[8] Simultaneously, "white grievance" emerges exactly against this kind of "petition for racial justice".[9]

However, as Butler asserts, grief is not only the result of a death: "[t]he pervasive sense that someone's life is *imminently* grievable means that mourning, coextensive with life, has already started at birth".[10] This point is also poetically raised by Claudia Rankine in her essay, where she explains that black motherhood in America means that at any given moment, a mother might lose her role as a mother if her child is killed.[11] "[F]or African-American families", suggests Rankine, "this living in a state of mourning and fear remains commonplace".[12] In this essay, she discusses many different cases of racial crimes and how the existence or non-existence of images was linked both to the mother's mourning and to evidentiary purposes. A key example of how images of dead black people were treated as a tool that could demand "national mourning" was the violent killing of Emmett Till in 1955.[13] In this case, his mother asked for his coffin to remain open and permitted her son's brutally violated body to be photographed.[14] Interestingly, another essay in the catalogue on the artistic uses and the politics of images "of the civil rights struggle" by Naomi Beckwith suggests that Till's case marks "a reordering in the relationship between images of black trauma and political action".[15] In other words, since that moment, black people started claiming the images of their dead and using them as powerful tools against racial injustices.

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[4] Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The First White President", in *Grief and Grievance*, 32-41; Saidiya Hartman, "Dead Book Remains", in *Grief and Grievance*, 117–121.
[5] Judith Butler, "Between Grief and Grievance, a New Sense of Justice", in *Grief and Grievance*, 11.
[6] Ibid., 11.
[7] Ibid., 11. For Butler on "grievability", see also Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2010).
[8] Butler, "Between Grief and Grievance, a New Sense of Justice", 12.
[9] Ibid., 14.
[10] Ibid., 14; italics in the original.
[11] Claudia Rankine, "The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning", in *Grief and Grievance*, 17.
[12] Ibid., 17.
[13] Ibid., 18.
[14] Ibid., 18.
[15] Naomi Beckwith, "My Soul Looks Back in Wonder", in *Grief and Grievance*, 180 and 181.

On that note lies the importance of this exhibition's artworks, which could be seen as guiding the viewer to challenge the notion that "[d]ead blacks are a part of normal life here", to echo Rankine.[16] Both Mark Nash's and Massimiliano Gioni's essays elaborate on the exhibition's rationale.[17] In his essay, Nash maps the four "themes" that describe the show's artworks: i) three-dimensional works that refer to "slavery"; ii) artworks that examine "the history of the civil rights movement"; iii) artworks on the visualisation of "the black body"; and iv) abstract art.[18] Gioni also stresses that the show underlined the use of artistic abstraction as a powerful way to represent "trauma and its aftermath without recurring to the frontality of explicit images".[19] Of course, the remarks linked to the displayed artworks might be grasped easier by those that visited the show in person. Otherwise, the reader is solely dependent on the catalogue's illustrations, something that does not always allow for a nuanced understanding of the pieces. But isn't that always the case when perceiving art from a two-dimensional image reproduction? Here, this becomes less troublesome due to the inclusion of the detailed artists' entries at the end of the catalogue, which apart from biographical information provides useful analysis of the included artworks. [20]

Finally, the essays by Nash and Gioni have another common thread. They both make a more personal link between the show and Enwezor's life and curatorial career. As Gioni aptly explains, *Grief and Grievance* can also be read as an "autobiographical exhibition", both due to Enwezor's biography and to the fact that he "was facing his own mortality as he worked on the show".[21] This highlights another aspect of this book's contribution, as it marks one of the final projects of one of the most important contemporary curatorial figures: Okwui Enwezor. A curator that asked us all to pay attention to black grief, mourning and racial injustices in America. And surely, this extensive catalogue succeeds in assisting us to do so.

[16] Rankine, "The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning", 17.
[17] Mark Nash, "Registers of Mourning", in *Grief and Grievance*, 193–197; Massimiliano Gioni, "Songs of Mourning, Songs of Resistance", in *Grief and Grievance*, 187–191.
[18] Nash, "Registers of Mourning", 194–195.
[19] Gioni, "Songs of Mourning, Songs of Resistance", 188.
[20] Maya Harakawa, Molly Superfine, and Mlondolozi "Mlondi" Zondi, "Artists' Entries", in *Grief and Grievance*, 246–257.
[21] Gioni, "Songs of Mourning, Songs of Resistance", 189.