

## **preface**

# Devastated Creator: Theorizing as Grieving Mother-Author- Spectator

I must take space and time to share that I write this book about racial childhoods as a grieving mother. I live in a deep piercing pain from the sudden death of my younger son, Lakas, that may bring up for the reader a discomfort with the sadness fueling my motivation to study Asian/American childhoods in the movies—which is to connect to my child who is no longer developing.<sup>1</sup> It may be too dark to come into proximity to my impossible undertaking as mother-author-spectator where creativity coincides with devastation. Lakas will come up again and again because this book is a willing for him to live, for me to feel his precious life as I experience movies about children at the ages he could not live in the past ten years.

Grief births this book, and the act of creating it helps me crawl out of devastation. As the mom of an older son who's left home for college and a deceased child who would be a teenager today, I remember anticipating with fear their violent birthing. The simultaneity of life and death in the opening of my body to give birth, with the risk of death ever present, scared me. Sigmund Freud conceived how “Eros, the life drive to preserve living substance and join together individuals to create higher organisms, families, and nations, is itself inseparably joined to . . . the drive to disjoin and dissolve all aggregates psychic, social, or organic.”<sup>2</sup> I recognize this conjoining in the act of giving birth as one that teeters at the border of life and death when the body takes on a force of expulsion. Freud goes further, however, to chart his understanding of human existence beyond this moment. He argues that together the life and death drives, Eros and Thanatos, precisely capture how he perceived “human life itself . . . governed by a process of creation and destruction.”<sup>3</sup> I recognize this phenomenon in

the experience of the death of my child—as a mom who expected that in surviving childbirth, a particular natural order would ensue.

The physical disattachment in giving birth to my children—whom my husband, Dan, and I named Bayan (which means home, country, belonging in Filipino) and Lakas (meaning strength, both inner and of the people, also in Filipino)—came as a series of powerful oceanic tidal waves inside my body, teaching me about my physical and psychic capabilities. After almost two days of labor for our older child, my body was opened via emergency C-section, and my husband saw my insides before I was sewn up. Indeed, Eros and Thanatos, death and life, come together inexorably in giving birth.<sup>4</sup>

Almost three years later, after the delivery of our younger son, Lakas, the scar from my second C-section would not close, would not heal, so I was put on bed rest for six weeks. The scar ceaselessly oozed a substance that my doting husband would vigilantly pat dry to ward off infection. In those weeks, I could barely get up and could not walk. Holding our new baby, Lakas, and cradling our older son, Bayan, as a big brother nonetheless created this delicious joy I savor. We were alive even as we straddled the edge of death. Bed rest occurred at a time when our family saw no one else. I remember the warm, wonderful, purposeful, and focused feeling cradling our family. Still. I savor the experience of the complete four of us. We did not yet know what was ahead in our severing, our incompleteness in meeting death. I always thought I would die first. He did too. When he was alive, Lakas one time said, “When I am fifty, you’ll be dead.” I did not deny that would likely be the truth.

Lakas died on Christmas Day in 2013 at age eight, when I was forty-three. Today the memory of his body, character, and personality endures ever more in how I perceive mine. He remains undeniably part of my physical self-perception and my psychic self-understanding. Without him, I am not the me I recognize. It is not the me I intended or ever wanted. I stand at a crossroads onto a new self while a different self-understanding persists. My body knows his body. He was here, the scar under my belly his gateway into this world we share—where he lived and where he remains in us, of us, among us. In a child’s dying, that is the thing to remember for me, that this is the world where he remains. I cannot go elsewhere to be with him. This is the place to stay. This is where he is.

Ten years since his death, I also know there is no dimension of time or space that can keep us apart. The best is when I feel his presence now. Christmas Day on the eight-year anniversary of the day he died, I woke up

receiving five kisses from him on my face. Christmas was when he died, a confounding day I begin feeling on his September birthday, a three-month cloudy season of sensing a looming disaster is about to strike. To get through, I repeat our rituals, the things we did as the day of his death approaches soon after the day of his birth: communing with nature, baking his Halloween pies, baking the Christmas tree cookies he learned from his grandma, and our family hugging each other.

The physical awareness of my body that I experienced as a new mother, from the very physical encounters in the first days to the present, informs my reading of films as a grieving mother-author-spectator when I finally recognized in his death that I am a very attached mother as a conscious response to my own neglected childhood. Now I go through sorrow and mourning as a creative act of self-fortification (rebuilding the self) and flourishing (thriving, living anew) in making this work take place in the world that is his too. In this book, I am mother-author-spectator, devastated creator, asserting what I call an agentic attunement, a lingering and waiting awareness and anticipation of my children that started immediately when they were born. The anticipation of the children's needs awakens an alertness in me. It is a feeling I recognize in myself when a film begins: the senses alert and awake. This is the very way I pay attention to the movies of my study, for they help me to imagine Lakas at the ages he was and the ages he did not quite reach. Six-year-old David, a main character in the 2020 movie *Minari*, already evaluates others around him, assessing his parents' repeated fighting, judging his grandmother's rituals, and analyzing the white people around them as representatives of hostility or welcome. I remember Lakas, almost six, measuring the school playground on his first day of kindergarten before soon becoming so popular on it, in all his brown confident glory within his wealthy and predominantly white community. Observation, as psychoanalyst Fred Pine asserts, is the bedrock of psychoanalysis.<sup>5</sup> And Lakas's actions as well as David's occur within historical and social contexts: the demographics of the spaces can determine what is aspired to and actualized there. Surely practicing observation during kindergarten, Lakas landed on this personal philosophy: "I want everyone to be treated the same," which he practiced in his way of always including others and making kindness fun. Lakas likely assessed the predominant whiteness of his environs and decided he would be brown and proud, painting dark self-portraits every year for class. Because brown kids historically get short shrift in educational institutions, this is unusual and strong. Psychoanalytic methods of observation enable us to practice

such agentic attunement to conceptualize relations on-screen or in a scene, interpreting how they shape our lived experiences.

### **Precarity and Inequality: Intimate Attachment**

Precarity centrally informs this book about racialized childhood in the movies because racial and other inequities fundamentally shape childhood, as do privilege and security. We see it early, as pregnancy is itself a site of racialization, as Khiara Bridges argues in *Reproducing Race* (2011). Indeed, raising babies made me aware of the investments in different kinds of childhoods that, in turn, shape their experiences, as well as made me keenly attuned to my circumstances and surroundings. One example is the comfort of class privilege in having space for my children to cry (and I could attend to why) without worrying about shared walls. Indeed, access to advantages and resources is the terrain where unequal childhoods form. In giving my children heritage names as people of color in the United States, I placed value on their cultural inheritance, even if nonwhite ethnic names themselves have real consequences in the job market or in navigating the social sphere. I trusted in the strength they would gain from the affirmation of their cultural background as a source of pride to fuel and buoy them, even catapult them to wherever they wished to land with their history and heritage in tow. Lakas would tell new friends on the playground who would fumble his name, “It’s easy. Just say it,” as he patiently and confidently expected them to do it right then and there. While he may not have known it, the act of teaching claimed his belonging and his right to be addressed correctly. As a mother, I intended for my children’s names to act as assertions of self-definition, cultural wealth, and strength in a world of racial and class discrimination. Their names helped to expand boundaries of knowledge and acceptance for themselves and for others who learned to say them.

For me, mothering is about shaping the present, the inheritance of the past, and actively forging the future without fear, so we chose those names to clear a path for them to claim their legacy. It is a form of “mothering as social change,” as best-selling author Angela Garbes argues in *Essential Labor* (2022), where the work of caregiving contains within it not only the needed labor to enable other labor but the goal of creating a more just world. Indeed, the structural contexts of nurturing in the present involve concrete advantages and disadvantages. Still, I assert participation in the

long arc of ancestors and descendants bound together in my expanded understanding of the diaspora, opportunity penalty from racialized names of color be damned.

The death of a child distorts that arc, makes life feel disordered and unnatural, leading me to accept there are things certain and uncertain, out of my control. Things happen for no reason at all. Theoretical psychoanalyst, philosopher, and film theorist Teresa de Lauretis theorizes the death drive as “the last avatar of sexuality, that agent of unbinding, negativity, unconsciousness, and resistance to the coherence of the ego that was the cornerstone and the discovery of psychoanalysis.”<sup>6</sup> This does not quite feel like the opposite of Eros—going toward life. Grief is actional in the sense that living with an awareness of the force of the death drive is, for a living person, a creative act of making sense of the nearness and facticity of death.

Grief illuminates the position one holds to enact powerfully what it means to be born and what it means to mother and parent within these circumstances and conditions. That is, death leads to a grief that reveals the need I have for my child—not just his for me. The need I have to care for Lakas is a source of joy, a purposeful opportunity, and a relished responsibility. Encouraging curiosity and whatever his interest—baseball, diving, Legos, cooking, Scrabble—is a form of agentic attunement between me and him, and our family: to care for him generatively so he may launch well. Others feel its life-giving and life-defining power too. The amputation of the sensuousness of the physical relationship between caregiver and child, between me and Lakas? The elimination of physicality in hugging as an expression of care and love? That disappearance hurts, aggravated by the appearance of the casual cruelty that grievers face.

Things people have said to me in the aftermath of his death: *You will lose your life. You will die while alive. You will become a shell of yourself. Things happen for a reason. He is in a better place. He wanted to die. He was meant to die.* What I know above and through this noise is that he loved life. We loved life together. We did things. He would say, “I’m bored. Let’s do something.” It would inevitably be something easy and fun. A walk. Climbing the highest bars of the play structure. The beach. Digging deep in the sand and the waves he would inevitably dive into. Playdates with friends. Making dirt cake—crushed Oreos, gummy worms, and unlimited sprinkles. A pumpkin pie from a recipe he learned at the school library story time—of which he brought half (the first pie he ever baked) to the librarian (we continue to deliver them to her today). And he would always sit on my lap after a meal. Satisfied. He gave the best hugs. Satisfying.

Childhood and mothering involve acts of intimate attachment that describe the sensuous physicality of the relationship. I remember the peaceful connection when both my children strongly latched on to my lactating breasts, which released the milk through several holes in each nipple. In the descent of the milk, the process of its draining, and by the force of my children's suckling, I felt our energetic exchange in the entirety of my body. While milk from my body sustained life, psychoanalysts like D. W. Winnicott, who was also a pediatrician, say there is no interchange between mother and child at that moment: the breast is a part of the child, and the breast is a part of the mother.<sup>7</sup> They each experience and perceive the process as part of their own selves. It is fascinating to think about how the child perceives that act, which for me as a mother was indeed a giving of my body for the baby's sustenance, as I felt it physically affecting me. It is a very particular act of purposeful redirection of that body part for another who is apart from me yet is part of me. The attachment changed me in capturing my body not only in service of my offspring but also in how this relation of giving continues throughout the demands of the baby's new life (through the rest of mine even in his death, actually).

Mothering, for me, combines awareness along with the action that arises to sustain another toward their independence. And in the case of the mother-spectator-author there is the recognition of how film can help map the path toward healthy selves, which encourages my formulation of agentic attunement—*paying attention to the child's development with their future sovereignty in heart and mind*. The interchange from mother/parent/caregiver to child is felt then and throughout life as mutual, in the trust that my child learned and that I demonstrated as trustworthy in that experience. People would comment on Lakas's attachment to me and mine to him—joking that he was my appendage. I know it ultimately gave him confident independence to feel my attunement to his needs, helping launch him on a path toward better chances for successful self-sovereignty.

Parental attention to the child's demands—that everyday interchange—shapes children now and in their future. Meeting their needs strengthens our bond, and the self-satisfaction results from their dependency being met by others—even if they are unaware that it exists outside of themselves. The ability to meet their needs becomes part of how they understand themselves and the ease with which they move in the world. This does not mean that every need is met but that the broader parenting style—the repetition or dependability of receiving care—contextualizes child development in terms of the drives and instincts that exist in children and the

role of the external (structures and relations) in shaping them. That refers not only to their desires, and whether they are being met, but also to their resulting self-esteem and self-confidence from the expression and meeting of those needs. Comfort in a changed diaper and being acknowledged by having their needs attended to matter in shaping the baby's confidence and achievement of peace. Persistent neglect and repeated disregard can build feelings of insecurity and undervaluation. A child's need for care is immediate, urgent, and impactful—and it makes them intensely and breathtakingly vulnerable. If a child is neglected and does not feel attended to as part of an overall caregiving approach, where they cannot achieve ease, what happens to their sense of themselves as valued?

Psychoanalyst and pediatrician D. W. Winnicott coined the phrase “going on being,” which can refer to the peace an infant achieves in being able to trust that their caregiver is meeting their needs. If there are deficits in the care they receive, then this state is hard to come by. In the earliest stages of life, babies possess the drive to live, to eat, to defecate, to breathe. These drives, however, are relational as the baby experiences whether their needs are being met by a caregiver. Needs are shaped by relations and cannot be understood outside of them.

A central tenet in the four psychologies—drive, ego, object relations, and self psychology—is indeed “the patient's contemporary and remembered relations with significant others.”<sup>8</sup> This begins early in life and continues. Not only does psychoanalysis show how the development of the self relies on interactions with the external world from the very beginning of development, but the four psychologies work together to determine how urges, drives, and ego find themselves intertwined with objects and self-formation. That is, psychoanalysts listen to patients describe their relationships and help them interpret them in order to shape their self-understanding and life experiences. Winnicott identifies the self as always in relation to the other, and he works squarely within the dyad or dialectics between mother/caregiver and child—focusing on the relationship as significantly constituting both. In my analyses I incorporate object relations theory and self psychology without forsaking drives and ego psychology. I want to make room for what of life's choices can be of “our own making” in interpreting the inventory of our experiences through both psychoanalysis and filmmaking.<sup>9</sup> Agentic attunement captures the power of paying attention to experiences—as spectators, film scholars, and filmmakers—and how we can interpret them to establish helpful narratives in child and adult development.

Indeed, conditions and circumstances in capitalism—such as the lack of universal childcare and an inadequate minimum wage—may violently prevent parents from caring for their child adequately by requiring their separation early in parenting and childhood. Political and social factors shape object relations. Nevertheless, an agentic attunement between parent/caregiver and child can still be cultivated. Constant presence is not required; being away does not preclude an agentic attunement that leads to security. As a working mom, I wanted my infants to receive care that followed my own philosophy, which not every working parent can afford or have the privilege to contract or choose. My boys' caregivers and I worked to build their confidence and independence.

For me, the carnality of wiping feces off the babies, how the smear at times went up their backs, and how the urine would occasionally fountain into my eye demonstrated the physical attunement that occurs between child and caregiver. I recall these experiences as the tethered dynamic between me and my infant children, where I learned how to detect when they wanted to stop eating, or became aware of when the poop came, or the burp, or the cry. We communicate and develop a forceful attachment. Yet, I recognize that the experiences children undergo are their own; as a parent or caregiver, I am merely attempting to decipher their needs as separate entities from my body.

As the mother of a teen who just left home, I was never forewarned about how painful releasing him would be and how it is all worthwhile—simultaneously. I want to hold on as I let go. Everything we do to raise him results in this confident self-sufficiency and readiness to contribute to the world through talents, skills, sense of responsivity to self and others, and more. The dreams of my older son, Bayan, entail a departure from our home and a physical detachment that gives us light in this life, a feeling of helping to shape the future, and his independence is a physical manifestation of the love we gave and continue to give. His departure is not a death, for it coexists with the joy of his autonomy and the launching of his self-sovereignty. He now makes his own way at a developmental stage that feels right. It is an affirmation of our family continuity as he pursues his own goals. In contrast, I could have died when my younger son, Lakas, died. The stopping of his life threatened my own continuity, my own very living. In counting how old he would be today, imagining his needs and his desires, and in honoring his life through writing this book, I still mother him.



My film *80 Years Later* (2022) focuses on racial inheritance and what gets passed on within a family. A key collaborator on the film, who did not know me before Lakas died, said he did not know how I was as a mother—whether I was a good mother. I do not know how he defines good mothering—to me it is about agentic attunement while maintaining awareness of our separate yet bound selves. That is, a devoted mother remains nearby, making sure not to smother the child with intense infantilization or premature adultification so that they can achieve independence with their full selves—heritage and history included. The child is not her/ them, nor a mere extension of her/ them, and is at a specific developmental stage that any parental expectations should recognize. For me, the goal of motherhood is to raise a child with an independent self. Agentic attunement recognizes that separation.

I write this book, then, from the perspective, practice, and position of an attentive mother-author-spectator to the child on-screen as I long and yearn for one child who no longer lives at home and for another who is no longer alive. Devastated creator. I write this book as a way to imagine how Lakas would have grown up and how he would be growing today. To be clear, I write to affirm the preciousness of those years—that I know uniquely from profound loss—so that it is not simply a projection or displacement of grief onto the characters in the films.

The ages of the children and young people in the movie are the ages Lakas would have been in the decade after he had died. He would be eighteen years old now. As viewers, we are situated subjects, and I view films as the mother of a dead child for whom art can provide life-affirming connection, about how to live without his physical presence, especially in helping to imagine what could be, in the face of what cannot be, for a child no longer progressing into his own life except through what he left behind—his own friendships and his family in the way he imprinted us and in continuing the impact he made on us.