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# Introduction

## Opening Up Lament

Perhaps you have been with someone who, in the midst of describing a loss, begins to weep. Perhaps you've heard someone trying to continue speaking while sobbing. Or you might have heard someone begin to weep as they sang a song that moved them. Apart from these scenarios, you have heard the label "lament" applied to all sorts of calmer discourses decrying some situation or event. But this book begins by describing something you might have only glimpsed in the media – in the first episode of the HBO television series *Six Feet Under*, or in media coverage of Iraq (including footage used in *Fahrenheit 9/11*). You might have deemed this blend of words, tears, and melody quite foreign. Those three elements are familiar by themselves, but perhaps unfamiliar in combination.

By lament I mean, first and foremost, this combination of three elements – tuneful, texted weeping. Lament – including (but not limited to) the funeral dirge (Lee 2002) – is often sung or chanted. It is also composed of coherent words, like the lyrics of a song; thus lament has text. And lament appears overwhelmingly emotional; in most traditions treated here, a performance without sobbing would not be a lament (for example a *bilāp* or *itkuvirsi*, a Bangla<sup>1</sup> or Finnish lament).

If you want to think productively about history, life, suffering, or culture, lament (to borrow from Lévi-Strauss) is good to think with. As a means of grappling with loss, lament has served societies both ancient and recent. Today, observers of culture – journalists, literary critics, anthropologists, and anyone else commenting on any form of culture – and performers of culture (especially revivalists, but also psychotherapists and American clergy) *invoke lament* as they try to grapple with change. For "ancients" and "moderns," lament is very useful indeed.

It would be a crying shame if lament passed from the scene. And if shame over tuneful, wordy crying is spreading, that too demands our attention. But so do the lament-like ways in which people of all sorts – scholars, priests, psychologists, relatives of lamenters and lamenters themselves – talk about lament. All of these stories I must tell. It is best, however, to turn first to defining the domain of inquiry. What do we mean by lament?

Lament is a typically improvisational genre in which women (and some men) have expressed grief and aired grievances, one in which communities have ritually reconstituted themselves in the face of loss. Lament is thus a lens through which many scholars have examined emotions, musics, poetic languages, and the societies in which those take shape.

And there is more. Instead of simply asking “Why (and how) do the far-off so-and-so’s cry as they do – and do they do so as they once did?”<sup>2</sup> I ask, too, about feelings – including *ours* – about ritual wailing and the possibility that it might vanish. It is important to investigate this second topic in order to better understand lament’s power over us as well as over apparently exotic Others.

In fact, I argue that, even if traditional lament is fast disappearing from our modern world, something related – call it postmodern mourning – is alive and well. The study of lament thus gives us a new perspective on modernity and postmodernity. In fact, for some, the loss of lament – or even the loss of culture – is what’s lamented. The recitation of our losses is the modern ritual, and it is strikingly similar to lament. And so, in addition to other warrants for such a book as this, we have another – that, even as lament “disappears” along with “vanishing cultures,” it attempts to redefine our modern experience.

### Three Scenarios: An Overview

This book is about lament as a genre of crying with melody and words. But it is a layered cake of three different stories. Consider the first framework a kind of Myth of the Fall.

#### *First scenario: positively losing lament*

The first, relatively positivist, story begins in mythic (once upon a) time. There was once a “traditional world” consisting of thousands of different human societies in which some women and men made up and sang laments on various occasions. They performed these laments when someone died.

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In societies where women married men outside of their villages and left their own kin to live with their husbands' families, women sang bridal laments. These were conventional. Yet they were not what, say, an Anglican might mean if she referred to rituals, i.e., acts of speaking or chanting whose text and melody were quite fixed. Instead, laments, though ritualistic in function, were improvised for the occasion.<sup>3</sup> Women (and occasionally men [Greene 1999]) would perform laments at the time of death and other moments of leave-taking like marriage. In that sense laments were predictable. Yet performers creatively improvised on predictable themes (sorrow, sometimes anger; melodies; words, etc.). Audiences could consistently recognize them, because performances bore a strong family resemblance to one another.

In some places, the dual nature of these performances as "improvised convention" was reflected in solo verses, set against choral sections. A professional or relatively expert lamenter (Böckel 1913:97; Tenhunen 2007) – or a woman linked to the family of the deceased – might *lead* the lament, improvising verses. Between such lines, a *group* of singers might echo the verses or join in for a set of repeated lines. Or the leader might take up the sometimes unmusical cries or shouts of the most sorely grieving, the closest kin, making them into a more musical line to be echoed by a chorus of neighbors and more distant kin.

Here is the climax of this first story: In the last century, such laments have become increasingly rare; an enormous body of evidence supports this claim (e.g., Dwyer 2008, on the disappearance of bridal laments from the Turkic world). In my own field site (Bangladesh) I heard people laugh at, or express religious disapproval of, crying out loud. Quiet crying is becoming more common, particularly among urban classes and upwardly mobile modern rural people. They express a kind of shame about "traditions" like loud crying.

That first scenario motivates the first part of the title, *Crying Shame*. It poses a problem whose solution the other scenarios provide: If what many call *cultures*, and not only persons, are said to "die" (rhetoric I do not judge here), and these "cultures" are composed of knowledge grouped into somewhat scripted scenarios – including how to grieve – who laments *their* death, and how?

*Second scenario: exploiting lament*

The first story is incomplete without a second. Rather than mythic time, I open this story with a case study from the late 20th century.

During the wars in the former Yugoslavia, Serbian soldiers would gather in their camps at night and sing songs – “national epic laments” (Lee 2002:10) – about the storied losses of the distant past, some memorializing the defeat of the Serbs at the hands of Ottoman Turks and the eclipse of Serbian culture resulting from those defeats. Nationalist forces revived songs that had been underground during Tito’s socialism, exploiting them to stoke genocidal passion. Thus this scenario speaks not of lost lament but of modernist-nationalist-militarist forces co-opting a song-form that, though not quite improvised, is related to lament.

Some laments tell stories. There are also stories (like this book) *about* lament – *metastories*, stories about stories. The second scenario complicates the first metastory about lament. Neither crying, nor music, nor the verbalization of grief and grievance are “dying.” Yet something is changing. The nexus of tears, music, and words that constituted performance genres we call lament is breaking apart, sometimes reassembled in what Andrei Codrescu describes as the fetishization of folklore in eastern Europe (personal communication, April 1999). Milosevic’s legitimation strategy twisted grievance rhetorics to serve the cause of violent post-socialist ethno-nationalism.

Whereas the first scenario ends in the loss of lament, the second ends in its co-optation. The record of 20th-century nation-states is mixed: some (for example China during the Cultural Revolution) promulgate policies that restrict lamenting (Kipnis 1997:1, 27) – while others give lament a new life and save it from the dustbin of history to which the first story consigns it.

### *Third scenario: the lament of postmodernity*

Finally, this book tells a third, very different, sort of story. It is about other stories – including one I’ve told (Wilce 1998a:vi) – that use lament to construct a larger tale about modernity as loss (Benjamin 1996[1916]; Ivy 1994). This book analyzes such metalaments as Foucault might have, looking around the world and tracing connections between forces – especially explicit critiques of “backward” forms of grieving – that push lament onstage or backstage. I reflect on cultural globalization and on the *metacultural* forces (Urban 2001) that affect culture-in-motion. Thus this book contributes to that genre of anthropology analyzing not single societies but global cultural processes (Appadurai 1996; Bauman and Briggs 2003; Erlmann 1999).

But let us suspend such abstract claims for a moment and look at evidence that lament is either disappearing or being twisted into something totally new.

### **“The Language You Cry In”: Illustrating the Three Scenarios**

The 1999 film *The Language You Cry In* illustrates all three of the scenarios above. It offers not only an account of, but also a remedy for, genre loss – in this case, the loss of lament (Scenario 1). The distributor’s website plugs it as a “scholarly detective story” ([www.newsreel.org/films/langyou.htm](http://www.newsreel.org/films/langyou.htm)). It is also the story of the collaboration of black and white Americans with Sierra Leoneans in recovering the steps by which “an ancient funeral dirge” left Africa and its ritual context, traveled to the Gullah Islands, was recorded by linguist Lorenzo Turner (Wade-Lewis 2007), and was rediscovered *while the cameras rolled* in Africa in the 1990s.

The history behind the film begins in 1933 when Lorenzo Turner recorded Amelia Dawley singing this song in “a Georgia fishing village” in Gullah country ([www.newsreel.org/films/langyou.htm](http://www.newsreel.org/films/langyou.htm)):

#### AMELIA’S SONG

*Ah waku muh monuh kambay yah lee luh lay tambay  
Ah waku muh monuh kambay yah lee luh lay kah.  
Ha suh wileego seehai yuh gbangah lilly  
Ha suh wileego dwelin duh kwen  
Ha suh wileego seehi uh kwendaayah.*

Everyone come together, let us work hard;  
the grave is not yet finished; let his heart be perfectly at peace.  
Everyone come together, let us work hard:  
the grave is not yet finished; let his heart be at peace at once.  
Sudden death commands everyone’s attention,  
like a firing gun.  
Sudden death commands everyone’s attention,  
oh elders, oh heads of family  
Sudden death commands everyone’s attention,  
like a distant drum beat.<sup>4</sup>

Ten years after Turner recorded Dawley's song, he played it for his Sierra Leonean student Solomon Caulker, who recognized the lyrics as Mende. Caulker noted the key repeated term *kambei* (grave), which, as the film's narrative tells us, "led him to suspect that [the song] was part of an ancient funeral dirge." Turner published a translation of the song, which Dawley had memorized but not understood. But how had this Mende dirge survived the Transatlantic Passage and slavery to be recorded two centuries later? Where exactly had it come from? What had it once meant?

Lorenzo Turner had only begun the detective work. It is the film's on-screen heroes – two white Americans, anthropologist Joseph Opala and ethnomusicologist Cynthia Schmidt – who discover before our very eyes the song's links to an ancient graveside ceremony called *Tenjami* ("crossing the river"; Thomas-Houston 1999:128). Together with the film's writer-directors Alvaro Toepke and Angel Serrano, they finish the long story of the dirge, in effect adding their own chapter – which I shall describe at the end of this section.

From the opening scene, showing a cloud swirling around a sun slowly being eclipsed, the film memorializes losses black Americans have suffered:<sup>5</sup>

Africa, 18th century. A young woman is snatched from her village by slave traders, forced apart forever from her lover, her motherland, her language, her identity. This is the non-history of millions of African American women and men, a wall of silence, a mysterious past that memory fights to preserve from the onslaught of time but which ends up shrouded in darkness.

The scene shifts, and we see narrator Vertamae Grosvenor with her back to the ocean – presumably the Atlantic. She says,

And this is the story that we're going to tell you today, the story of how a person was able to go back, before the arrival of the slave ships to the coast of the New World. This is a story of memory, the story of how the memory of an African American family was pieced together through a song sung by a woman named Amelia Dawley [scene shifts to inside of a Sierra Leonean home with five people looking in a ceramic urn, lit only by candlelight], *an ancient African song* with a legend to have *the mystical power to connect those who sing it with their ancestors, with their roots, through time and space*. [The volume of Dawley's singing is turned up now, and the scene shifts to her gravestone off the coast of South Carolina.] (emphasis added)

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And so, of the losses suffered by African Americans, the film makes “memory” one of the most significant. Grosvenor hints that the sharing of memories requires a shared genre (see Chapter 5 below) – and not just any genre, but one imbued with “mystical power,” a genre that by its very nature “links the living and the dead.” For most African Americans – and, as we find out later in the film, most Mende-speaking Sierra Leoneans – the genre (funeral dirges) had mystical power to connect worlds when that connection had been lost.

*The Language You Cry In* makes the lost-and-found song a key trope of “culture.” After the scenes described above we see shifting images of African Americans, from busy, well-dressed urbanites with employee badges to people looking homeless and dejected. Grosvenor tells us,

Slave-owners knew that, to master a human being, no matter what his race or color, all you needed to do was to *strip* him of his identity, [shifting to Africa, women daubing mud on naked chests in an apparent ritual context, with strains of lamenting audible in the background] his land [shifting to frontal view of young woman], *the strength of his [sic] culture*, and the memory of his ancestors [the camera on Bendu Jabati lamenting, with a group of women sitting behind her]. [Now focusing on a male elder’s calm face – ] Memory is power. We can’t rewrite the history of humanity but we can rekindle memory, or at least a part of it. (emphasis added)

As we learn later, the Mende-speaking Sierra Leonean woman, Bendu Jabati, *had* been keeping the flame of memory burning. But viewers will understand that the central figures constituting the “we” who rekindle memory are the film itself and its two main heroes.

Playing out the twin themes of loss and recovery, Grosvenor moves on to the discovery of the link between Africa and the Gullah coast, the link constituted through the *mystical* song, the *ancient funeral dirge*:

Linguist Lorenzo Turner and musicologist Lydia Parish came here [to the Gullah coast] to carry out research into the language and music of the Gullahs. . . . Professor Turner made a momentous discovery – a 50-year-old woman who sang a *haunting song*, the longest text in an African language found in the United States.

The film moves eventually to Sierra Leone and to a postmodern phenomenon. The Sierra Leonean government contacted American anthropologist Opala (presumably a long-time resident of or regular visitor to the

country) to arrange a *performance of culture*. That call prompted Opala to see what else could be done with Turner's discovery of "Amelia's song." The team of Schmidt and Opala took the old recording around the district of Sierra Leone where they suspected the song had originated. After many disappointments, they finally found Bendu Jabati in one outlying Mende village, the one person who recognized the song Turner had recorded. Schmidt asks her about it, and the camera focuses on Schmidt's face:

I asked her to talk about it, and she said that she had learned it from her grandmother. [Camera shifts to Bendu Jabati speaking in Mende, with subtitles]: "**That song brought back memories of my grandmother.**" [Back to Schmidt] One day she had asked her grandmother about the song, ". . . What is that song that you're singing?" And the grandmother said, "*This is a song that I remember our ancestors by. This is the song that I sing to remember my late husband, to remember my mother, to remember my father.*" And she said that that song was a *song that they sang at their burials*, and that it was associated with a very, very important ceremony [called Tenjami]. And this ceremony was very special to Mende people because it connected them with their ancestors . . . a song that they sang to bridge [gesturing from her right to left with both hands, then back again] the world of the living and the world of those who had gone before them.

Note that, apart from a brief moment (represented in boldface), Schmidt speaks (to the camera) *for* Jabati.

Bendu Jabati then tells the camera how her grandmother had guided her to "perform the [Tenjami] ceremony" with singing and a series of bodily moves, how the elder had commanded her to "*look mournful*," saying, "Even after I die, this is how you must perform this."

*The Language You Cry In* weaves its story across two and a half centuries, from the horrific Transatlantic Passage in the 18th century to the years just before the film's completion in 1999. If the 18th-century slave trade stands for the brutality of early modernity lamented in the film, it dates the loss of *genres* to the late modern 20th century. Even if Turner, Opala, Schmidt, and their colleagues on both sides of the African Diaspora did recover a particular "song" or "dirge" ("Amelia's song") that once circulated as part of the Tenjami ceremony, colonialism and World War I had already destroyed this circulation:

The Tenjami rites are no longer practiced in Bendu's village. Ancient Mende rituals like this were abandoned there at the end of World War I when Mende

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soldiers recruited by the British army came back to the village and introduced Islam and Christianity. But because of her grandmother's insistence that she keep the Tenjami song alive, Bendu was able to pass it on.

So does the film. The crucial chapter (or *interdiscursive link*: see Chapter 4 below) the film added to the long story of this dirge is the story of how our heroes recovered it and made it the centerpiece of the postmodern ritual they arranged with the Sierra Leonean government – the cultural performance the government had wanted, which was eventually coupled with a reunion the heroes arranged between Dawley's American descendants and their Sierra Leonean "kin." In this context cobbled together by the Sierra Leonean government, local musicians, visiting Gullah islanders, and the scholars, African Americans joined Sierra Leoneans in recognizing that the song once lost was now restored. This recognition was a performative act (Austin 1962), and – like all performatives – it at least attempts to bring about a new social fact, an indicative ("Bendu's song is Amelia's song"). Stated differently, since its former ritual context has not been observed since World War I, the celebrated "find" was something of a creation – a dirge made to be a part of something new (a ceremony of international fellowship), rather than a dirge recovered in all its local significance.

The film achieves several things. It reorients the local in terms of the global. Its signifiers – a dirge, folklore, loss, slavery – address educated viewers around the world. Its market or path of circulation is that comfortable postmodern class that hungers for narratives of lost-and-found traditions. And its referential object, an ocean-hopping dirge, mirrors the global circulation of such media productions about loss (and the circulation, in an earlier age of globalization, of slaves). The film narrates the loss of funerary traditions including the dirge (our Scenario 1), and of course uses that theme to create a compelling film (Scenario 2). In recapitulating the first two scenarios, it exemplifies Scenario 3 – using lament to construct the grand narrative of modernity as loss.

**Lament Matters**

Culture – dynamic semiotic processes guiding the production and exchange of material and symbolic forms – matters. Lament matters, too – and not only to scholars, though it has attracted a good deal of scholarly

attention in the last decades. Lament matters to my friends in Finland, leaders of Äänellä Itkijät RY (the Lamenters' Society). To them, Finns desperately *need* "therapeutic" outlets like lament (Tenhunen 2007), associated in the past with Karelians and other minorities (not Finns), and with magically efficacious *ritual*, not therapy.

In local traditions around the world, laments arose in, invoked, and helped constitute social life, in funerals and weddings and far beyond. They have touched on the politics of everyday life, gender relations, and religion (Briggs 1993; Holst-Warhaft 1992). Laments have moved people to action, aestheticizing and thus transforming suffering, shaping affect and social relations, sometimes providing performers with at least marginally legitimated public venues for voicing discontent or exercising resistance. Thus lament has provoked repression. And the truest examples of *ritual* lament (Wilce 2006) enabled the dead to reach the beyond and new marriages to succeed.

Lament matters to anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, and folklorists in part because of its complex relation to the ordering of social practice. Social meanings arise in the face of looming chaos and threats to meaning (de Martino 1972[1948], 2000[1975]). Social scientists from Max Weber to Byron Good (1994:132–134) have sought keys to cultural understanding in local *theodicies*<sup>6</sup> – cultural explanations for pain and death – as much as in local *theologies*. To search for structure even amidst conflict, and for order even in crisis, reflects the human drive to impose semiotic order on a universe whose meaning consistently eludes us.

*Studying* laments – and lamenting – makes sense in the same way. Laments weave stories – stories of the lamented dead and the lamenting family and community. They respond to cracks in the moral structure of local universes, asking (sometimes answering): Why *this* sickness, *this* death, *this* destruction or loss? How can we reconcile ourselves to this and somehow maintain our notions of the moral order (Good 1994:134)?

Laments are windows on culture insofar as they represent the ways people confront crises challenging the order of life (de Martino 2000[1975]). These confrontations reveal the performers' notions not only of suffering and tragedy but also of the moral universe. Revealing the stakes for culture and for persons, this book demonstrates "what an important part dirges play not only in the rituals of death but in the life of the community" (Holst-Warhaft 1992:20).

There is already scholarly awareness of the significance of "lament itself" as a cultural phenomenon; for evidence, see this book's References. This book is unique, however, in recognizing the importance of lament as

trope. It breaks new ground in its exploration of the ways recent voices have en-trope-ized lament. But I will save arguments about the light lament can shed on (post)modern cultural processes for later chapters.

## Key Terms of the Discussion

### *Modernity, postmodernity*

This book offers a new understanding of modernity, relating it to lament. “The loss of myth and ritual,” ritually retold, *is* how we transmit our founding myth, the mythic loss underlying modernity. The representation of loss (of tradition, lament, or even culture) *constitutes* (post)modernity just as lament ritually held together or reconstituted “premodern” worlds (Tolbert 1990).

The term *modernity* is itself a complex shifter – a linguistic sign whose meaning shifts according to context, telling us at least as much about its context and author as about any purportedly objective reality. Tradition and modernity serve in many discourses as ideal types (Weber 1999[1904]), “pure” concepts that intentionally ignore real complexities – in polar opposition. Urban (2001), for example, treats them as opposing metacultural orientations. For him, “modernity” is a metacultural stance that values innovation over tradition, i.e. “newness” over the replication of older cultural products and processes. Discourses around the world continually reproduce modernity and its opposition to tradition. These discourses have power even when we acknowledge that they reify the division between the two.

But tradition and modernity, in fact, coexist. I find evidence of the thoroughgoing hybridity of the major founding voices of European and American modernity, their perpetual turning toward tradition, quite persuasive (Bauman and Briggs 2003). Thus, I propose a Janus-faced vision of modernity: one iconoclastic face sneers at the past, while the other face (sometimes associated with *postmodernism*) looks longingly over the wreckage of tradition. You will find sentences in this book that seem to join the modern and the postmodern. I share Lyotard’s (1984:77) rejection of any sharp distinction between modernity and postmodernity. Not much is radically new about “postmodernity” vis-à-vis “modernity,” though we can distinguish them as cyclical phases.

Modernity as discourse is a force to be reckoned with – even when contested, resisted, played with, or renegotiated. How plural and decentered are the modernities that circulate in our world, how far are they from being singular or purely European (Appadurai 1996; Mitchell 2000)! Yet, even if we deconstruct “modernity,” we still confront discursive moves that project it as a universal monolith. Putting this paradox differently, it is true that there are perhaps countless vernacular modernities, and that whatever integrity modernity has, it only advances in interaction with local realities. Still, modernity is a *project*, a global agenda – a touchstone invoked daily in the media, official discourse, and private conversation.

In many of these local discourses – including less critical academic writings – modernity signifies an experience of rapid, disintegrating social change occasioning widespread suffering (Childs 2000:15). For Weber, capitalist modernity constitutes an “iron cage” (1958[1920–21]). Walter Benjamin’s account of such early-modern forms as the German *Trauerspiel* (“lament-play”) is a sort of materialist theology, a theodicy confronting the world-threat posed by modernity and modern forms of signification. The early Benjamin drew on Hebrew lament and Jewish mysticism to offer a view of history centered on lament as both prayer and protest (Plate 2004:13), a view that is both unique and mystifying. Benjamin used the concept of “the lament for nature” as a trope to sum up the modern world’s suffering. Whatever we might think of this theoretical move, the trope fits much of the global discourse on modernity as well as my argument making lament a constitutive element of modern thought.

Together, these complementary approaches to (post)modernity – as a disputable claim of radical transformation, or as a discourse creating a reality of its own – provide context for my discussion of lament and its representations.

#### *Modeling cultural dynamism and circulation: metaculture*

This book envisions culture through the lens of metacultural processes. Greg Urban’s (2001) insightful analysis of cultural processes from the perspective of metaculture provides us with a new way of thinking about lament, popular talk *about* it, and its academic study.

For Urban, culture is incarnate in physical objects – from ceramics, to the sounds of speaking, to cellulose and those electronic disturbances that broadcasting exploits. In those forms, culture moves and circulates. It has

always circulated across some stretches of time and space; it is defined in terms of its symbolic transmission. “Globalization” refers to the “complex connectivity” that emerges with or is the product of modernity (Tomlinson 1999:2). We encounter it in the form of new technologies (including new electronic media), new forms of intersocietal relations, the increasing penetration of capitalism, and an accelerating circulation of goods and discourses. The intensity of this connectivity is qualitatively new. Globalization reflects, and is enabled by, structures of dominance that emerged in the 19th century. But global circulation of cultural products also engenders resistance to this dominance, and thus reflects ever new forms of hybridity. The unavoidable reality of globalization calls for a shift of anthropological focus from “cultures” – imagined as distinct entities – to ethnoscapes, mediascapes (Appadurai 1996), and metaculture (Urban 2001).

Under contemporary conditions of globalization, many forces – mass media, advertising, and cultural commentary – accelerate, decelerate, or direct the motion of other bits of culture. Ethnomusicological products (CDs from Smithsonian/Folkways or the Finnish Literature Society), ethnographies, and religious commentaries on culture now achieve global circulation. Urban (2001) calls the forces impelling such motion *metacultural*. People desiring, praising, and reproducing one cultural object rather than another give that object a metacultural push. Since metaculture is by definition a secondary piece of culture that is “about” some other, primary piece, academic discourses on human life are metacultural. General anthropology textbooks and scholarly treatises on lament, commentaries on lament, Greek city-states’ attempts to regulate it – and even books about those regulations (Alexiou 1974; Loraux 1998) – are all bits of metaculture.

Metaculture is culture – particularly *reflexive* culture, bits of culture that are *about* other bits of culture. Criticism, praise, denunciation, and evaluation epitomize metaculture. We read, watch, or listen to commentaries and criticism of such cultural objects as films – also examples of metaculture. But neither critics nor academics have a monopoly on sociocultural analysis. Social life would grind to a halt without constant, instantaneous metacultural analysis by social actors of “what is going on here.” Off-the-cuff oral discussion of a lament performed in rural Bangladesh is just as metacultural as newspaper film reviews – or recent documents that circulate from Iran to Kashmir offering theological guidance as to the proper management of public displays of grief involved in Shia ritual lamentation (Pinault 1999a, 1999b).

Thus I propose to study *cultures of lament* as always already *metacultural*. The histories of lament production, transmission, and evaluation are metacultural histories, and this book takes its place in chains of transmission (since it re-presents and recontextualizes some lament texts) and evaluation.

I turn now to summarizing the argument of each chapter.

### Chapter Summary

Part I, “Locating Lament as Object,” opens up the topic of lament. Chapter 2, “For Crying Out Loud,” describes what I mean by lament and explores problems surrounding its definition – problems that other accounts have ignored but that are central to my discussion. One key problem is the relation of lament to textuality. Most scholarly descriptions of lament focus not on the tears but the words. It is not surprising that, wherever lamentation has included words, scholars – typically most comfortable with texts – focus on them. Lyrical textuality enables laments to refer, to be explicitly *about* something. What they are about is most often the past leading up to and including some tragic loss: “Laments are almost always a theatrical representation of the past” (Holst-Warhaft 2000:51). But textuality is more than words. Text is a repeatable, coherent set of signs – and this definition fits musical signs such as melodies (Laskewicz 2003:91), as well as lyrics. Lament’s musicality has attracted almost as much attention as its verbal text. “Traditional people” characterize the music and lyrics of lament as being “about” grief or passion. People feel that lament melodies convey or bespeak grief, with or without words. Thus musical and not only lyrical textuality help give laments their meaning.

Chapter 3, “Lament and Emotion,” asks to what extent lament is about emotion. The chapter uses the topic of lament’s emotionality to offer a new perspective on old problems plaguing Western thought. If emotion is key to understanding lament, what to do with obvious indications of its generic, conventional, and performative qualities? This chapter raises a question that becomes central to later chapters: If lament is emotional, is it – or should it be – sincere? Metadiscourses (discourses reflecting on other discourse) – about sincerity on the one hand and self-control on the other – surround laments precisely because many audiences take them to be expressions of emotion.

Rationality has outranked emotion in Western intellectual history, and cultural sensibilities touching emotion and rationality typically reflect social hierarchies and constructions of Otherness. Attributions of emotionality figure largely in Primitivist discourses. Is it valid to characterize lament as an ancient tradition, perhaps even one whose earlier evolutionary form was “primitive cries” (Böckel 1913:97) belonging to animal nature and not culture? Chapter 4, “Antiquity, Metaculture, and the Control of Lament,” introduces the notion of *double-timing* (adapted from Bakhtin’s notion of double-voicing, 1981) – in which contemporary performances are somehow simultaneously ancient. It situates contemporary lament in a historical context, but also subjects the antiquarian and philological study of lament to critical inquiry. While tracing ancient representations of lamentation, it also reflects on the construction of lament as an ancient object, complete with a patina or signs of age-distress (Stewart 1991). Chapter 4 also introduces the notion of *interdiscursive chains* and their role in objectifying and controlling lament, across many generations – in Greece, for example. This discussion provides contrast for later chapters’ treatment of much more devastating modern responses to lament.

Part II describes remaking lament in modern contexts. It turns out that memory is put to work in new ways in modernity. This prompts me to revisit the nature of lament with a focus on its commemorative features. Chapter 5, “Cultural Amnesia and the Objectification of Lament in Bangladesh,” uncovers the complex relations of lament to recent forms of social memory and acts of commemoration on the one hand, and on the other a contemporary will to forget – to forget truths about violence and practices/genres like spontaneous lament. I present my ethnographic experience of lament in Bangladesh and my analysis of laments by an angry young Bangladeshi woman I call Latifa, and explore the notion of “technologies of forgetting” vis-à-vis lament in that setting.

Chapter 6, “Modern Transformations,” temporarily brackets questions about the tradition–modernity binary and compiles evidence of widespread shifts in the practice of lament and in discourses about it. This chapter puts contemporary responses to lament – increasingly homogeneous meta-emotional and metadiscursive responses – in the context of globalizing modernity. Globalization is not an altogether new phenomenon. It is at least as old as the colonialist phase of imperialism that so deeply impacted lament in Bangladesh – a discussion that carries over into this chapter. I examine the position colonial sensibilities assigned to “emotional” genres like lament. Despite such 19th-century antecedents, the present generation is

even more aptly designated the age of globalization because we experience the increasing impact of ever more rapid global flows of media, the concomitant transformation of time-space and boundaries – and global circulation of modern meta-emotions, including shame over public emotional expression.

Such global flows become the key to Chapter 7, “How Shame Spreads in Modernity.” This chapter begins with a discussion of the meanings of shame in relation to collective identities and in relation to visibility. It culminates with a case study of how the Irish came to be represented (by a number of voices) as backward, an achievement based in part on associating them with lament. Elite English travelers described Irish lament as “mercenary tears” and “hideous moan[s].” Irish bishops attacked lamentation as “an unchristian practice.”

Chapter 8, “Crying Backward: Primitivist Representations of Lament,” gives concentrated attention to representations of lament that frame it using images of primitive life in all its “savage passion.” Representations of lament as backward or primitive spice up travelers’ accounts far beyond those of English women traveling in Ireland; they haunt lament scholarship. The chapter goes on to raise the question of whether the retrospective gaze of laments as texts warrants their linkage with “backwardness.” Modernity needs tradition or backwardness as a foil against which to constitute itself. How does the *invidious* representation of something as backward square with modernity’s own need to look back in constituting itself as different from tradition? And that in turn raises other, more general, questions. What sorts of homologies can we find between cultural products (laments) and metacultural representations of them? How do various spins on lament handle its contradictory relations to different strands of modernity – its retrospective focus and its tendency to ground its authority in newness, construed in terms of spontaneity or sincerity?

Part III, “Reviving Lament,” focuses on lament’s crosscutting relations to modernity. Chapter 9, “Mourning Becomes the Electron’s Age: Lamenting Modernity(ies),” takes up a paradox central to my argument. Many postmodern voices, with their particular self-conscious stance toward cultural production, invoke lament as a synecdoche or a sort of cultural “index species”<sup>7</sup> – a key signifier of all the rich, expressive genres available to members of (“perishing”) traditional societies. Genres of lamentation are good for performing a sense of loss, but also for focusing modernity’s self-awareness in terms of its own losses (Saunders 2007). Some contemporary authors who mention traditional lament do so in order to

mourn its unavailability to them. Ironically, their grieving over this purported cultural loss becomes a kind of lament in itself. The project of modernity is defined in terms of loss – loss of the kind of trust that is the glue that holds society together, or loss of the worker’s very soul or subjectivity in the alienation of his or her labor – and thus modernist consciousness must “oscillate between past and future” (Adams 2001:222, 225). The (not wholly objective) modern consciousness of loss prompts a new search for suitable genres of grief and grievance. Yet no genres, no conventional means of grieving, satisfy; postmodern sensibilities resist and attempt to transcend the purported restrictiveness of genres and, indeed, languages as conventions (Das 1998; Sass 1992; Wittgenstein 1958).

Chapter 10, “Lament’s (Post)Modern Vertigo,” finds lament “Floating in a Deterritorialized Media Sea.” This chapter returns to the modernist and postmodernist discourse Chapter 9 analyzes as homologous with lament, this time with an eye to modernity’s contradictory nature. In its search for nuances that speak to those contradictions, the chapter considers the new, electronic media. It then returns to Urban’s concept of metaculture to offer a revision of his model based on the dialectic between culture and metaculture and on the definitive role of tradition in (post)modernity. A metacultural embrace of newness alternates with the desire to resurrect and play with tradition in postmodern media. The remainder of the chapter covers lament drowning or surviving, in a series of stories of the impact of new media – in particular, websites related to lament in the classical texts of ancient India. I extend Jacquemet’s concept of linguistic vertigo in a sea of deterritorialized media – which he uses as a metaphor for the destabilization of deictic words like “here” or “this” – to new uses of “we” on those India-related websites. I show how slippery are the “we”s in websites related to lament and India.

Chapter 11, “Lament in a Postmodern World of Revivals,” recognizes that, when it comes to the fate of lament, rumors of its death have been greatly exaggerated. It explores a series of “revivals” of lament – from very limited revivals of such traditions for school performances in southeastern Alaska [Tlingit]), to the “revival of death” in England and the US (Årnason 2001; Walter 1994). The chapter also explores the growing interest in Others’ lament traditions on the part of leaders (e.g., Golden 1994) of what I call “the bereavement movement,” and a local revival of lament in Finland. Finally, I examine the co-optation of lament in the former Yugoslavia and Iran in the 1990s as an example of the media-based modern production of culture in two very different states. These revivals and adaptations raise

questions about discourses of authenticity, and about widely differing forms of cultural nostalgia.

The book concludes in Chapter 12 with a meditation on the central paradoxes surrounding lament and discourses about lament – discourses on loss being both ageless and ever new, newly fitted to the historical moment. Such discourses make lament a sign of hoary tradition on the one hand, while, on the other, smuggling lament into the very structure of myths of (post)modernity.