Critical Exchange

Mourning work: Death and democracy during a pandemic

David W. McIvor
Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO 80524, USA
david.mcivor@colostate.edu

Juliet Hooker
Brown University, Providence, RI 02912, USA
juliet_hooker@brown.edu

Ashley Atkins
Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI 49008, USA
ashley.atkins@wmich.edu

Athena Athanasiou
Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Athens 176 71, Greece
athenaathanasiou2@gmail.com

George Shulman
New York University, Gallatin, New York, NY 10003, USA
gmsl@nyu.edu

Contemporary Political Theory (2021) **20**, 165–199. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-020-00421-5>; advance online publication 20 July 2020

Sorrows – like benevolent angels – lift the veils from my life.
José Martí (2002, p. 72)

In this Critical Exchange, political theorists and philosophers of the contemporary condition were asked to reflect on the politics of mourning. Political theorists have increasingly turned to mourning as a prism through which to view the differential politics of grief and grievance (for an overview see McIvor and Hirsch, 2019). Yet in this particular moment it is impossible to think about the linkages between politics and grief outside the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic. As this exchange was coming together, the virus was beginning its spread. While only some of the contributions directly confront the question of death and democracy during a pandemic, all speak to the ways that loss, grief, and politics are intertwined – something that the current crisis has made abundantly clear.

There is a politics to mourning: distributions of bodies and communities that are more or less vulnerable to suffering and death; struggles to make these disparities salient and to challenge them; and overarching cycles of contestation over the meaning and praxis of mourning in, and for, democracy. Each of the contributions below approaches the broad topics of mourning and politics in slightly different ways, yet several common themes emerge, including sacrifice, sovereignty, solidarity, the dangers and value of mourning as an analytic framework and as an organizing basis for political praxis, the relationship between death and democracy and the specter of democracy's death, and mourning's relationship to the intelligibility or unintelligibility of particular forms of life.

Mourning is a work of clarification (Freud, 1917). The differential vulnerability to death and mourning during the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed enduring racial and class divides in the USA and clarified the impact of spreading inequality. For Hooker, in particular, the pandemic has clarified patterns of racialized precarity to which political theorists and social actors have not adequately responded. Disavowed precarity also calls into question the supposedly recent phenomenon of 'democracy grief' in the global north or what Hooker refers to here as the 'civic sadness that has arisen with the recognition that the USA is a democracy in need of repair'. Such recognitions are belated – and, like the owl of Minerva, may have come too late – and they elide the experiences of black citizens who have been paying the 'psychic tax' of democracy grief for generations, and who are paying a steep price once again during the pandemic (Cineas, 2020).

Similarly, Athanasiou argues that the pandemic has laid bare 'induced conditions of unlivability', which are the living legacies of racism, nationalism, sexism, exploitation, and other structures of institutionalized or ritualized abuse and disregard. Beyond these specific injuries, mourning clarifies our attachments and practical commitments. We mourn only for those to whom we are attached, or for that to which we are committed (Hägglund, 2019). Mourning can have an illuminating effect then and become an occasion for reflection and reconnection. During the pandemic, millions have experienced separation from family members, friends, livelihoods, and daily routines – losses that, even if temporary, might inspire a re-evaluation of life and a means of the self-critique and self-scrutiny that Peter Euben saw as the heart of a democratic pedagogy (1986). While Euben argued that the shared experience of the tragic festival in ancient Athens provided the context for re-evaluation, could a collective experience of separation provide a similar impetus?

Several contributors to this Critical Exchange confront the ubiquity of loss and sacrifice as political thematics and the embedded assumptions within these thematics about sovereignty, solidarity, and vulnerability. For Shulman, the affects and moods associated with loss seem to animate all forms of political speech and action today, and in particular, populist rhetoric that operates through genres of jeremiad or romance. Populists promise to restore a lost greatness, or to reinstate a

time of shared prosperity. Yet, for Shulman, right-wing populism mainly serves to ‘displace the weight of grief by the energies of grievance’; in other words, it does not seek out mourning as a means of letting go or moving beyond certain forms of life, but remains fixated on fantasies about the past. As such, populism rejects the need to sacrifice an attachment to a particular vision of flourishing, in order to work through these losses and imagine or create new futures. Shulman argues that various genres of loss within political theory can invite ‘political judgment and praxis’ about forms of life that may be ‘irretrievable’. In the words of the psychoanalyst Hans Loewald, this would involve the transformation of ‘ghosts’ that haunt and persecute into ‘ancestors’ that guide (1960; Lear, 2017, p. 201). Despite this call for political judgment, Shulman also warns about how an insistence on ‘working through’ can pathologize resistance in ways that deny the ‘contingency and uncertainty’ of political action. In other words, if democratic politics involves loss, sacrifice, and mourning, the contingency inherent to those struggles belies – or at least challenges – a strong connection to the therapeutic (and teleological) assumptions of working through.

Hooker and Atkins also take up the relationship between democracy and sacrifice. Democratic theorists such as Danielle Allen and Anne Norton have argued for an inherent link between democracy and sacrifice, yet both Hooker and Atkins challenge the logic or the value of this link, albeit in different ways. For Hooker, calls for sacrifice often overlook the facts of who is being asked to sacrifice, or – more pointedly – who is being *sacrificed* for democracy. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the so-called essential workers – many of them, including grocery store workers, nursing assistants, farmworkers, and delivery drivers, lacking paid sick leave, a living wage, or health benefits that are not linked to their employment – are positioned as sacrifices to the relatively well-off and protected (Sperling, 2020). Moreover, as the recent primary election in Wisconsin illustrated (in ways that might foreshadow the November general election) vulnerable populations were exposed to greater risks of infection through their democratic participation. In Milwaukee, in particular – home to almost 70% of Wisconsin’s African-American population – voting locations were cut from 200 to five, and dozens cases of COVID-19 have been reported as a result. Noble civic sacrifice? Or punitive precarity and a foreshadowing of democracy’s demise?

For Atkins, the question of sacrifice has been improperly framed within democratic theory. According to Allen (2004), sacrifice is an essential civic discipline because democratic citizens are in the paradoxical situation of being ‘powerless sovereigns’. Citizens are promised power within a collective project of self-rule, but inherent to collective action is the fact that some people will succeed at the expense of others. Atkins, however, calls into question the notion of sovereignty underlying these premises. As she argues, democratic subjects are ‘not promised self-rule but rather rule with others’ and as a result sacrifice should be reformulated to challenge the ‘possessive love’ implied within Allen’s account.

Democracy and sovereignty are at odds with each other, as democracy ideally inspires a love ‘that is never solely one’s own’. In her reading of the actions of Mamie Till Mobley – who publicly exposed her lynched son Emmett Till’s body to the public gaze – Atkins envisions another model of sacrifice, where what is given up is the ‘special claim’ over Till’s body. For Atkins, Till Mobley’s son becomes, through her actions, a collective matter, or a matter to the collective – and her sacrifice is the relinquishment of exclusive possession and of the fantasies of control entailed within possessiveness as such. Claudia Rankine (2017) has made a similar argument – also in reference to Mamie Till Mobley – about the Black Lives Matter social movement. For Rankine, Black Lives Matter is an attempt to keep mourning as an open dynamic in American culture, through an insistence that particular bodies be given public space and attention – ‘remember their names’ as re-memorizing the dead into the body politic.

Athanasiou, similarly, begins from a politics of dispossession. For her, mourning provides a framework for rethinking the maldistribution of vulnerability and livability, but such rethinking does not repudiate vulnerability or non-sovereignty but makes them the basis of ‘transformative modes of sociality’. Vulnerability becomes the basis for agonistic struggles of social movements that aim to ‘reappropriate the inscriptional space of mourning’ and to collectively envision social transformations that will prevent vulnerability from being occasions for violation or discrimination. Athanasiou, then, does not call for willing sacrifice, but rather activist solidarity and ‘dissident mourning’ to challenge the conditions and terms of precarious life (Butler, 2004; Athanasiou and Butler, 2013).

Yet mourning has its ambivalences. In fact, according to the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, mourning is a means of acknowledging and integrating ambivalence into our internal and external worlds (McIvor, 2016). For each of the contributors, mourning has a dangerous, disturbing, or anti-political side. According to Atkins, once again, mourning has a connection to a possessive form of love that is ill suited to democratic modes of life. For Hooker, mourning and calls for sacrifice betray romanticism within contemporary democratic theory that elides the specific – and ongoing – ‘anxieties and alienations of democratic life’. Such claims echo the work of Bonnie Honig, who has cautioned against the ‘moralist humanism’ that attends much of the politics of lamentation. For Honig, moralist humanism offers a pre- (or post-) political solution to dilemmas that can only be addressed through messy and contingent struggles (2013, p. 26). Similarly, Simon Stow has traced how romantic forms of public mourning displace political struggles or attempt to forestall them (2017). Shulman echoes such concerns when he argues that mourning rhetoric often invokes an ‘internal, ethical call’ through which social change might occur; yet this move risks an elevation of the ethical over the political rather than an acknowledgement of their messy intertwinement. Athanasiou, on the other hand, hints at the ways in which mourning can be narrowly and strategically inscribed by existing structures of power in ways that preempt or demobilize

resistance. Lisa Wedeen (2019) has recently given a detailed account of such state inscriptions in her analysis of the Assad regime's attempt to 'seize ownership' over the grief caused by the Syrian civil war through 'aesthetic-political practices' that organize and absorb the affects of mourning (2019, p. 113).

Nevertheless, everything is dangerous (Foucault, 1983), and the limitations of a politics of lamentation should not obscure the value of a critical concept of mourning or the promise of mourning as a means of organizing or engaging in praxis. For Athanasiou, the concept of mourning can foster 'reflexivity about the phantomlike remainders and reminders' of historical and enduring violence. Similarly, Hooker sees actual patterns of grief and grievance as the means of turning democratic theory away from its idealizing (and hence obfuscating) tendencies. For Shulman, mourning can operate within different genres of loss to different effects – calling us towards political judgment about what should be mourned and left behind or seeing mourning as a means of 'imagining a common horizon for adversaries who might undergo a metamorphosis together'. For Atkins, the theory of democratic mourning implies 'an attempt to take losses back into the life of a community' – to restore disavowed losses as a means of continually re-founding democratic community. Here restoration is seen as a non-sovereign 'invitation' to more democratic forms of life, just as Athanasiou sees dispossession and vulnerability as the basis for reimagined sociality and Shulman conceptualizes loss as an occasion for radical imagination and futurity.

Perhaps the greatest value of mourning as a concept for political theory comes from the central role that it plays within human life. As long as humans are creatures of attachment, we will be vulnerable to loss and perpetually exposed to mourning. Hence, it is possible to see mourning – in both its interpersonal and political forms – as less a terminable project of accepting loss in order to 'move on', and more as an interminable process of mitigating defenses that protect the self from experiencing loss and the ambivalence and tragedy contained therein. Mourning, as Freud argued, is a labor – an *Arbeit*. The work of mourning – ever refreshed, ever challenging – is the work of acknowledging and engaging the complexity of the world by fashioning creative and reparative rejoinders to internal and external strife, to better navigate, in the words of Cindy Milstein, 'a sea of grief...without drowning' (2017, p. 3). These creative rejoinders and moments of self-fashioning through grief are what McIvor and Hirsch (2019) have called the democratic arts of mourning, and we see fresh evidence of this capacity during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the mock funeral procession organized by the Georgia Coalition 2 Save Lives, as a protest against the lifting of Georgia's stay at home order by the Republican governor despite the persistence of the virus and in the context of significant racial disparities in COVID-19 hospitalizations and deaths (Boynton, 2020).

Nevertheless, such actions are only intelligible within a form of life that aspires towards democracy, just as civic sacrifices – like those of Mamie Till Mobley –

only make sense within a social context that could accept and honor those sacrifices. As Till Mobley said at the time, ‘let the people see what I see...I believe that the whole United States is mourning with me’ (quoted in Rankine, 2017). A noble invitation and a powerful sentiment, yet nearly seven decades later, and in the midst of a ‘global’ pandemic, racialized precarity still runs rampant. Emmett Till might be considered a sacrifice for a more democratic form of life, yet is this life mere fantasy, making sacrifices to it ultimately unintelligible or meaningless? As Hooker reminds us, ‘we have never had a multiracial democracy whose mortal illness all can grieve’, and the democracies we have inherited – white democracy (Olson, 2004), or settler colonial democracy (Dahl, 2018) – have operated and continue to operate at the expense of racialized others whose sacrifices have repeatedly gone unrecognized. Along these lines, both Hooker and Shulman turn, briefly, to Afro-pessimism and its claims about a racialized ontological partition that precludes the actualization of multiracial democracy. Claims for the latter may rest upon what Cedric Robinson has called a ‘delusion’ or ‘mythological veil’ within political science and political theory that obscures the ongoing chaos and violence of our contemporary condition with a fantasy that, underneath such chaos, ‘ordered systems reign’ (2016, p. xxix). Theorists of democracy and mourning have to confront this possibility, along with the social positions from which a fantasy about ordered systems is compelling (or possibly compelled). The democratic work of mourning, however, might also be seen as the work of ‘lifting [these] veils – to paraphrase the Cuban poet and revolutionary José Martí – or of de-mythologizing inherited forms of democracy in order to make fugitive visions of a democratic form of life more present and inhabitable.

Where do these lines of thinking go from here? Alongside and in addition to the tracks put down by the contributors below, I would suggest three possible avenues for future research and investigation. First is a continuing exploration of the relationship between democracy and sacrifice. What does sacrifice imply under conditions of increasing social and economic stratification? What is the relationship between equality and sacrifice, and what are the potential sacrifices to be made *for equality*, and how would those losses be mourned? Second is the question of the intelligibility or unintelligibility of democracy as a form of life. Mourning is a practice of life, which implies that it is related to, or rooted in, a set of expectations, rituals, and roles that animate that practice and give it meaning. Does democracy still – if it *ever* did – provide a form of life that can give a shape to those rituals and a meaning for the suffering? Finally, how does the body – the body politic, but also the human body – metabolize grief, or how does mourning metabolize or energize human bodies for the work of building democracy? What can political theorists and philosophers learn from psychological or somatic approaches to the body’s plasticity, and what is the latter’s relationship to mourning, democracy, and the democratic work of mourning?

David W. McIvor

Dying for democracy? Race and mourning in pandemic times

Writing about the work of political theorists on mourning when the coronavirus pandemic is ravaging the globe and heaping losses upon untold losses – the horrific death toll, the economic devastation, lives disrupted and upended, the foreclosure of collective occasions to grieve the dead or be with loved ones, and even the smaller, quotidian losses of being forced to dispense with tactile human contact (a handshake, a kiss on the cheek, a hug) due to physical distancing – seems both futile and clarifying. Futile because, while there has been significant recent scholarship on mourning by political theorists, it is not clear to me that the approaches we have developed so far are equal to the task of making sense of certain key aspects of this toll of global loss. Clarifying because writing at a time of pervasive loss makes it clear what questions we have not asked and what answers we have yet to develop.

Much of the contemporary theoretical scholarship on what Honig (2013) has called ‘the politics of lamentation’ has focused on mourning *for* democracy, if you will. Mourning has been reconceptualised as a resource for democratic politics and the basis from which an ethic of human solidarity or equal citizenship might emerge. Judith Butler’s call for equal grievability (2004), for example, grounds a recognition of our ties to one another in shared vulnerability, on the fact that we all experience loss, while Danielle Allen finds in peaceful acquiescence to democratic loss the grounds for a conception of citizenship as friendship (2004). Many of these theorists recognize that loss is not equally distributed and view the invisibility of some losses and unequal precarity as the locus of mourning’s politics. On this reading, how citizens organize collectively in response to loss has crucial implications for democracy. In this vein, McIvor (2016) and Stow (2017) identify models of democratic mourning that eschew certitude, embrace ambivalence and complexity, and reject unitary national narratives, while Stow (2012) finds in vernacular African-American mourning traditions a necessary counter-memory to romantic modes of national public mourning committed to memorializing injuries against the nation and forgetting those committed within it. McIvor and Hirsch (2019, p. xx) condense many of these claims about mourning as a democratic resource when they argue that: ‘Citizens and communities can identify and practice a variety of arts of democratic mourning and, by acting in the face of these bitter experiences, momentarily reclaim and inhabit their birthright as political beings’.

From the perspective of this scholarship we might, thus, be led to interrogate how we will choose to mourn the losses wrought by the coronavirus pandemic, and to conclude that it will reveal much about who we are as a democracy. As of May 2020, the coronavirus pandemic has killed upwards of 90,000 US citizens. The coronavirus death toll will tragically continue to grow, but it already dwarfs the toll of those killed in the attacks of 11 September 2001, and has surpassed the number

of US soldiers killed during the 20 years of the Vietnam War. Notably, the Vietnam War and 11 September 2001 have been focal points for thinking about questions of commemoration, the national narratives and democratic forms of mourning fostered by different public rituals and types of memorialization. Despite the fact that a pandemic or global health crisis is a very different event than an attack by a foreign enemy or a war fought on foreign soil, the language of war has also permeated government responses to the pandemic, even when, as in the case of the USA, that response has been monumentally ineffective. There are, thus, important questions that research on mourning in political theory will lead us to ask. How will coronavirus deaths be memorialized? When the toll of the virus is dispersed across the country, and the losses are ongoing, how are such losses to be mourned? When the rites and rituals of collective grief such as funerals themselves become occasions for the virus to spread, and bodies pile up at such unprecedented rate that additional mass graves have been needed (as in New York City), how will modes of grieving be transformed?

These are undoubtedly important questions, yet amid the cascade of losses caused by the coronavirus pandemic, additional questions about the entanglements of race, democracy, and mourning have been thrown into stark relief. I will focus here (in necessarily abbreviated fashion) on two such questions about death and democracy, and what they mean for the racial politics of mourning. These might be posed for maximum rhetorical effect as the following: Is democracy dying? Who is dying for democracy?

Well before the coronavirus pandemic emerged in the waning days of 2019, the breakdown of what were previously perceived by many as unassailable norms of US political life during the Donald Trump presidency provoked an outpouring of ‘democracy grief’. The long-standing scholarship in comparative politics on democratic deficits and democratic breakdown no longer applied only to countries in the global south, instead the question of *How Democracies Die* (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019) had become frighteningly relevant for the USA. As described in the pages of the *New York Times* (Goldberg, 2019) this novel (for some) form of ‘political suffering’ or ‘civic sadness’ emerged from being confronted – for the first time – with the reality that the US is a democracy in need of repair: ‘For anyone who was, like me, born after the civil rights movement finally made democracy in America real, liberal democracy has always been part of the climate, as easy to take for granted as clean air or the changing of the seasons. When I contemplate the sort of illiberal oligarchy that would await my children should Trump win another term, the scale of the loss feels so vast that I can barely process it’. While the phenomenon described in the article is undoubtedly ‘real’, grieving for democracy is only a new experience for some. For black citizens suffering from a racist criminal justice system and mass incarceration policies that demonize them as a group and routinely subject them to lethal police violence for the most imagined infractions – for example, the ‘psychic tax’ of knowing that the political leadership

of their country is complicit in perpetuating these harms and that many of their ordinary fellow citizens are intensely invested in denying that such injustices even exist – being dehumanized and treated as an internal enemy by the state whose role is ostensibly to protect its citizens is nothing new. Democracy grief is indeed real, but it is only for *some* US citizens that it is a recent phenomenon.

Meanwhile, the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic has only accelerated the trend of democracies on life support. Hungary's nationalist prime minister, Viktor Orbán, used the pandemic to declare a state of emergency that further solidifies his unchecked grip on power, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has utilized the threat of the pandemic to carry out a parliamentary 'coup' that delays his trial on corruption charges (Tharoor, 2020). In the USA, Trump is openly inciting fringe right-wing protests by white nationalist groups against social distancing measures imposed by Democratic governors, even as he has also resisted calls to implement universal vote by mail for the presidential election scheduled in November 2020. Simultaneously, as democracy is eroded by creeping authoritarianism and perversion of the rule of law, citizens are being asked to literally die for democracy. The presidential primary and statewide election in Wisconsin in April 2020, for example, was not delayed due to the pandemic. As a result, many voters were forced to show up to cast their ballots in person, risking infection. Yet, because turnout (largely driven by absentee balloting) proved to be more robust than anticipated, commentators concluded that 'in the end, the voters responded' and that 'the Wisconsin election [w]as a disaster avoided' (Parks, 2020). One wonders what disaster means in this context, however. Clearly, the 'disaster' averted was a low-turnout election lacking legitimacy, not the public health disaster or individual losses of voters becoming infected and possibly dying after contracting the virus while casting their ballots. Given that older cohorts are much more likely to vote and that they are more vulnerable to the virus, dying for democracy may be destiny for some in a pandemic. As we mourn democracy dying, we, thus, paradoxically celebrate dying for democracy.

Indeed, in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic calls to sacrifice for the greater good – be it democracy or the economy – abound. From conservative calls for seniors to sacrifice themselves to save the stock market, to those who are able to work from home lauding the heroism of health care providers and essential workers, the notion of the pandemic as a leveler fomenting solidarity has been mobilized to further disparate political projects. From the epicenter of the US coronavirus pandemic, as thousands of New Yorkers were dying from the virus, and those who could not flee to less-impacted communities remained locked in their homes in order to help flatten the curve, one of the powerpoint slides deployed by Governor Mario Cuomo at his viral press conferences to calm an anxious citizenry proclaimed: 'we are all in this together.' Yet, as much as there have indeed been myriad ways in which ordinary citizens have offered mutual aid and support to one another amidst the pandemic, the sentiment that the virus has acted

as an equalizer, a common trope in times of disaster, natural and otherwise (compare hurricane Katrina and its aftermath), rings hollow in the face of the glaring inequalities of race and mourning in pandemic times. As a sign at a protest organized by the National Nurses United union in front of the White House demanding protective equipment noted: ‘20 seconds won’t scrub “hero” blood off your hands’. And, in the words of Jennifer Suggs, a Walmart cashier in New Orleans: ‘We’re not essential. We’re sacrificial. I will be replaced if I die from this’ (Lithwick, 2020). Or compare headlines about the rich fleeing to vacation homes, yachts, or underground bunkers to the obituaries of grocery store workers like Leilani Jordan, who died from Covid-19 after continuing to work because ‘she felt the need to help the elderly and disabled during this time of crisis’ (ABC7NY, 2020). If we are not all in this together in the same way, we must ask: who exactly is dying for democracy?

As the racial and socio-economic disparities in who is being most affected by the coronavirus pandemic have become increasingly clear, the fact that its losses are being disproportionately borne by those whose lives were already most precarious makes clear that the rhetoric and logic of sacrificing for the greater good is deeply shaped by pre-existing inequalities rooted in citizenship status, race, class, gender, sexuality, etc. It is those who were already viewed as disposable even before the onset of the pandemic who are now falling ill and dying in disproportionate numbers. The toll of the pandemic is ongoing, but as of April the virus had been twice as deadly for African Americans and Latinos than for whites in New York City (Mays and Newman, 2020). The situation is similar in other states. In South Carolina, for example, black Americans account for 56% of deaths, even though they make up only 27% of the state’s population. In Illinois, 15% of the state’s population is black, but African Americans account for 42% of coronavirus deaths. Similarly, in Louisiana, only one-third of the state’s population is black, but 59% of those who have died from the disease are black (Tensely, 2020). In Michigan, African Americans are 33% of cases and approximately 40% of deaths, even though they are only 14% of the population. According to a *Washington Post* analysis, counties that are majority-black have three times the rate of infections and almost six times the rate of deaths as counties where white residents are the majority (Thebault *et al.*, 2020). In New York City, meanwhile, the preliminary death rate for Latinos as of early April is about 22 people per 100,000 compared to a rate of 10 per 100,000 for white residents (Acevedo, 2020). And by mid-May, the Navajo Nation, the country’s largest Native American reservation, had surpassed New York state with the highest Covid-19 infection rate in the USA (Silverman *et al.*, 2020). As one news headline summarized the disparate racial impact of the pandemic: ‘The Coronavirus Doesn’t Discriminate, But US Health Care Showing Familiar Biases’ (Farmer, 2020).

The racial disparities in the toll of the pandemic are the result of societal and civic investments in the lives of some and the corresponding disposability of others.

The disproportionate toll of Covid-19 among African Americans is due to a number of factors that are the result of structural racism. African Americans suffer at greater rates from pre-existing medical conditions that worsen outcomes from the virus (such as heart disease, asthma, etc.) as a result of higher incidences of poverty, environmental racism that leads to more toxic environments in minority neighborhoods, lower rates of access to health insurance, and racial bias in medical care (Eligon *et al.*, 2020). African Americans are also disproportionately employed in many of the essential sectors of the economy that require continued exposure to the virus, such as: nursing, warehouse and delivery services, meatpacking plants, grocery store employees, etc. These are also lower-wage occupations that lack benefits, such as health insurance or paid sick leave. In New York City, for example, Blacks, Latinos, and Asians make up over 70% of the city's essential workers, including transit, childcare, health care, cleaning services, and postal employees (Goba, 2020). Moreover, while the USA has lagged in making coronavirus testing widely available, it is no surprise that the poor and non-whites have faced greater barriers to tests despite being disproportionately affected, as studies have long shown that racial bias permeates medical care, particularly for African Americans.

Across the board, it is those who were already vulnerable who are now bearing greater losses: from immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in ICE detention centers to undocumented migrants who are unable to access the various relief programs enacted by Congress, to Asian Americans facing racist attacks because of GOP scapegoating about the 'Chinese' virus, to homeless people who cannot keep social distance and have no homes in which to shelter in place, to the imprisoned population which in some states is being used to manufacture masks and hand sanitizer while confined in unsafe conditions, to women who already shouldered a larger share of childcare and domestic chores prior to working from home and distance learning, to LGBTQ youth for whom 'home' is not always a safe space, the pandemic has not simply upended 'normal' life, it has revealed the deeply unequal way that society and family life are structured. This is nowhere clearer than in the category of those who have recently been revealed as essential workers – the majority of whom are women, and women of color in particular (Robertson and Gebeloff, 2020) – despite the fact that they have long been toiling in undervalued and underpaid professions that do the crucial work of care in our society.

The racially disparate impact of the coronavirus pandemic is but another in a series of ongoing losses suffered by black people within the US body politic, however. In their case 'democracy grief' and 'dying for democracy' have long been intertwined in perverse fashion. Not only have they not received the same level of concern from the state as other citizens (and indeed when the state has directed its attention their way it has often been in the form of surveillance, displacement, and lethal violence), they are continually asked to sacrifice for democracy (Hooker, 2016). Voter suppression tactics, for instance, have long meant that minority voters

must stand in line for hours to vote, and racial gerrymandering has diluted their political power. Black citizens are thus, sacrificing to participate in a political project that not only does not protect them, but which is fundamentally not committed to their survival, much less their thriving. As Jasmine Syedullah has observed, one of the key useful insights of Afro-pessimism is that its unrelenting focus on the politics of loss exposes ‘that intimate union of national belonging and domestic violence that is the reward for legal legibility’ for black people, and ‘the limits of political agency, incorporation, representation, and progress’ (Gordon *et al.*, 2018, pp. 128-129). The problem is that ongoing black losses are required by the project of white life in common, as we have never had a genuine multiracial democracy whose mortal illness all can grieve.

As the losses of the coronavirus pandemic compel us to seek moments of democratic grace that can restore our political faith, we must not find them in unequal sacrifices premised on mourning a project in common that has never been such. As Hanchard (2020) observes, historically democratic praxis and racial hierarchy/political inequality have been inextricably linked from ancient Athens to contemporary liberal democracies that can only be considered fully democratic if the impact of Western colonialism and domestic racial hierarchy is ignored. This raises the question, democratic for whom? Recognizing that democracy has only ever been partial or uneven challenges the teleological premises of much democratic theory and the idealization of democracy as the opposite of inequality in much of political science. It suggests that democratic theorists too often romanticize calls to sacrifice for democracy, and that they do not pay sufficient attention to the anxieties and alienations of democratic life. Similarly, the scholarship on mourning has tended to frame examinations of political loss in a reparative vein that situates public grief almost solely as a solution to democratic disrepair. This has the paradoxical effect of minimizing ongoing and continuing loss. Rather than seeing mourning *only* as a resource for democracy, political theorists interested in loss would do well to *also* consider the costs of dying for democracy.

Juliet Hooker

Love and death in democracy

In this contribution, I trace one influential line of thought leading to the idea that rituals of mourning have a critical role to play in democratic politics. This line of thought begins with the idea that sacrifice lies at the heart of democracy and with an accompanying portrait of the democratic subject as a nearly powerless sovereign – a subject who aspires to shape the world to fit his desires but who nearly always confronts the frustration of this aspiration, and who must, therefore, acquire a discipline for loss. This contribution explores the way in which this discipline for

loss, when unsupported, is thought to result in the kinds of losses that have to be mourned.

An important source for these ideas is Danielle Allen's *Talking to Strangers*. One of the hard truths of democracy, according to Allen, is that some people are always giving things up for others (2004, p. 29). It is not on occasion, but often, Allen says, that one will find oneself in disagreement with the political decisions of the polity, a loss to which one must accede for the sake of others. What is given up holds value. Perhaps it is something cherished and even loved. It is because things of value are given up for the sake of something higher – for the sake of the common good, we might say – that they are understood by Allen as *sacrifices*. One of the hard truths of democracy, then, is that it requires sacrifice for others.

We see a similar discussion of sacrifice in Anne Norton's essay 'Evening Land'. For Norton, sacrifice is so pervasive a feature of democratic life that democratic subjects must acquire a 'discipline' for loss:

Democracy demands, in Richard Rorty's phrase, that one take things lightly or, more precisely, that one act as if one did. The opponents of abortion need not keep silent. They may vote their consciences, they may assemble, they may agitate. They may not act as if this were, as they believe, routinized murder. The opponents of capital punishment seek injunctions and commutations; they file briefs and hope to overturn decisions. They do not stage prison escapes or sabotage the machinery of execution. They are required – we are all required – to act as if those things that matter most to us matter very little. The civil servant must act as if there were no distinction between parties, between patrons and rivals, friends and enemies, strangers and family. They are required – we are all required – to pretend indifference to passions and attachments. We are permitted to have, but not to act upon, these passions. We must accept their defeat and denial daily. This is the discipline democracy requires (2001, p. 167).

As this discussion implies, democracy doesn't simply require a readiness to sacrifice what is loved. Democracy doesn't spare us sacrifice as Abraham was spared having to sacrifice his son. It is rather the case, as Norton puts it, that 'Day and night, on all the Mount Moriah's of this world, democrats sacrifice what they love' (2001, p. 166). For Allen, too, it isn't the story of Abraham, who spared his son, that should guide our political imagination, but the story of Jephthah, who, in exchange for military victory, sacrificed, as promised, what first met him upon his return home (his daughter) (2001, p. 37).

These claims regarding the centrality of sacrifice within democratic politics are accompanied by a particular conception of the subject who is called upon to make sacrifice. According to Allen, the inevitability of sacrifice is a hard truth that brings us up against an even harder one, namely, that democratic citizens are empowered only to be disempowered (2004, p. 41). As a democratic subject, the idea goes, one

is empowered to rule in accordance with one's political vision, but soon enough must face the reality of being overruled by others to whom the same promise is made. The aspiration to sovereignty, understood as a kind of self-rule, takes the form of an effort of trying to subdue matter to form so that the world matches our desires (2004, p. 21). To the extent that the world cannot be fashioned according to one's vision, one confronts one's powerlessness. It is the aspiration to rule or (or subdue) in accordance with one's vision that, for Allen, deepens the problem of sacrifice: in sacrifice, we are confronted with our status as nearly powerless sovereigns.

While not as explicit, it is clear that Norton, too, assumes that the discipline required by democracy is complicated by an aspiration to sovereignty in something like the above sense. It is just below the surface of her comment that, as democratic subjects, we are permitted to have those passions that we cannot act upon, as if democracy indulges our outsized fantasies, if not our acting upon them. It is, though, more clearly implied by Norton's examples of *what* democratic sacrifice consists in: it is a sacrifice to holding back from acting exactly as one's own passions dictate, where even protest falls short as an *expression* of one's convictions (being a way of acting as if one takes things lightly). In holding back these passions, it could be said that one holds back one's efforts to subdue matter to form.

Allen and Norton agree that democracy requires that sacrifices be made that are disempowering, but, according to Allen, some of these losses are ones that ought to be mourned (2004, p. 110). What accounts for this difference in their accounts? Is this a substantive difference or a difference in emphasis? And what motivates the thought that some losses must not only be suffered but also mourned – those, in particular, for Allen, that we have failed to acknowledge?

It can seem that the difference here is substantive. There is a hint of irony in Norton's discussion that isn't present in Allen's. In speaking of pretense, Norton is speaking, in the first instance, of the idea that in a democratic setting one often cannot act in accordance with one's convictions – as a fully empowered sovereign (one who rules alone) might – and must, instead, act before others as if one did not have those convictions. However, this language invites the thought that our stance toward sacrifice might also be ironic, that is, that we act before others as though our losses aren't losses. In that case, these losses would not be acknowledged as a matter of course.

On Allen's view, by contrast, the problem of democratic sacrifice calls for rituals that allow sacrifices to be honored and so presupposes their visibility *as sacrifices*. Moreover, these sacrifices deserve to be honored in her view because sacrifice is not only difficult, requiring one to suffer the loss of something of value, but worthy of honor in being loss suffered for the sake of something higher. Norton's characterization of democracy as a practice in the loss of that for which we have

‘the highest regard’ (2001, p. 167) makes it difficult to see how loss might be honored and what the significance of its being made visible to others would be.

Still, we might attend to the fact that Norton speaks of democratic losses as *deaths*. This suggests that democratic practice might be described not simply as a practice of loss but as requiring or benefiting from a practice of mourning. Certainly, the language of ‘mourning’ has particular resonance if we describe democratic losses as deaths. What, though, would incline us to describe these losses in this way? The sacrifice of what one loves doesn’t yet invite this description, it seems.

For Allen, it is a certain kind of loss, loss that is invisible and yet retained – that does not appear and yet does not disappear, being retained in the ‘fabric of society’ (2004, p. 110) – that might be described as a death to be mourned. To mourn a death in this sense is, it would seem, an attempt to take such a loss back into the life of a community; it is an effort to convert a loss from one that is retained in it to one that is restored to it. In this way, it bears much in common, I take it, with the work of mourning our significant others, which also seems to require that we work toward making the meaning of their deaths a part of the meaning of our ongoing relationships with them.

It is the hint that democratic loss is something that we do not suffer in the eyes of others that to my mind lends force to Norton’s characterization of democratic loss as death. For both Allen and Norton, it would seem that such a loss might also be considered a loss (or death) to be mourned if it is suffered in relationship with fellow citizens though not openly acknowledged to be part of that relationship. The democratic work of mourning, as we might think of it, is the work of restoring loss to the life of a democratic community.

When Allen speaks of invisible losses that we are to mourn, she has in mind, principally, a historical arrangement whereby some citizens (the *same* ones) have given things up for others, an arrangement that both perverts the hard truth of democracy with which we began and, in the process, transforms it into its hidden secret. This is this burden that, for Allen, distinguished black Americans as a political class in the USA until the de-segregation battles of 1957. It was exposed, she claims, in the publication of photographs of Elizabeth Eckford reacting to the white mob surrounding her, and issuing taunts and threats, as she attempted to make her way into the newly desegregated Little Rock High School. It wasn’t the new passage of civil rights legislation but ‘only her [Eckford’s] suffering – intense, contained, and quiet, under Hazel Bryan’s curses in the public square during September’s still warm early school days’, that according to Allen, ‘forced a psychic transformation of the citizenry’ (2004, p. 3).

Allen points to Eckford’s forbearance as an example of democratic sacrifice. To bear the burden of the mob’s anger without returning it requires a kind of self-discipline that is political despite being understood as a matter of mastery over internal conflicts and despite its being relied upon to navigate the ordinary spaces in

which we encounter others (a reason for Allen's occasional adoption of the term '*socio-political*'). It is political because one undertakes the effort of achieving this discipline for the sake of access to political benefits and because it is a discipline that yields to citizens who displace onto others the burdens and losses of political life (among them, those associated with de-segregation), helping to secure the stability of a democratic polity in the short-term, even if at the cost, among other things, of eroding trust in the long-term.

In characterizing Eckford's forbearance in these terms, Allen is treating the arrangement whereby some citizens (the same) are always giving things up for others as a special instance of the democratic arrangement whereby some (but not necessarily the same) give things up for others. This is not to say that these democratic sacrifices are the same. Eckford's actions awaited the trust-building reciprocity that might exist under a fairer distribution of burdens. But Eckford's loss is, nonetheless, a loss that belongs to the life of the collectivity as much as other democratic sacrifices, and her losses should for that reason be regarded as collective.

It is the understanding of these losses as collective losses that encourages the thought that they are ours to mourn. David McIvor follows Allen in attempting to conceptualize democratic efforts to mourn legacies of racial violence 'as public efforts to acknowledge broader patterns of loss and sacrifice *inherent* to the life of collectivities, in an effort to make those sacrifices [in future] more visible, voluntary, and honored' (2010, p. 31; my emphasis) and to assist in the rebuilding of trust. The shift from 'inevitable' to 'inherent' suggests that though the fact of loss is inevitable, an arrangement whereby some (the same) are always losing is not. And yet, it also implies that these racial losses are still traceable to that core democratic reality and, therefore, to be seen as internal to democratic practice rather than as 'exogenous shocks' (2010, p. 41).

The relationship is less than clear to me, however, between the truth that some in democracy are always giving things up for others and the historical reality that it is always or nearly always the same who do. If one doesn't understand the problem of democratic sacrifice as rooted in the (political) psychology of being a nearly powerless sovereign, it is difficult to recognize these arrangements or their corresponding 'modes of citizenship' (which Allen designates by the terms 'the citizenship of acquiescence' and 'the citizenship of dominance') as reflective of anything internal to democracy – even in the form of a shock from within. It is that framing of the problem posed by sacrifice in democratic settings that supports the idea that some might respond to it by assuming a more robust sovereignty, while others take up the burden of loss. I take it that this is a cost, though the appeal of this view is perhaps that we can understand these sacrifices as implicating others and as calling for reciprocity (especially in view of the long-term stability that this might be thought to secure).

The picture of sovereignty that underlies these descriptions of the problem of sacrifice should, I think, be questioned, however. In being promised that he will not be ruled by others, the democratic subject is not thereby promised self-rule but rather rule with others. The desire to remake the world in light of one's vision if not understood from the start as a desire for others to be moved by this vision would seem to me to be an autocratic rather than democratic urge. To protest an abortion clinic in the belief that abortion is routinized murder isn't to act as if one takes matters lightly; it's not to fall short of the urgings of one's democratic desire because this desire is not a desire to subdue and shape a formless world.

What this picture neglects is the way in which democracy transforms our desires. It transforms them in such a way that it may well be as complete an expression of one's democratic aspiration to agitate for one's view in the face of opposition to it as to have one's vision implemented. If democracy does not simply permit one's passionately held convictions, but calls on subjects to cultivate in themselves convictions that are fit to be brought before others (to be public spirited), then it might be said that it inspires a love that is never solely one's own, never a possessive love, and, in that sense, takes only what it gives. This, then, is the basic fairness of the democratic arrangement, which would seem to be missing in these alternative statements of the problem, where it becomes difficult to understand how a discipline for loss could be tolerated.

If we turn our attention again to the early civil rights period, we will find there an important historical precedent for the proposal that mourning has a critical role to play in democratic politics and one that provides an illustration of democratic sacrifice without the framing of this conception of the democratic subject. The clearest precedent, in my view, is to be found in Mamie Till Mobley's decision in 1955, to display the lynched body of her son, Emmett Till, over the course of a four-day public viewing. This was, as she conceptualized it, an invitation to all Americans to be impacted by the sight of his body so that they might together come to an articulation of what they had seen (Till Mobley and Benson, 2003, p. 139).

I think we misunderstand the nature of this invitation, however, if we see Mobley as calling on her fellow citizens to recognize that her son's death (already) constituted a collective loss. As I understand it, Mobley's call was, instead, an invitation to all Americans to enter into loss, that is, to see the loss of her son as one that could be shared. This is, to my mind, a re-envisioning of the American polity and so bold a re-envisioning that it should be understood as an attempt to refound it: the call to articulate collectively what was seen in this body is, as we might think of it, an invitation to the writing of a new constitution for a new people. Martha Nussbaum (2013) describes Lincoln's Gettysburg address – another address attached to a concrete occasion of mourning – in similar terms. In both cases, there is an effort to implement a normative vision that is not yet actual. Mobley's invitation, connected as it is to a body exhibiting the pathological antagonisms that

have marked the history of the country, likewise suggests the thought that here, too, is the body politic marked by civil war.

Mobley understood herself as having made a sacrifice, just as Allen's proposal might lead us to expect, but it is important to be clear about what this sacrifice was. She describes herself in a letter to the NAACP as having set out to 'trade the blood of [her] child' for the 'betterment of [her] race' (as quoted in Feldstein, 2000, p. 107). What, though, can this mean? It is clear that her purpose in writing this letter was to account for her continued efforts to engage the public through her political speeches, urging Americans to take up her invitation (her motivations had, in fact, been called into question by the NAACP). She was not testifying to having absorbed the loss of her son in quiet and contained suffering but clarifying that the nature of her sacrifice was political in a quite specific sense: the meaning of her son's death would become (she hoped) a collective matter, given over to all Americans, something to which they would have an equal claim. Hers was the sacrifice of any *special* claim that might be had over its meaning.

Ironically, her clarification of the nature of her sacrifice was meant to settle any speculation concerning her true (or deep) motivations. It was meant to cut through the speculation concerning whether she was acting as a mother in displaying the body of her son and addressing herself to the nation or acting on her own behalf in the interest of creating a spectacle (as even some who had been sympathetic to her case came to fear). We might take instruction from this case and consider the possibility that an understanding of sacrifice that draws us into these matters of the human heart, into the depths of suffering, may, in fact, promote suspicion rather than trust in political settings, which is precisely what the recognition of sacrifice is meant, according to the line of thought examined in this contribution, to promote.

Ashley Atkins

Mourning's work and the work of mourning: thinking agonism and aporia together

The critical concept of mourning defines a political articulation of the present as haunted by (its) absent presences: namely, the disavowed but persistent remains of uncanny presences cast as absences through matrices of social disposability. It also pertains to the political conditions through which those spectral bodies out of place make themselves present, and present to one another, despite and against those forces that have disregarded them, and in ways not reducible to the normative presuppositions of self-presence. In this respect, I am calling for a conception of mourning that might become an occasion for mobilizing a critique of the present through fostering reflexivity about the phantomlike remainders and reminders of the historical regimes of racism, nationalism, sexism, homophobia/transphobia, able-bodiedness, and capitalist exploitation and precarity.

Thus, reconfigured as a performative mode of relationality that resists closure and finality, mourning addresses the agonistic (in)determinations of political temporality whereby vulnerability, brokenness and dispossession are ways of opening to transformative modes of sociality. This transformative potentiality remains hopeful, restless, and aporetic. It remains the place and time of critical poetics, responsiveness, and dissent in the midst of histories of subjection and abjection. Therefore, the urgency of addressing mourning in our present moment emerges as a politically saturated performative way of reimagining and resisting (in) the present, time and again, through transfiguring this present's *no longer* and *yet to come*.

This is a moment when the situated historicity of mourning represents itself in all its lived embeddedness in the aporias of finitude, vulnerability, and contingency. This is a moment of crisis (yet another one) when the critical conceptual horizon of mourning attends to a terrain irrevocably infused with histories of violence and suffering in late capitalism. Such archives of complexly entwined domination and contestation are inscribed on the intersecting and permeable boundaries between the bodily, the textual, the political, and the epistemic. What really does it mean to think anew the conditions and contingencies of mourning today, in the context of an unfolding disaster? And what does it mean to inquire into the different(ial) registers of mourning, not so much as a field of knowledge but rather as a critical question about power/knowledge, or, put differently, as the question of interlocking crisis, criticality, and critique? What kinds of situated knowledges would be consistent with and responsive to the vicissitudes of the present? How to critically theorize the politics of mourning in the time of a pandemic?

Amidst the world-changing COVID-19 pandemic, then, what are the implications of the present order of things – defined by late capitalist market-driven biopolitics and bioeconomics – for rethinking about the politics of mourning and grievability, in all its multiple and discontinuous iterations? How might this politics of mourning have a bearing on inequalities in terms of the intersecting powers of class, race, gender, sexuality, and access to public healthcare? And how do biomedical discourses of safety, survival, and normality work as an apparatus of crisis capitalism and in the hands of neo-liberal governments that impose an austerity calculus and administer the underfunding and breakdown of public healthcare institutions? The coronavirus outbreak in southern Europe took place in the aftermath of the 2008 financial disaster and from the social debris that austerity policies and the bailout of the banks have left behind. It seems to me that under such conditions we have to ask about the induced conditions of unlivability wherein bodies are differentially measured through the market-driven governmentality of profit, debt, and precarity.

Donna Haraway has captured the ways in which immune system discourses map embodied difference in terms of who and what may count as self and other in western late capitalist biopolitics (1989). In late capitalist biopolitics, counting is

not about a neutral arithmetic but rather about, to echo Judith Butler (1993), determining the bodies that count and matter. Therefore, I think the critical figure of mourning offers a framework through which to rethink such processes of mattering and counting in ways that would account for contingent struggles with, within, and despite those power/knowledge configurations that seek to determine whose life counts. Within the context of the pandemic, when so many deaths go unnoticed and uncountable in ways that expose and trouble the logic of numeration and calculability, the apparatus of the disaster conceals and yet intensifies pre-existing and long-standing crises within the crisis, as it were: poverty and precarity, the decimation of healthcare systems, structural oppression, the exploitation of migrant labor, racism, able-bodiedness, sexism and homophobia/transphobia. We might consider the inequalities that permeate and regulate social distancing through discourses of ‘staying at home’ – inequalities implicit in normative kinship, class, citizenship, geographic location, energy and digital connectivity resources. So we have to ask, what does the – necessary and unavoidable – imperative to isolate by staying at home mean for those who don’t have/cannot afford/have lost one, or those who are transient, or those who live in conditions of displacement and confinement such as asylum seekers in refugee camps? And for whom, under what conditions, and through what normalized crises is home not a safe and shareable shelter? My sense is that the apparatuses of self-management and calculable risk administration intersect with, and get complicated by, a politics of location in all its lived embeddedness, that implicates the relation between life and politics for differently situated bodies. Loss – as loss of home, care, legal and political status, rights, relationality, social services and infrastructures – becomes the thanatopolitical limit of late capitalist biopolitics.

Therefore, the politics of mourning speaks to the task of critically addressing and questioning the uneven distribution of vulnerability and livability, i.e., the deadly inequalities and foreclosures that infuse the power over life and death and make certain lives disposable through crises, through normality, and through normalized crises. This is by no means to introduce a metaphysical ontology of human vulnerability or to repudiate vulnerability itself – which would be both impossible and appalling in evoking the fantasy of invulnerable and impervious sovereign self – but rather to commit to a collective political work that accounts for, responds to, and helps overcome the conditions that let our vulnerabilities be violated and become arenas of discrimination, exploitation, oppression, and uneven distribution of resources. In this sense, our critical task in the context of proliferating forms of injurability as injustice might entail addressing and putting forth forms of responsiveness and response-ability that give rise to collective courage, resistance, and justice.

With this in mind, the ambiguous figure of mourning is put to work as a critical question, or a critically situated epistemology, for examining the terms of politicized death and enforced precarious living. It pertains to the collective

contingencies of endurance and survival through which reimagining (as well as reclaiming possibilities for) anti-fascist, radical democratic collective life becomes desirable and possible. Thus, understood, the politics of mourning, for me, is a way of tackling, again and again, this question: in what ways critical(ly) situated knowledges might induce potentialities despite the biopolitical timescapes of a present structured through what Lauren Berlant has called crisis ordinariness (2011)? This is a question that calls for critical epistemologies and imaginaries of differing and deferring temporalities, capable of engaging the present contingencies and their meshes of subjectivation and power/knowledge that regulate the social allocation of life and death.

Emerging from feminist/queer, post-colonial/decolonial and anti-racist critical theories, my interest would be in how the critical concept of mourning might become a site for re-positing the everyday emergency temporality as a historical and political question that concerns the unevenly allocated affective and political registers of loss, vulnerability, deprivation, and adversity. Drawing insights from such critical epistemologies, I would like to point to a political-performative conception of mourning that confounds the schematic dichotomies of affirmative versus deconstructive, optimism versus pessimism, and, ultimately, agonism versus aporia.

Such perspective seeks to explore ways of considering the experience of loss and grief in its enmeshment with history and politics as a performative way for critical agency, while simultaneously considering critical agency as always already an experience of the aporetic. In this sense, a critically situated politics of mourning emerges as a contingent modality of political agonism, which might question and rearticulate authorized power/knowledge matrices regulating which (and how) bodies are made to appear, endure, matter, and (make) sense. This would require addressing how agonistic subjectivity relates to the situated and intractable aporias of political performativity – rather than assuming an unlimited positivity premised upon the disavowal of contingency and vulnerability. Critical agency is, thus, understood in terms of a collective agonistic desire to contest the orderly and ordinary terms of differentially experienced everyday despair.

Some critics may express the reservation that such a performative account of critical agency would lend itself to a melancholic framing. It is my sense, however, that melancholia, taken as a critical political concept and not a sign of a privative impasse, might not be incompatible with critical agency. For those subjected to the unbounded effects of colonialism, nationalism, capitalist exploitation, white supremacy, and sexism, melancholia itself undergoes a critical reconfiguration: as we act through it and in spite of it, it becomes a performative modality through which to fashion world-making perspectives on everyday survival and resistance. As performance theorist José Esteban Muñoz wrote: ‘It is this melancholia that is part of our process of dealing with all the catastrophes that occur in the lives of people of color, lesbians, and gay men... it is a mechanism that helps us

(re)construct identity and take our dead with us to the various battles we must wage in their names – and in our names’ (1999, p. 74).

To be sure, when it comes to the long-term and ongoing struggles to dismantle the presumptions that work to delimit or eviscerate the possibilities of relational life, the personal is political, and at the same time, as Sara Ahmed has put it, the personal is theoretical (2017). Perhaps this is what needs to be learned from such courageous collectivities and social movements as Black Lives Matter in the US, Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, Women in Black in the former Yugoslavia and Israel-Palestine, and *Ni Una Menos* in Argentina and elsewhere, which seek to politically redeem losses induced and disavowed by ongoing conditions of white supremacy, occupation, militarism, sexism, nationalism, economic and political destitution. This is about public and collective enactments of political performativity, which reappropriate the inscriptional space of mourning in order to turn it into a site of agonistic contestation.

The history of AIDS activism in the 1980s – i.e., the AIDS Memorial Quilt and die-ins in major places of public administration – manifests this interrelation of mourning and resurrection in a distinctive way (Crimp, 1989). This activism of mourning has brought into relief the traumas of homophobia, thereby forging affective networks of camaraderie built on a queer counter-archive of acknowledgement and testimony. Thus, it has called into question the conflation of mourning with political inertia in the face of political-psychic preclusions that regulate the languages of mourning and the space and time of the memorable.

Different activist movements, as they gather – in outrage and in grief – to contest racist state violence and injustice, perform the yet to come of social justice. Having emerged out of a moment of political loss and grief, the Black Lives Matter social movement conveys a political and affective responsiveness to the racialized disposability so thoroughly embedded in the choking ordinary. When Eric Garner was murdered by a chokehold applied by police officers while he pleaded for a breath of air eleven times on 17 July 2014 thousands of marchers took to the streets in response chanting Garners last words: I can’t breathe.

The Women in Black activists (in former Yugoslavia, and elsewhere), in their street actions of agonistic mourning, embody their own and others’ precarious and dissident belonging vis-à-vis power assemblages of patriarchy and nationalism. In occupying the position of the internal enemy, which has been conferred upon them as a status of abjection, they deploy a politics of mourning depleted and critical of its historically authorized nationalist and heteronormative conventions that pose mourning as a trope for proper femininity.

Viewed from this light, varied critical genres and practices of public grievability, in their distinct modalities and contexts, engage with and account for unclaimed injuries and memories in ways that displace, again and again, the norms that authorize who/what matters as memorable and who/what is deprived of the rights and rites of memorability. Involving the processes of affecting and being affected

by others in relationality, grief, passion, exhaustion and endurance, such movements and public aggregations offer space for the political-performative eventness of unauthorized and dissident mourning. In creating a certain sense of community, they hold open the question of what enables and is enabled by a collective confrontation with unaccountable losses and open wounds. As these activists struggle with/in and against injurious and unjust processes of ‘making live and letting die’, the sign of mourning they invoke is performatively claimed anew and critically reconfigured at once. In the political performativity of such agonistic dispositions, vulnerability and resistance become each other’s complicated condition of possibility.

In such critical formations of social memory, which redeem living memories of irrecoverable political trauma and despair, mourning performs the conditions of its own possibility by acknowledging and dismantling histories of oppression and thus becomes a site for the critical possibility of resistance, freedom, and the yearning for a different future. Moten (2003) has insightfully engaged with the way the aesthetics of ‘black mo’nin’ disrupts the temporal regime that sustains the opposition of mourning and melancholia. This is about an uncanny sense of expansive temporality not reducible to the imperatives of white, nationalistic, reproductive futurity. Political imagination and the potentiality of critique are claimed, desired, and enacted by those whose lives and futures have been violently excluded, repressed, and rendered unworthy by the entwined powers of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Ultimately, in its multiform registering of the radical epistemologies of critical race theory, feminist queer theory and decolonial theory, the agonistic democratic work of mourning attests to past and enduring injuries as injustices while it performs the transformative powers of brokenness and dispossession, thus allowing for an imponderable potentiality that is utterly uneasy, hopeful, wounded, and aporetic. As McIvor (2016) reminds us, the democratic work of mourning, as it relates to the operations of racialized pasts and presents, requires accounting for the uneven structural positioning of particular bodies vis-à-vis contexts of racial violence and discrimination: in other words, it requires de-racializing the white western psychoanalytic and other intellectual renditions of mourning.

Dissident mourning calls for a radical renegotiation and reinvention of the category of mourning itself, and especially its reliance on white, nationalist, patriarchal, heteronormative, and familialist discursive archives. In this respect, it calls for rethinking the political implications of critical mourning in instating possibilities for decolonial, antiracist, anti-fascist, and queer feminist political subjectivities in our times. Dissident mourning is about accounting for the unequal conditions of grievability – to invoke Butler’s work – that haunt the common intelligibility of memorable life through socially prohibited forms of grief and desire. At the same time, it is about responding to those irrecoverable and irreconcilable losses through reckoning with the impossibility of taking the lost

other within oneself. In this sense, the question becomes what to do politically with the possibility of impossible mourning. Perhaps the impossibility or inability to engage with the dead other is the only possible way to mourn. How might, then, this double bind be embodied in the politics of dissident mourning under the circumstances of sovereign regulation of otherness? How does this aporia come to involve the resistant politics of remembering otherwise in the face of political loss? How does it indicate a notion of non-sovereign political subjectivity involving the intricacies of vulnerability, despair, and responsiveness? And, finally, how might instantiations of dissident mourning attend to the experience of becoming a political subject constituted through loss and engaged in pursuits of critical agency, in opposition and resistance to the logics of unclaimable political loss?

And so I am interested in taking up Jacques Derrida's work on the im/possible work of mourning (2001) along with Butler's account of the hierarchies of grievability (2000, 2004), in order to consider the work of mourning – or, the putting of mourning to work – as both foreclosed and open to political potential. This relation of mourning to the performative im/possibility of unlivable life involves the question of how a situated politics of agonistic mourning draws its possibility from that which renders it impossible. This question leads me to suggest that the critical labor of mourning is aporetic and agonistic at once. In fact, in the domain of political mourning, the workings of agonism and aporia are constitutively bound to each other. But more than that, the figure of mourning, in all its intractable ethical, political, intersubjective, and affective nuances, is a theoretical resource that implicates us in the critical project of thinking agonism and aporia together. Perhaps the performativity of mourning can be taken as an open-ended and interminably complicated exercise in thinking and enacting the agonistic within the aporetic and, at the same time, the aporetic within the agonistic.

Athena Athanasiou

Genres of loss

In these brief comments, my key question is: how are experiences of change thematized as *loss* – loss for whom, of what, explained how, metabolized in what ways? With that question in mind I am experimenting with the idea that *loss* is not only an abiding thematic element and recurring affective state in politics, but perhaps also an emergent *genre* in political and academic culture.

If we follow Aristotle, we can cluster narratives according to genre categories, such as epic, tragedy, and comedy, or as romance, allegory, melodrama, or gothic more recently. By genre I mean the vernacular idioms, conventional narrative forms, and repeated tropes that constitute 'kinds' or species of literature, narrative, or speech. However, as academics across the humanities know, genre is, thus, an institution that shapes its participants, because a genre sets their standards and

expectations for how to read and engage, not just a text, but an event or history, as they interpret it through a genre. For Bakhtin (2010), ordinary life is, thus, constituted by ‘speech genres’ – memorandum, commands, lectures, sermons, but also prayers, pitches, seductions, and we might now add tweets – as forms that structure what and how we speak in (and interpret) certain scenes and settings. In turn, he argues, speech genres are abstracted or reified in explicitly literary forms. We attend to genre not to get a taxonomy right, but to foreground the rhetorical dimension in texts and contexts, by showing that *how* people speak, the forms they use, inextricably shape *who* can speak, *what* can (and cannot) be said – and heard – as well as what we *expect* from each other and our speech-acts. The idea of genre, thus, seems like a kind of hinge, on the one hand swiveling attention to the inherited grip, creative reworking and visceral reception of speech-acts in the political world, and on the other hand, swiveling our attention toward the ways that we academics theorize them. In each domain, genre conventions are not fixed, but undergo historical stresses that jeopardize their authority or engender their reanimation.

The eulogy and jeremiad might be deemed genres of loss that bridge the ordinary and the formally literary, but what follows if we read theories of trauma, melancholy and mourning, depictions of receding democratic values, laments for eviscerated public things, theories of waning radical narratives, and critiques of left melancholy as iterations of a genre, bespeaking a structure of feeling taking conventional (literary) form? How are change, action, and futurity being conceived in theories and narratives – also prominent literary fictions since *Beloved* – that foreground loss and demand we come to terms with it, both as a crucial feature of reality and as a condition of possibility?

Until the 2016 election, my organizing hypothesis about American politics for the prior five years was that inherited political genres – call them romantic, jeremiadic, melodramatic, also populist and also progressive – were no longer credible and, thus, in a crisis of authority. Prevailing generic forms seemed unable to address – or address only in formulaic ways – either pervasive experiences of downward mobility and precarity among whites, or the historic and ongoing violence, domination, and segregation that characterize life across the color line, despite formal equality, let alone link them together. Neither inherited genres of progressive reform, nor inherited jeremiads of restoration seemed credible, I had been arguing, and despite claims by some left theorists about the commonality of class politics, no inherited genre of political speech seemed able to cross the racial divide separating whites with something to lose (who are undergoing dispossession) from those racially consigned to violence, generalized dishonor, and abandonment. Meanwhile, important figures across the humanities and on the academic left – for example Sheldon Wolin and Wendy Brown, David Scott and Lauren Berlant – were depicting a crisis in the inherited genres of radicalism.

This critical exchange, organized under the rubric of mourning and politics, is an occasion to reflect on genres in politics and in our analysis, in a moment of intense mobilization and polarized conflict within and between the two parties, and by social movement activists outside or beyond them around the thematic of loss. By what genres are differently situated citizens – as well as theorists analyzing them – conceiving loss and responding to it? Though eulogy is a crucial genre of loss, I will emphasize both that loss is a mood or feeling explicitly animating all speech now, and that political actors, movements, and theorists are thematizing loss in consequentially different ways. What genre choices are being made, and with what worldly implications?

I would start with two central facts. #1: Charles Blow used the metaphor of ‘heartbreak’ to depict the feeling-state of white workers, whose increasing rates of mortality due to suicide and drugs bespeaks despair that the economy can enable dignified livelihoods (and thus futurity) for most people. That loss of faith is linked to a crisis of identity because whiteness is being displaced in real ways by changing demographics due to immigration, while also failing as a form of protection and value. Central fact #2 is that the historic election of Barack Obama not only enabled renewed mobilization of white nationalism, but also exposed the limits of civil rights reform in the face of mass incarceration, pervasive violence, and increasing racial disparity by every index. Younger generations among people of color seem to have lost faith in the progressive narrative of incremental improvement and in a civil rights politics of respectability, national leadership, and elite bargaining.

In response to – and shaping – white experience of dispossession, we see two kinds of populist jeremiads, each organized by loss. Trump, in his rhetoric as candidate if not in the policies of his administration, would make America great again by joining nativism and protectionism to Social Security and Medicare – as if to resume the protection that whiteness once afforded, symbolized by ‘the wall’. Bernie Sanders would undo financialization, dismantle Wall Street power, increase taxation on the rich, and enact protectionism to support a new New Deal. Massive spending on healthcare, college, infrastructure would generate mass employment at living wages, boost unionization, and enable social movement organizing. If Trump Americanizes national socialism as white nationalism, Bernie’s rhetoric Americanizes social democracy to fulfill progressive promises but without military Keynesianism as their economic driver. Their narratives are indeed mobilizing whites: Trump seems to have reconstituted the Republican Party by avowing its racial subtext while abandoning its neo-liberal orthodoxy; Bernie’s two campaigns may have succeeded in turning the Democratic Party from the neo-liberalism ruling it since 1992, as if resuming New Deal progressivism anchored in social movement mobilization.

Contra my hypothesis about genres in crisis, though, do the last years indicate that jeremiadic and progressive narratives have lost credibility? *Contra* Brown

(2015), have liberal democratic values been hollowed out by neo-liberalism, are they amenable to resuscitation, or do they remain alive enough to authorize felicitous speech-acts? Is the left enacting melancholic denial of the loss of its master narrative of class commonality, or does the Sanders campaign signify the possibility of creatively reworking that inherited genre? *Contra* Scott (2004), is the genre of radical romance – which posits a condition of oppression overcome decisively by collective action – exhausted, or is it being resurrected in movements like Black Lives Matter? *Contra* Berlant (2011), are ‘genres of crisis’ actually ‘waning’, and being displaced by a ‘genre of impasse’, or are genres of crisis being reanimated by dramatic political speech positing decisive action in the before-and-after arc of a redemptive narrative? Is a sense of crisis being ‘de-dramatized’ as survival in the ordinary, or, is it amplified by a narrative of a deranged, corrupt system that we can and must dismantle? In response to these questions, I would play out three divergent lines of association.

One set of associations begins with the situation Marx describes in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1994). Revolutionaries once resurrected the dead as they called up, identified with, and imitated heroic precursors to inspire their engagement with the tasks of the present. While Marx links their misrecognition to tragedy, he depicts farce when successor generations repeat world historical necromancy to avoid, rather than engage, their historical reality. Marx’s account suggests that parody dominates now because we have not worked through the truth of our historical situation – we are attached to a form of life that is unsustainable, unjust, and obviously failing, but we won’t give it up. By Marx’s argument, only those who let the dead bury their dead are able to create a poetry of the future, as if to say that mourning is a condition of creative futurity. But this possibility is historically conditioned, because the capacity for the new, as opposed to resurrecting the dead, depends on the emergence of a collective actor. Absent that actor, leaders and myths fill the political vacuum. But the problematic of resurrection appears in two ways or dimensions.

In one dimension we imagine Marx addressing Luddites: you are attached to an artisanal form of life being displaced by industrial production; a radical not nostalgic politics must organize by way of class not craft, and by emergent (technological) possibilities not by a receding form of life. Correspondingly, we have not yet had that deeper conversation about what we should count as irreversible change and an irretrievably past way of life. Given globalization and climate change, is it possible and desirable to restore manufacturing in the ways that Sanders and Trump both endorse? Must we instead radically re-conceive how we understand and shape the practices of livelihood that could anchor a specifically democratic form of life now?

Thinking about unwelcome change and loss, and about how we decide what is necessary to relinquish and possible to conserve, draws me from Marx to Tocqueville’s way of addressing aristocrats, and to the way that Lear’s (2006)

Plenty Coup addresses his tribe. Like Marx to the Luddites, both argue that a form of life is no longer credible, and that mourning it as irretrievable is the key condition of even imagining life on other terms, a capacity Lear calls 'radical hope' and ties to a 'possibility for new possibilities'. Plenty Coup and Tocqueville serve as what Lear calls a 'designated mourner' to both narrate and facilitate a 'working through' I would link to theory and politics, not only therapy. But the condition of Lear's argument on behalf of mourning is his pathologizing of Plenty Coup's adversary, Sitting Bull, who refused a mourning he construed as acquiescent collaboration with white power, and who instead remained invested, Lear says melancholically, in refusing to accept loss and relinquish a past attachment. To pathologize Sitting Bull's refusal as a denial of reality, Lear must deny the actual contingency and uncertainty of their historical moment, which he does by a teleological presumption that warranted Plenty Coup's faith but not Sitting Bull's resistance, the same teleological presumption that Marx mobilized to pathologize Luddites as they argued about the meaning of industrialization. This presumption is a de-politicizing move, which forecloses the very questions that Sheldon Wolin argues democratic citizens must ask and answer. Defending the archaic and sounding like a Luddite, Wolin rejects Marx's teleology and denies that democratic possibility can be built on emergent historical forces and forms. More like Walter Benjamin than Marx, he identifies the political explicitly with resurrecting the dead. By these associations I mean to suggest that the question of loss is both empirical and political, at once about historical facts and the discursive forms that invest them with meaning. I mean to ask: how do we judge which inherited social practices must be relinquished and which emergent practices bear democratic possibility?

Taking Marx's trope of resurrection seriously suggests a second dimension for thinking about loss and politics. After all, his performance of high modernism conjured a collective subject producing itself by speaking and enacting a 'poetry of the future'. Here Marx embodied and proposed what a later modernist, Castoriadis (1998), called 'radical imagination', and linked to figurative language or metaphors that carry us from the familiar or literal to the unfamiliar and emergent. Are Americans at a loss now not only because of material conditions so-called, but also because they lack the figural language or organizing fantasy by which they might re-imagine the desolation of de-industrialization as a condition of possibility? Does that failure of imagination result from a failure to acknowledge the fact of change and digest the meaning of their losses? Still, what genres of speech enable people to give a salient, generative form to what they tacitly know and inchoately feel about change and loss? Political judgments, not only about the practices we affirm or resist, but also about the feelings we encourage or overcome, are, thus, tied to rhetorical choices about our language.

A second set of associations begins with James Baldwin in the early 60 s. Speaking to southern whites, he acknowledges their view that de-segregation is an

unwelcome change entailing a devastating loss of privilege and identity. But, he insists, this change as loss offers opportunities for genuine flourishing:

Any real change implies the break-up of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety. And at such a moment, unable to see and not daring to imagine what the future will now bring forth, one clings to what one knew, or thought one knew; to what one possessed or dreamed that one possessed. Yet it is only when a man is able, without bitterness and self-pity, to surrender a dream he long cherished, or a privilege he has long possessed, that he is set free – he has set himself free – for higher dreams, for greater privileges... Remembering this... affords me almost my only means of understanding what is happening in the minds and hearts of white southerners today (1956, p. 12).

Both whites and blacks, he expects, will ‘undergo the torment of being forced to surrender far more than we ever realized we had accepted’. If they ‘surrender’ to – as in allow themselves to undergo – ‘history’s strangest metamorphosis’, they will also surrender – as in relinquish – crucial aspects of identity and forms of safety, but thereby they will emerge as a new – and freer – kind of political subject. If this statement remains true regarding race, it seems even more evocative of the ‘surrender’ involved in giving up a growth economy oriented around individual consumption. The claim has to be made – in both cases – that people will benefit from surrendering their attachment, albeit in ways they cannot imagine now, in ways that cannot be intelligible in the terms by which they now imagine cost and benefit. As Lear argues, the structure of intelligibility that defines ‘better’, so bound to an inherited way of life, will itself have changed. It is only by creative metaphor, what Castoriadis called figures of the newly thinkable, that we can travel over that abyss between the familiar and the new.

What Luddites, aristocrats, and whites see as unwelcome change, Marx, Tocqueville, and Baldwin argue is change for the better, for if they surrender to the losses and uncertainties that change entails, they set themselves free to create new dreams and powers. In contrast, Wolin, Lear’s *Sitting Bull*, and George Wallace reject surrender to unwelcome change. But wait! you will say, these are very different situations! and *that* is exactly my point: there is no one valid view of loss – nor one right story about proper mourning as opposed to pathological melancholy – but rather fraught political judgments by differently positioned actors forming a historical sense, political subjectivity, and narrative frame simultaneously. What do we fight to preserve, against those who tell us we are resisting the course of history, the demands of reality, the fact of necessity? When or how do we seek to preserve – perhaps in new ways – what we have valued? When do we accept the loss of what we cherished as the very condition of our identity? How can such ‘surrender’ be (made) an opportunity? And when do we, like Baldwin, imagine a *common* horizon

for adversaries who might undergo a metamorphosis together, and when do we, like Marx or Sitting Bull, deny that possibility?

A third set of associations is prompted by our politics now. I take widespread symptoms of despair to suggest that Americans KNOW that an inherited form of life, a cherished dream, and a set of privileges is failing or ending, but how is this sense of loss being interpreted and channeled? The meaning of feelings, or the sense of experience and its meaning, is rhetorically mediated, as our genres not only name feelings and stipulate causes but tell us how to judge those feelings or relate to those causes. Public avowal of losses, or of an inchoate sense of loss, has no self-evident implications, but depends on genre choices. Trump and Bernie represent vastly different political projects, but they share a jeremiadic genre that depicts unwelcome changes as reversible, as the effects of remediable causes they lodge in institutions and villainous actors. Each, thus, mobilizes anger to focus on the remediable and the future, rather than depict, say, a dramatic and irreversible shift in our industrial form of life, or incommensurable and ongoing injury by intractable white supremacy and the haunting power of the past. They do not so much inhabit the interval between grief and grievance, in Saidiya Hartman's profound phrase, as displace the weight of grief by the energies of grievance. Are there models of or examples of loss metabolized differently, of loss and anger mobilized otherwise? Are other genres available?

By this question I would turn from the ways that fact # 1 – white precarity – is being metabolized to the ways that fact #2 – ongoing racial injustice – has been metabolized. Of course, there are African-American versions of a jeremiad, but after the civil rights movement, that genre seems less credible. Instead, the ongoing and catastrophic state of racialized exception is more typically iterated by a genre of loss closer to eulogy than jeremiad, but eulogy inflected by what I, appropriating Nietzsche, would call 'the birth of tragedy in the spirit of music'.

On the one hand, we can hear Hartman (2008) and Rankine (2017) depict losses that cannot be redeemed or rectified and should never be forgotten. Given the ongoing afterlife of slavery, Hartman concludes that black people must live in loss, not get over it, but by inhabiting that space between grief and grievance they can articulate loss as the basis of collective subjectivity and political militancy. They can make grief a mode of political agency by finding in the enunciation of past harm a way of living loss, and through that, a new agency. After the Charleston massacre, Rankine, thus, celebrated Emmett Till's mother as a model of linking mourning and militancy, but also for a practice of grieving that sought to reach and challenge whites. Though visual evidence of violence risks becoming a spectacle for white pornography, she argued, it might compel whites to face the incommensurable experiences of systematic racism that divide white and black. The Black Lives Matter movement can be read as an attempt to keep mourning an open dynamic in our culture. Unlike earlier Black Power movements, it aligns with the dead, continues the mourning, and refuses the forgetting in front of all of us.

Her hope – which I take Hartman to construe as a form of cruel optimism – is that the impact of such witnessing will be a re-routing of interior belief among whites, a shift she insists is the internal condition for genuine social change. Because of black public action, grief for these deceased others might align some of us, for the first time, with the living. We see here a second aspect of this genre of loss, an internal (and ethical) dimension also emphasized by Baldwin, which assumes that human beings can face in others only what they can face in themselves. Any effort to enlarge democratic practices of reciprocity and recognition must be routed through internal spaces by crossing the color line whites maintain. In these terms we can hear Klein's account of loss as an incurable aspect of human existence and an explosive element in our subjectivity because adult experiences trigger our earliest experiences and toxic defenses. I hear Baldwin in this dimension, too, not only when he says life is tragic, but because he says all human beings seek forms of exemption or protection that he calls chimeras. Because no one surrenders such innocence easily, this loss is an achievement, and bears the creative vitality that Nietzsche associated with the spirit of music.

So where do I end up? First, we must specify kinds of losses, and whose. Second, we must recognize that reversibility or irreversibility are more arguments and achievements than givens. Third, beware of those who speak a language of acknowledgment or mourning without crediting points one and two. Lastly, I have to ask: could a genre of loss conjure a common horizon that bridges white and black?

George Shulman

About the Author

David W. McIvor is Associate Professor of Political Science at Colorado State University. He is the author of *Mourning in America: Race and the Politics of Loss* (Cornell, 2016) and the co-editor, along with Alexander Hirsch, of *The Democratic Arts of Mourning: Political Theory and Loss* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019). His current research is focused on the concept of narcissism and its relationship to ecology and democracy.

Juliet Hooker is Professor of Political Science at Brown University. She is a political theorist specializing in racial justice, democratic theory, Latin American political thought, and Black political thought. She is the author of *Race and the Politics of Solidarity* (Oxford, 2009) and *Theorizing Race in the Americas: Douglass, Sarmiento, Du Bois, and Vasconcelos* (Oxford, 2017), which was a recipient of the 2018 Ralph Bunche Book Award for the best work in ethnic and cultural pluralism and the 2018 Best Book Award of the Race, Ethnicity, and

Politics Section of the American Political Science Association. She is currently working on a book project on political loss and democracy, entitled *Black Grief/White Grievance*.

Ashley Atkins is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Western Michigan University. She received her PhD in Philosophy from Princeton in 2014. Her specializations and areas of research include philosophy of mind, social and political philosophy, and the philosophy of language. She is the author of “Black Lives Matter or All Lives Matter? Color-blindness and Epistemic Injustice” (2018) in the journal *Social Epistemology*, and she is currently working on a manuscript about Emmett Till and the politics of loss.

Athena Athanasiou is Professor of Social Anthropology and Gender Theory at Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences (Athens, Greece). Among her publications are the books: *Agonistic Mourning: Political Dissidence and the Women in Black* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017); *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (with Judith Butler, Polity Press, 2013); *Crisis as a ‘State of Exception’* (Athens, 2012); *Life at the Limit: Essays on Gender, Body and Biopolitics* (Athens, 2007); *Rewriting Difference: Luce Irigaray and ‘the Greeks’* (co-ed. with Elena Tzelepis, SUNY Press, 2010). She has been a fellow at the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women, at Brown University, and at the Center for the Study of Social Difference, at Columbia University. She is a member of the editorial advisory board of the journals *Critical Times*, *Feminist Formations*, *Philosophy and Society*, *feministiQ*, and *Journal of Greek Media and Culture*.

George Shulman teaches political theory at The Gallatin School of New York University. His second book, *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Politics*, won the Davvid Easton Award in 2010. His current book project is called *Life Postmortem: Impasse and Genre in American Politics and Literature*.

References

- ABC7NY. (2020) Grocery Store Worker Insisted on Helping Seniors, Disabled Before Coronavirus Death. *ABC Eyewitness News*. <https://abc7ny.com/society/grocery-store-worker-insisted-on-helping-seniors-before-covid-19-death/6088497/>, accessed 9 April 2020.
- Acevedo, N. (2020) Hit the Hardest by Coronavirus Deaths, NY Latinos Mourn Loved Ones. *NBC News.com*. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/hit-hardest-coronavirus-deaths-ny-latinos-now-mourn-together-n1180836>, accessed 10 April 2020.
- Ahmed, S. (2017) *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- Allen, D. (2004) *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship after Brown v. Board of Education*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Athanasiou, A., and Butler, J. (2013) *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*. New York: Polity.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (2010) *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Baldwin, J. (1956) Faulkner and Desegregation. *Partisan Review* 23(4): 568–573.
- Berlant, L. (2011) *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Boynton, M. (2020) Funeral Protests Kemp Reopening Georgia. *V-103*. <https://v103.radio.com/blogs/maria-boynton/protest-held-as-georgia-stay-at-home-to-expire>, accessed 1 May 2020.
- Brown, W. (2015) *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Butler, J. (1993) *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2000) *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Butler, J. (2004) *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso.
- Castoriadis, C. (1998) *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Cineas, F. (2020) A bioethicist on why reopening states will kill more black people. *VOX*. <https://www.vox.com/identities/2020/5/1/21242911/black-americans-coronavirus-opening-states>, accessed 1 May 2020.
- Crimp, D. (1989) Mourning and militancy. *October*, 51: pp. 3–18.
- Dahl, A. (2018) *Empire of the People: Settler Colonialism and the Foundations of Modern Democratic Thought*. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press.
- Derrida, J. (2001) *The Work of Mourning*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Eligon, J., Burch, A. D. S., Searcey, D., and Oppel Jr., R. A. (2020) Black Americans Face Alarming Rates of Coronavirus Infection in Some States. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/07/us/coronavirus-race.html>, accessed 14 April 2020.
- Euben, J. P. (ed.). (1986) *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press.
- Farmer, B. (2020) The Coronavirus Doesn't Discriminate, but U.S. Health Care Showing Familiar Biases. *NPR News*. <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/04/02/825730141/the-coronavirus-doesnt-discriminate-but-u-s-health-care-showing-familiar-biases>, accessed 2 April 2020.
- Feldstein, R. (2000) *Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism, 1930–1965*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1983) On the genealogy of ethics: an overview of work in progress. In: P. Rabinow (ed.) *Michel Foucault: Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth* (Vol. 1). New York: The New Press.
- Freud, S. (1917) Mourning and Melancholia. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914–1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works* (pp. 237–258). London: Hogarth Press.
- Goba, K. (2020) New York City's Coronavirus Essential Workers Are Overwhelmingly People of Color. *Buzzfeed News*. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/kadiagoba/coronavirus-new-york-brooklyn-essential-workers-black-poc>, accessed 22 April 2020.
- Goldberg, M. (2019) Democracy Grief Is Real: Seeing what Trump is Doing to America, Many Find it Hard to Fight off Despair. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/13/opinion/sunday/trump-democracy.html>, accessed 13 December 2020.
- Gordon, L. R., Menzel, A., Shulman, G., and Syedullah, J. (2018) Afro pessimism. *Contemporary Political Theory* 17(1): 105–137.
- Häggglund, M. (2019) *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom*. New York: Knopf Doubleday.
- Hanchar, M. G. (2020) *The Spectre of Race*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Haraway, D. (1989) The biopolitics of postmodern bodies: Determinations of self in immune system discourse. *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 1(1): 3–43.
- Hartman, S. (2008) *Lose your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

- Honig, B. (2013) *Antigone Interrupted*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- Hooker, J. (2016) Black lives matter and the paradoxes of U.S. black politics: From democratic sacrifice to democratic repair. *Political Theory* 44(4): 448–469.
- Lear, J. (2006) *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lear, J. (2017) *Wisdom Won from Illness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Levitsky, S., and Ziblatt, D. (2019) *How Democracies Die*. New York: Penguin Random House.
- Lithwick, D. (2020) America's Heroism Trap. *Slate*. <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/04/coronavirus-humans-vs-heroes.html>, accessed 20 April 2020.
- Loewald, H. L. (1960) On the therapeutic action of psychoanalysis. *Papers on Psychoanalysis* (pp. 221–256). New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Martí, J. (2002) *Selected Writings*. New York: Penguin.
- Marx, K. (1994) *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. New York: International Publishers Company.
- Mays, J. C., and Newman, A. (2020) Virus is Twice as Deadly for Black and Latino People Than Whites in New York. *The New York Times*. 8 April. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/nyregion/coronavirus-race-deaths.html>. Accessed 22 Apr 2020.
- McIvor, D. W. (2010) *Mourning in America: Racial Trauma and the Democratic Work of Mourning*. Dissertation. Duke University.
- McIvor, D. W. (2016) *Mourning in America: Race and the politics of loss*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- McIvor, D. W., and Hirsch, A. K. (2019) *The Democratic Arts of Mourning: Political Theory and Loss*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books.
- Moten, F. (2003) *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press.
- Muñoz, J. E. (1999) *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Norton, A. (2001) Evening land. In: A. Botwinick and W. E. Connolly (eds.) *Democracy and Vision: Sheldon Wolin and the Vicissitudes of the Political* (pp. 161–173). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Nussbaum, M. (2013) *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Olson, J. (2004) *The Abolition of White Democracy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Parks, M. (2020) In the End, the Voters Responded: Surprising Takeaways From Wisconsin's Election 2020. *NPR News*. <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/15/834037566/in-the-end-the-voters-responded-surprising-takeaways-from-wisconsin-s-election>, accessed 15 April 2020.
- Rankine, C. (2017) The Condition Of Black Life Is One Of Mourning. In: C. Milstein (ed.) *Rebellious Mourning*. Chico, CA: AK Press.
- Robertson, C., and Gebeloff, R. (2020) How Millions of Women Became the Most Essential Workers in America. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/18/us/coronavirus-women-essential-workers.html>, accessed 18 April 2020.
- Robinson, C. (2016) *The Terms of Order: Political Science and the Myth of Leadership*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Scott, D. (2004) *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Silverman, H., Toropin, K., Sidner, S., and Perrot, L. (2020) Navajo Nation surpasses New York state for the highest Covid-19 infection rate in the US. *CNN*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/05/18/us/navajo-infection-rate-trnd/index.html>, accessed 18 May 2020.
- Sperling, G. (2020) Martin Luther King Jr. Predicted This Moment. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/24/opinion/sunday/essential-workers-wages-covid.html>, accessed 24 April 2020.

- Stow, S. (2012) From upper canal to lower manhattan: Memorialization and the politics of loss. *Perspectives on Politics* 10(3): 687–700.
- Stow, S. (2017) *American Mourning: Tragedy, Democracy, and the Politics of Public Loss*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Tensely, B. (2020) Peeling Back this Pandemic's Layers of Inequality. *CNN*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/15/politics/coronavirus-inequality-race-tricia-neuman/index.html>, accessed 15 April 2020.
- Tharoor, I. (2020) Coronavirus Kills its First Democracy. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/03/31/coronavirus-kills-its-first-democracy/>, accessed 31 March 2020.
- Thebault, R., Tran, A. B. T. and Williams, V. (2020) The Coronavirus is Infecting and Killing Black Americans at an Alarming High Rate. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/04/07/coronavirus-is-infecting-killing-black-americans-an-alarmingly-high-rate-post-analysis-shows/?arc404=true>, accessed 7 April 2020.
- Till-Mobley, M., and Benson, C. (2003) *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime That Changed America*. New York: Random House.
- Wedeen, L. (2019) *Authoritarian Apprehensions: Ideology, Judgment, and Mourning in Syria*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.