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INTRODUCTION

What Is Political Loss?

So many people have reached out to me telling me they're sorry this happened to my family. Well, don't be sorry, 'cause this has been happening to my family for a long time, longer than I can account for. It happened to Emmett Till . . . Philando, Mike Brown, Sandra . . . and I've shed tears for every single one of these people that it's happened to. This is nothing new. I'm not sad. I'm not sorry. I'm angry. And I'm tired. I haven't cried one time. I stopped crying years ago. I am numb. I have been watching police murder people that look like me for years. I'm also a Black history minor. So not only have I been watching it in the 30 years that I've been on this planet, but I've been watching it for years before we were even alive. I'm not sad. I don't want your pity. I want change.

—LETETRA WIDEMAN

We're not backing down anymore. . . . This is our country.

—JANUARY 6 INSURRECTIONIST

LOSS IS UBIQUITOUS in US politics and society today. Most glaringly, the global Covid-19 pandemic has visited untold losses worldwide. From the horrific death toll, which as of this

writing surpasses one million in the United States alone and six million worldwide, to the economic devastation it has wrought, the 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) because of physical distancing, the losses caused by Covid-19 continue to mount. At the same time, the pandemic and inadequate government responses to it have further exposed existing differential patterns of racialized precarity.¹ From the composition of the not-until-recently-recognized-as-such essential workforce, which is dominated by women of color; to which groups have been disproportionately infected, hospitalized, and killed by the virus (Black, Latinx, and Indigenous peoples),² while others (mostly white) protest any government measures to curb the spread, such as mask mandates; to unequal access to vaccines, yawning racial and class disparities in the impact of the pandemic unequivocally demonstrate that we are not in fact “all in this together,” as politicians are wont to claim in moments of national crisis.³ Loss is widespread, but it is by no means evenly distributed. Some losses are also compounded. As the *Washington Post* noted: “Deaths from covid-19 are causing gaps in grief, gaps that are tragically familiar: Black, American Indian and Alaska Native communities suffer a higher bereavement burden given persistent disparities in life expectancy and mortality.”⁴ At the same time, if the losses that accompany a global pandemic are made political by the disparate effects of state action and inaction and the way existing inequalities exacerbate ostensibly “natural” disasters, other kinds of racialized losses that have indelibly shaped US political development seemingly reached a critical inflection point during the Obama and Trump eras—with grave consequences for US democracy.

Black Grief/White Grievance analyzes the impact of loss on the political imaginations of citizens, as well as the civic practices they develop in response to it.

As the paired epigraphs by Letetra Wideman and one of the thousands of January 6 insurrectionists powerfully illustrate, in the Obama and Trump eras, the two most important forces driving racial politics in the United States have been Black grief and white grievance. Black grief and white grievance are linked because white grievance obscures and supplants Black grief and is often mobilized in response to it. White grievance functions to ensure white priority and inattentiveness to Black loss. It is also the greatest obstacle to the prospect of genuine multiracial democracy in the United States. The ongoing refusal of Donald Trump and his supporters to accept the loss of the 2020 election—which culminated in the attempted insurrection at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021—finally prompted some sectors of the country to begin grappling with this danger. The violent white riot at the US Capitol did not come out of nowhere, however. During Trump’s administration long-simmering cries of white victimhood crystallized into a potent politics of white grievance that frames the United States as a white country under siege from threats from within and without at the hands of people of color, such as “ungrateful” and “unpatriotic” Blacks, “criminal” Mexican and Latin American immigrants, “Muslim” terrorists, “violent” refugees, the “kung flu” or “Chinese virus,” and so on.⁵ Simultaneously, the continued protests for racial justice galvanized by rampant police shootings of Black citizens amid a deadly pandemic that has disproportionately affected people of color, coupled with the key role played by Black activists—particularly Black women—in the electoral defeat of racist right-wing forces in the 2020 election, highlight the continued burdens placed on Black citizens within a white

democracy that has never lived up to its egalitarian rhetoric. In the measured words of political scientist Zoltan Hajnal, “America’s democracy is racially uneven. Whites are likely to end up on the top as winners, and racial and ethnic minorities are likely to end up on the bottom as losers.”⁶

Black Grief/White Grievance takes loss seriously as a key question for political theorists and ordinary citizens. It is centrally concerned with how loss is mobilized politically. How political loss is distributed among citizens is a crucial question for democratic politics, as Danielle Allen has argued.⁷ Uneven distributions of the democratic labor of losing, especially along preexisting hierarchies such as race, belie the fundamental tenets of equal citizenship. Yet certain kinds of entrenched structural inequality—such as white supremacy—precisely function to obscure this uneven distribution of democratic labor. Political loss is also not a naturally occurring phenomenon. Rather, our political communities and society have been constituted to produce differential losses and to profit from the losses of non-white peoples. As Megan Ming Francis observes, “The current vulnerability of American democracy has much to do with the nation’s long history of anti-Black state violence . . . yet, despite the enduring influence of racial violence, scholars of American politics do not usually treat it as a durable threat to democracy.” Even in this moment of rising concern about democratic “backsliding” in the United States—a framing that overstates the extent to which equal citizenship had been achieved—there is a tendency to underestimate “the impact of anti-Black violence and its relationship to racial authoritarianism.”⁸ Being a good democratic citizen entails learning to accept justified political losses. At a time when the racist pathologies of US democracy are painfully apparent, we must therefore ask: Which citizens have historically been expected to develop this crucial civic

capacity? Grappling directly with the question of political loss can help us to decide which losses need to be attended to in a democratic political community, so that those who have already historically made the greatest sacrifices do not continue to do so. It can help us think through questions such as: What is the wrong kind of instrumentalization of grief? How should democracies respond to those who refuse to accept legitimate losses? How already disempowered citizens respond to loss, the additional work they have to do to make their losses visible, is a central concern of this book. So, too, is the question of what obligations we have in response to this unequal distribution of democratic labor. At minimum, we have a duty to actively witness and work to redress such losses. One of my central claims is that while Black grief has historically been mobilized by Black activists in service of Black freedom, we must reckon with the loss this entails.

The account of political loss in this book is by no means exhaustive.⁹ *Black Grief/White Grievance* is primarily concerned with US racial politics. I draw most closely on the work of African American thinkers and activists, ranging from the post-Civil War era to the contemporary moment, but they are not the only Black thinkers to wrestle with questions of political loss. Indeed, the issue of how loss is mobilized politically has broader global purchase. Nostalgia for past colonial dominance and racial resentment against various “others” is fueling support for racist, far-right political parties in various European countries and played a central role in Brexit, for example.¹⁰ Likewise, in Latin America, we see racist backlash driving support for authoritarianism (most notably illustrated by the far-right administration of Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro), at the same time as the grieving activism of mothers of those killed by police and state violence (who in countries such as Brazil are primarily

Black) has been the driving force in calls for state accountability.¹¹ In all these cases, as in the United States, citizens are mobilizing in response to different forms of political loss.

What Is Political Loss?

Political theorists have approached the kinds of experiences I include in the category “loss” by turning to two sets of analogous terms: grief or mourning on the one hand, and harm or injustice on the other hand. Judith Butler, for example, argues that grief can serve as the ground for political solidarity because it is an unavoidable human experience. She stipulates that while there is no “human condition that is universally shared . . . all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody. Loss has made a tenuous ‘we’ of us all. . . . This means that each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies.”¹² For Butler, grief has political implications and is closely associated with corporeal vulnerability. Yet loss is not simply suffering. Suffering accompanies loss but is not reducible to it. And while grief is one response to loss, it is not the only one. Loss is also not interchangeable with harm or injury. By harm or injury, we generally understand a wrong unjustly inflicted or suffered, which often includes the violation or infringement of a person’s rights. As Judith Shklar has argued, this way of thinking about the difference between misfortune and injustice, between random and purposive harm, tends to focus on intent and whether or not rules were broken. Instead, she argues, the focus should be on the political choices made in response to suffering. “It is not the origin of injury, but the possibility of preventing and reducing its costs, that allows us to judge whether there was or was not unjustifiable passivity in the

face of disaster. . . . If the victim's suffering is due to accident or misfortune but could be remedied by public agents, then it is unjust if nothing is done to help."¹³ Even Shklar's focus on how victims perceive suffering does not fully capture the experience of loss, however. Injustice or harm is accompanied by, or produces, experiences of loss, but there are elements of loss that exceed these categories. While their applicability in individual cases is often disputed, harm and injustice are legible categories that are adjudicated by answering questions about intent and political efficacy. For example, whether the perpetrators meant to cause harm, and whether there was a dereliction of duty on the part of public officials, and so on. In contrast, there is an ineffable, inarticulable dimension to loss. There are aspects of racialized harm that are difficult to specify and that compound loss. When one is denied a job or a promotion as a result of racism, an injustice has taken place, but there is also the additional burden that comes from knowing that this is not the first nor the last time this will happen in a racist society, that these kinds of harms are happening to others as well, and that many of one's fellow citizens will not acknowledge that an injustice took place. There are costs to trying to make an injustice visible, and there are some harms that can never be fully repaired, and it is these elements that loss captures and is attentive to. Loss encompasses inchoate affective dimensions that exceed categories such as harm or injustice.

In fact, one of the key features of political loss that this book draws attention to is its aesthetic and affective registers. As we seek to name or make visible that which is unrepresentable, aesthetics and affect are ways to try to make the unseen visible and audible.¹⁴ Loss is often described as incapable of being fully articulated in words, and the aesthetic and affective forms that evoke it as producing overwhelming and unspeakable

responses. Frederick Douglass, for example, whose considerable rhetorical skills contributed so much to the cause of abolition, described being overcome with emotion long after his escape from slavery upon merely hearing slave spirituals, which “told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish.”¹⁵ Similarly, in her theorization of Black visuality as a practice of refusal, Tina Campt describes “images that require the labor of feeling with or through them.” It is this “labor of feeling” evoked by aesthetic objects—a labor that requires attention and solidarity as suggested by the phrasing “feeling *with* or through”—that is a key aspect of loss.¹⁶ Indeed, affect and aesthetics play a central role in efforts to mobilize political loss. Harriet Jacobs and Ida B. Wells, two of the key African American theorists of loss analyzed in this book, shift between fact and affect in their rhetorical appeals. Like other Black intellectuals and numerous political movements, from ACT UP to the Movement for Black Lives, Wells and Jacobs move between dispassionate rhetorical modes and more explicitly affective appeals in their attempts to make Black suffering legible. Activists seeking to make loss visible enumerate or quantify the magnitude of loss and tell stories that personalize or humanize it—as in lists of the dead, die-ins, or the AIDS quilt, for instance—and affect and aesthetics are central to both of these strategies. The visual and poetic interludes that precede each chapter in *Black Grief/White Grievance* reflect the centrality of affect and aesthetics to apprehending loss. In this way, the structure of the book itself moves between fact and affect to try to convey the ineffable dimensions of loss.

Loss is therefore more than grief, suffering, harm, or injury, and it has an inchoate, inexpressible quality, but not all losses are

necessarily political. The death of a loved one is a loss, but it is not necessarily political. It is political, however, if it is the result of lack of action to alleviate predictable suffering as Shklar suggests, or if the person is a victim of state violence. Losses also become political as a result of civic action to make them visible, as victims seek to have their sense of injustice recognized. Political loss can therefore involve the loss of someone or something. For instance, many of the examples of Black grief analyzed in this book are about the loss of lives (deaths) as a result of white violence. This is not the only kind of loss Black people have suffered, but it is one around which the most visible and consistent political mobilization has occurred. For Indigenous peoples, in contrast, territorial dispossession and denial of self-determination have arguably been more politically salient losses, although loss of life and loss of land are intricately connected in the eliminationist logic of settler colonialism.¹⁷ But political loss also takes other forms. Loss can be anticipatory, as in the case of white grievance. It can be real or perceived, and its political potency does not depend on its veracity. While political loss can therefore take many forms, there are three aspects of the “political” in political loss that I explore in this book: (1) loss that is rendered political as a result of state action/inaction, (2) loss that becomes a site for political mobilization, and (3) losses that democratic citizens—especially more privileged citizens—have an obligation to acknowledge and attend to.

The most obvious form of political loss is defeat in an electoral contest or policy debate. If some but not all types of loss are political, some forms of politics are inevitably about loss. Democracy is one of these. We tend to view democracy primarily in terms of empowerment, but democratic politics requires both exercising power and accepting defeat. In democracies, loss is supposed to be an unavoidable feature of political activity for all citizens. Acceptance of loss is a key civic capacity in a

democracy. Hence the subtitle of a recent documentary about Confederate monuments and the Lost Cause aptly describes it as “a story about sore losers.”¹⁸ To be a good democratic citizen, one must learn to accept justified political losses. As Allen observes, “democracies inspire in citizens an aspiration to rule and yet require citizens constantly to live with the fact that they do not.” Democracies promise citizens “autonomy, freedom, and sovereignty,” but these cannot be simultaneously realized for all. “No democratic citizen, adult or child, escapes the necessity of losing at some point in a public decision. . . . An honest account of collective democratic action must begin by acknowledging that communal decisions inevitably benefit some citizens at the expense of others, even when the whole community generally benefits. . . . The hard truth of democracy is that some citizens are always giving things up for others.”¹⁹ Political loss is widespread in democracy but is considered legitimate insofar as it is equally distributed. Historically, however, US democracy has never distributed loss equitably.²⁰ White supremacy assigned to African Americans the pain of losing and reserved for whites the joys of untrammelled political rule, of domination. It was not until after the civil rights victories of the 1960s that the United States ostensibly moved beyond what Allen calls “the two-pronged citizenship of domination and acquiescence.”²¹ Yet we continue to see different expectations of political loss today that reflect white supremacy’s uneven distribution of democratic labor.

Another important sense in which losses are political is whether they are the result of state action or inaction. Individual losses are rendered political by virtue of structural inequalities and systemic disparities that are allowed to persist. For example, while there are still generalized risks to the mother’s health associated with childbirth, an individual Black woman’s

death from complications as a result of maternal mortality is not “natural” but political in light of current racial disparities in health care. Black mothers giving birth in the United States die at three to four times the rate of white mothers.²² While some of these unequal outcomes can be attributed to economic factors such as disparate access to good medical care, studies have shown that minority patients tend to receive a lower quality of care than nonminorities, even when they have the same types of health insurance and the same ability to pay for health care. Moreover, employment opportunities (which determine health care options in the United States) are also shaped by histories of racial discrimination in the workplace. Current racial disparities in maternal mortality are therefore political losses, even in the absence of direct medical malpractice or negligence. Personal losses become political in part when the context in which they are produced is shaped by collective injustice.

In his analysis of the different “pedagogies of grief” developed by Ralph Emerson and W.E.B. Du Bois in the wake of the death of their sons, Thomas Dumm points to the role of racism in Du Bois’s loss in contrast to that of Emerson, who was exempt from this added burden.²³ While both suffered losses (to use my terms), Du Bois’s was political, but Emerson’s was not:

So if we are to acknowledge his [Du Bois’s] loss, we must try to reckon into the calculus of loss this horrible stain of injustice as part of the experience of Du Bois and not of Emerson. And as democratic theorists, we must try to reckon not only his loss, but his loss as multiplied by the losses of millions of others who one by one have so suffered it directly as its most prominent victims, and indirectly as witnesses who have so far been muted in response to the damage it has done to us, and partially, as our collective inheritance of a culture.²⁴

Du Bois's grief has to be understood within a larger context not just of the horrific anti-Black violence that was routine in 1899, but also of ongoing racial health disparities that reflect the institutionalized devaluation of Black life. Du Bois's son died from diphtheria—for which a vaccine had become available in the mid-1890s, leading to precipitous declines in mortality—because he did not have access to adequate medical care in racially segregated Atlanta.²⁵ While Burghardt was not violently attacked, he was nevertheless killed by racism. His death therefore corresponds to my understanding of political loss.

Losses also *become* political through the process of people mobilizing around them. Simply having suffered a loss does not mean that it will be recognized as such. The category “political loss” does not exist as a preexisting thing outside of or antecedent to politics. Losses become political partly as a result of the efforts of different constituencies (activists, elected officials, artists, academics, etc.) to make them visible and to establish that they require a collective response. Consider, for example, two highly visible examples of loss in recent decades: the September 11, 2001, attacks and the Me Too movement against sexual violence. Many recent texts by political theorists on mourning, grief, and loss take 9/11 as a point of departure because it is seen as an indisputable example of national loss. We immediately recognize the death of a victim of 9/11 as political because it was the result of an attack by foreign actors. In contrast, it required the mobilization of the #metoo movement for the losses women have accrued as a result of sexual violence and sexual harassment to be recognized as more than simply personal, private, individual problems.

Another sense in which losses are “political” is whether they implicate the political community as a whole and require a collective response. Here, I draw on Sheldon Wolin's conception

of the political as episodic and instantiated in specific moments when people act together. He takes the political to be “an expression of the idea that a free society composed of diversities can nonetheless enjoy moments of commonality when, through public deliberations, collective power is used to promote or protect the wellbeing of the collectivity.”²⁶ Following Wolin, the political involves collectivity, which means that we have obligations to act with and address the needs of other citizens. As Dumm suggests about Du Bois’s loss: “If we hope to take steps in Du Bois’ experience of grief, our first step must be to acknowledge how all of us are stained by the specific pain of that which he has experienced and we have witnessed . . . and in doing so *take upon ourselves the stain of racism as our debt*, and hope that it will enable us to acknowledge the indefinitely deeper grief of Du Bois.”²⁷ As Dumm’s brief allusion to the duty of democratic citizens to be active witnesses suggests, racism has shaped the experience of loss in ways that democratic theorists must contend with if we are to take the experiences of Black citizens seriously. Some losses are therefore political not only because of the structural disparities that produce them, but also because we have a collective responsibility to attend to them.

The view of racialized political loss sketched thus far departs in important ways from how political theorists have understood the political import of loss. Some political theorists have argued that loss is central to the activity of political theorizing itself. For Peter Euben, “much political theory begins with loss. Loss animates it as an enterprise and forms its problematic.” He suggests that loss haunts even utopian political visions, and that thinkers as diverse as the Greek tragedians, Plato, Machiavelli, and Marx can be read as theorists of loss. Of all their accounts of politics, we can ask: Do they present loss “as an aberration in

a trajectory of progress or as endemic to ‘the human condition’? What rhetorical or poetic devices, what metaphors or prophetic intonations do they use to dramatize the loss they confront and promise to move beyond or redeem? Do they embrace, indulge in, or resist nostalgia, counsel accommodation, endorse revolutionary praxis, or posit some purer realm unsullied by the messiness or undisturbed by the frailty of this world?”²⁸ Understanding how loss shapes the goals of different thinkers and movements provides a way to assess competing political visions. Loss was an even more central category for Sheldon Wolin, who argued that “loss has a claim upon theory.” Drawing on Theodor Adorno, Wolin suggested that, rather than seeing history as a triumphant parade of winners shoving aside the defeated, “what survives of the defeated, the indigestible, the unassimilated, the ‘cross-grained,’ the ‘not wholly obsolete’ is what should interest the theorist.”²⁹ Indeed, he repeatedly mourned the loss of local participatory traditions that he argued embodied genuine democratic politics, such that his influential conception of democracy as fleeting and episodic is pervaded by loss and nostalgia. As Lucy Cane has observed, Wolin’s “embrace of mournful theory” enabled original insights about the limits of liberal democracy, the threat of corporate power, and ossified elite rule, but it also resulted in “a melancholic relationship with America’s democratic past” that tended to gloss over its inegalitarian elements.³⁰ By mourning an idealized vision of US participatory traditions rooted in local deliberation, Wolin missed other sources of democratic vitality, such as the antiracist, feminist, and queer politics he at times dismissed as impeding solidarity.

If Wolin’s “democracy grief” fueled his critique of contemporary democratic politics, others argue that mourning can become immobilizing politically.³¹ For Wendy Brown, the “left

melancholia” that pervades contemporary accounts of radical pasts has become “a mournful conservative, backward-looking attachment to a feeling, analysis, or relationship that has been rendered thinglike and frozen in the heart of the putative Leftist.” The contemporary Left that yearns for past eras of unified movements and class-based politics becomes “a conservative force in history,” she argues. The result is that the Right has become revolutionary and radical, while the Left tries to preserve the status quo of the welfare state and civil liberties. This is a Left “more attached to its impossibility” than what it might accomplish.³² Nostalgic forms of politics that idealize a lost past can lead to political paralysis, and to incomplete understandings of the potential of the present.

In contrast to Brown’s critique, the contemporary scholarship on mourning and democracy has celebrated its generative potential. Moving away from canonical views of excessive grief as dangerous to the political community (as in the iconic case of Antigone), these scholars reconceive mourning as a resource that can enrich democratic politics. They view the invisibility of some losses as the locus of mourning’s politics and argue that how citizens organize collectively in response to loss has crucial implications for democracy. According to Alexander Keller Hirsch and David McIvor, “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.”³³ McIvor and Simon Stow argue for models of democratic mourning that avoid certitude, embrace ambivalence, and reject unitary national narratives. Stow identifies vernacular African American mourning traditions as a necessary countermemory to romantic modes of national public mourning committed to memorializing injuries against the nation and forgetting domestic injustice.³⁴

Yet these celebratory accounts do not pay sufficient attention to mourning's costs, especially for those for whom this is a recurring condition.

In contrast, Black political thought, which has also been centrally concerned with loss, offers a distinct account of how loss functions politically that is different in important ways from those above. *Black Grief/White Grievance* draws primarily on the long tradition of thinking about loss in African American political thought, including thinkers as varied as Du Bois, Ida B. Wells, and Harriet Jacobs. Wells, for example, has been described as a “fiercely anti-nostalgic” thinker, and this is an apt description of how Black thinkers in general theorize loss.³⁵ Black thinkers are not nostalgic for past eras of utopian possibility in the way that Wolin or Brown's left melancholics are. Even African American thinkers who have a more celebratory account of the US founding, such as Frederick Douglass, recognize that the burden of loss is ongoing because the harms of racism have not been repaired.³⁶ Black thinkers have had to grapple with how to mourn when grief is ubiquitous yet losses are unrecognized by the dominant society. The struggle for Black thinkers and activists has been how to hold on to hope in the face of ongoing grief, not the problematic fixation on loss of Freudian melancholia, nor the overcoming of loss that constitutes successful mourning from a psychoanalytic perspective. As Fred Moten observes, “black mo'nin'” is a third category between mourning and melancholia that disrupts both.³⁷

An important strand of Black political thought has resisted reparative approaches to loss that privilege appeals to the state, and insisted instead on the need to attend to how Black life persists even as Black grief is ongoing. Black thinkers have pointed to the ways race works to manage experiences of disempowerment for dominant groups and to obscure the losses of

subordinated groups. They suggest that we need to move beyond the false polarity between hope and despair, and learn instead how to practice despairing hope or hopeful despair.³⁸ The never-ending drumbeat of incidents of police violence and killings of Black citizens is a constant reminder of the disposability of Black life, yet—as Black feminists in particular insist—it is crucial to make space for accounts of ongoing Black life in the context of immeasurable devastation.

Mobilizing Loss: Grief and Grievance

This book takes up two specific responses to political loss: grief and grievance. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, grief and grievance have the same etymological origin (from the French term *grever*, to harm). Grief and grievance are both responses to loss, but the most significant difference between them, as the *OED* definition of grievance aptly notes, is that the wrong or hardship that is the ground for grievance can be *real or supposed*.³⁹ This distinction between “real” and “supposed” harms maps onto the asymmetric attention that Black grief and white grievance have historically been accorded in the United States. Specifically, one of the principal claims of this book is that there has been insufficient space for Black grief because of the imperative to turn to activism to try to remedy racial injustice, even as white grievance has been driven by a refusal to acquiesce to loss, even when those losses are warranted or just. Because Black grief and white grievance are not normatively equivalent, they do not require the same responses. Losses required to dismantle white supremacy have to be accepted, while others (such as some forms of Black grief) need to be witnessed and attempts made to redress them even if they can never be fully repaired. It is never legitimate for the

instrumentalization of Black grief to be imposed as a civic demand by the broader public. Nor is it legitimate for white grievance to overshadow or supplant Black grief as has often been the case.

As Wideman observes in her powerful enactment of and invocation of Black witnessing in the epigraph to this chapter, the sacrifices expected of Black citizens and activists for the sake of white democracy are part of a long-standing historical pattern.⁴⁰ The protests against police violence led by the Movement for Black Lives continue a long tradition of Black political mobilization catalyzed by Black death as a result of white violence subsequently channeled into public mourning, as was the case with the NAACP's use of lynching photographs to mobilize public outrage against post-Reconstruction-era racial terror in the early twentieth century, or the funeral of Emmett Till as a catalyst for the civil rights movement in the 1950s. In Wideman's words: "this has been happening to my family for a long time, longer than I can account for. . . . I'm also a Black history minor. So not only have I been watching it in the 30 years that I've been on this planet, but I've been watching it for years before we were even alive." For democratic theorists who extol witnessing as a key civic capacity, it is not as a passive bystander activity. Instead, it is an active form of truth telling and listening to the pain of others that might enable agonistic exchange and collective meaning making.⁴¹ Wideman's painful testimony, however, reminds us of the costs of witnessing. As Elizabeth Alexander has observed—and Wideman's invocation of seeing racial violence for years before she was even alive illustrates—racial violence imposes compulsive witnessing on Black citizens.⁴² Yet the contemporary scholarship on mourning and democracy has tended to frame Black public grief in a reparative vein that situates it almost solely as a solution to democratic deficits. This has the paradoxical effect of minimizing ongoing

and continuing loss. Conceptions of mourning as a democratic resource are an inadequate approach to Black grief. If we are to truly attend to Black grief, we can hold on to witnessing only mournfully and tentatively, without romanticizing it.⁴³

Black citizens are called on to repetitively witness for the sake of repairing the wrongs of white democracy, and they are also expected to protest only in the most civil, nondisruptive ways in order for their losses to be legible.⁴⁴ Refusals to contain Black rage are said to be counterproductive because they alienate potential white allies. Yet such criticisms are based on a number of mistaken assumptions about the history of Black activism. This is especially true of the dominant official romantic narrative of the civil rights movement in the United States, which emphasizes its commitment to nonviolence and civility rather than its more confrontational tactics. What is often left uninterrogated in critiques of “uncivil” forms of Black protest, moreover, are the very conditions of possibility for the production of “white empathy,” which is not the same as political solidarity. To have empathy is to be able to see and identify with the pain or suffering of others. Empathy can therefore remain in the realm of feeling without implying action, and it can also depend on seeing the other as like oneself in some fundamental way. In contrast, political solidarity does not depend on prepolitical bonds and requires taking action to redress injustice.⁴⁵ Democratic equality, which is possible only in the context of racial justice, requires much more than white empathy and should not depend on constrained Black political action, which is itself an unjust civic burden.

Moreover, the losses Black grief and white grievance are responding to could not be more different: one is a set of ongoing catastrophes, the other specters of future loss. In contrast to Black grief, contemporary white grievance is animated in large

part by prospective losses understood as defeats. It is a form of anticipatory loss.⁴⁶ Insofar as whites not only remain the demographic majority within the US polity, but also continue to be the dominant group by all measures (social standing, cultural capital, political [over]representation, economic resources, etc.), the sense of displacement that animates some sectors of US whiteness has been driven by what are at best symbolic non-white gains, such as the election of a Black president.⁴⁷ In contrast, Black grief is a response to the most extreme material losses, including spectacular and slow death. As a result, white grievance is a nostalgic form of politics that seeks to preserve or return to a (not-yet-actually-past) status quo, while Black grief enacts a politics of transformation oriented to the redistribution of loss.

This contrast between Black grief and white grievance is clear in two instances of political loss that mobilized citizens in highly visible protests during the summer of 2020: the majority-white and often heavily armed antimask protests demanding reopening with no restrictions in the middle of a pandemic, and the nationwide, multiracial, Black-led racial justice protests impelled by the police killings of George Floyd in Minnesota and Breonna Taylor in Kentucky, and the shooting of Jacob Blake in Wisconsin. The antimask protesters were ostensibly motivated by the loss of personal freedom imposed by public health mandates, while racial justice protesters were mourning the, at best, continued indifference to or, at worst, commitment to Black death (manifested in police impunity) of the state and many citizens and were demanding the right to live free of state violence.⁴⁸ Racial justice protesters wanted freedom from being killed; antimask protesters were demanding the freedom to have their personal preferences dominate the collective safety of the body politic. Given the racial disparities in infection,

hospitalization, and fatality rates from Covid-19, white liberty was expected to trump Black and brown safety. White antimask protesters enacted a conception of freedom as untrammelled liberty, as the ability to dominate others, to behave lawlessly. They demanded a freedom for themselves that was not available to others or depended on the nonfreedom of others.

White grievance is also justified and propelled by phantasmagoric projections of Black violence epitomized by racial justice protests. In Congress, for example, where many GOP elected officials have expressed support for the violent insurrection on January 6, 2021, it was Representative Cori Bush (a prominent Black Lives Matter protest leader in Ferguson, Missouri, elected to represent St. Louis in 2020), who was called a “terrorist” by Marjorie Taylor Greene, the controversial Representative from Georgia and QAnon conspiracy adherent. She accused the Democratic caucus of being “filled with members who supported, cheered on, & funded criminal thugs who riot, burn, loot, attack police, murder, & occupy federal property/ Members who . . . lead a violent mob in neighborhoods, and more.”⁴⁹ Greene’s false depiction of racial justice protesters as violent and criminal is consistent with the narrative of a country under attack that is a central feature of the politics of white grievance fueling right-wing extremism in the United States today.⁵⁰ In fact, in contrast to their feelings of aggrieved victimhood, armed white antimask protesters at various state capitals and white insurrectionists at the Capitol received kid-glove treatment compared to the heavy-handed, violent, repressive tactics unleashed on racial justice protesters, echoing a historical pattern of white race riots occurring with impunity and in many cases the outright complicity of state agents.⁵¹

The anticipatory losses animating white grievance obscure the presently occurring, tangible suffering inflicted on nonwhite

populations whose supposed ascendancy is an existential threat.⁵² The anticipatory nature of white loss is reflected in the fact that it is not just economically disadvantaged working-class whites who subscribe to white grievance.⁵³ For instance, a study of indicted January 6 insurrectionists found their demographic profile to be quite different from past right-wing extremists. They are older, many are business owners or hold white-collar jobs, and only a small number (9 percent) were unemployed. “Unlike the stereotypical extremist, many of the alleged participants in the Capitol riot have a lot to lose. They work as CEOs, shop owners, doctors, lawyers, IT specialists, and accountants.”⁵⁴ The Capitol rioters and others who continue to believe that the 2020 election was stolen subscribe to the potent rhetorical fiction of a new “Lost Cause.” Like the one that white southerners deployed so effectively to reverse the racial justice gains of Reconstruction at the end of the nineteenth century, today’s “Big Lie” is being used to reverse and prevent any further steps toward multiracial democracy.⁵⁵ White grievance is therefore profoundly antidemocratic. If the United States is ever to become a genuine multiracial democracy, it cannot continue to demand sacrifices of some, while allowing others to mourn justified losses they refuse to accept.

White civic capacities and political imaginations have been shaped by the fact that white supremacy has historically insulated them as a group from certain kinds of political loss. For the white majority, therefore, being good democratic citizens will entail learning how to do what has repeatedly been asked of Black citizens: peaceful acceptance of loss. In their case, these legitimate losses are of exclusive access to political power, and privileged social and economic standing. In a democracy, it will always be necessary to manage competing and coexisting losses, as the salience of Black grief and white grievance in

contemporary US racial politics illustrates. But in democracies in which racial hierarchy has resulted in unequal distributions of loss—that is, where for some their sense of what citizenship entails is built on the dispossession of others—simply redistributing loss more equally is insufficient. Instead, the meaning of equality needs to be reimagined so that nonwhite loss is not built into what whites perceive to be their baseline entitlement as citizens. Thinking about white grievance in this way proposes a different response to white loss. The usual solution, which follows the classic strategy in public policy on the welfare state and international trade to address backlash, is to “compensate the losers,” to argue that with proper policies there need not be losses at all, but can be gains for all.⁵⁶ From the perspective of political loss, however, responding to white grievance in this way does nothing to transform zero-sum thinking, nor to develop the key civic capacity of accepting justified losses among those who have historically been exempt from this democratic burden, as I argue in chapter 1.

Black political imaginations have also been narrowed by racism in different ways, such that the challenge in their case is to recognize how the notion of redemptive suffering—the idea that by engaging in exemplary forms of political activism that make Black pain visible, white public opinion will be transformed—has constrained Black politics.⁵⁷ Private grief turned public mourning has been a central feature of Black politics because, historically, Black grief has been largely invisibilized. In response to profound losses that are not publicly acknowledged, Black communities have mobilized around spectacular moments of loss when it has been possible to make Black grief legible. One result of this is the difference in public attention to those killed by police violence compared to the “slow deaths” caused by everyday disasters that disproportionately affect communities of

color, such as environmental racism.⁵⁸ The imperative to channel grief into activism that has been the dominant approach to loss in African American political thought and politics paradoxically constrains Black grief in important ways. It can function to conscript Black grief into the project of repairing white democracy, though important strands in the tradition have refused this aspiration. Instead of conforming to expectations of democratic sacrifice, Black people can enlarge the space for a conception of humanizing, noninstrumental collective Black grief that is not immediately transformed into grievance. Focusing on the more capacious approach to loss developed by Black feminist thinkers centers the question of what Black politics can be if it is not about sacrifice for white democracy.

Political theorists have worried that focusing on political loss will lead either to paralysis (as in critiques of left melancholia) or to what Bonnie Honig calls the lamentation of politics (abandoning the pursuit of power).⁵⁹ For Black politics, however, the problem has been a parasitic approach to Black activism as a source of democratic energy and renewal. To the extent that Black grief is approached as a salve for white democracy without addressing justice, it perpetuates expectations of Black sacrifice that constrain Black political agency. As I show in chapter 2, a template for acceptable Black protest based on a romanticized account of the civil rights movement of the 1960s continues to constrain Black activism by reducing it to political martyrdom. Black citizens are asked to make extraordinary sacrifices in an economy of suffering that requires the display of Black pain in order to enable progress toward racial justice. This script of civic exemplarity rests on assumptions that the right kind of activism will generate white solidarity, and it misreads how Black activists understand their political actions. In contrast, chapters 3 and 4 point to a different route

for Black politics. Since the affective demand of white grievance is Black/nonwhite submission, redemptive suffering is unlikely to be persuasive. Black people should therefore focus instead on affirming Black life and refusing scripts of sacrifice. Black feminist thinkers, in particular, have developed complex approaches to loss that go beyond the imperative to channel grief into activism. Some, such as Ida B. Wells and Harriet Jacobs, analyzed in chapter 3, seek to balance grief and grievance and are strategic in what they choose to disclose and conceal about Black suffering, while others, such as the grieving maternal activists analyzed in chapter 4, pay attention to the costs of activism and the need to sit with grief in order to make space for Black life in Black politics.

Black Grief/White Grievance is a book about the politics of loss, but it is also about the politics of refusal.⁶⁰ Refusal is an important concept for Black politics, and it is a central theme of this book. Each of its four chapters is structured around a political or theoretical gesture of refusal. Chapter 1 traces white refusal and its costs for democracy, chapter 2 argues that Black politics should refuse expectations of political heroism, chapter 3 sketches Black feminist refusal of the imperative to make Black loss public and visible, and chapter 4 calls for grieving activism that refuses to instrumentalize grief and bear the burdens of activism. By refusal, I mean not an abandonment of politics or retreat from the world, but rather a rejection of conceptions of Black politics solely in terms of repair, of instrumental approaches to Black loss that myopically view it as only or predominantly about shoring up white democracy. Taken as a whole, this book is a call to refuse to exchange Black suffering for white identification. Black politics also needs to refuse some of its own dominant scripts, especially those that respond to grief by seeking to transform it into grievance. Refusal in this

book is therefore an idiom of political theorizing as well as a means of reorienting Black politics and affirming capacious accounts of Black humanity, which means guarding against the reduction of Black agency to resistance. Finally, *Black Grief/White Grievance* is a call to refuse familiar accounts of democratic politics that focus solely on empowerment and set aside equally central experiences of loss and disempowerment.

The claim that both Blacks and whites need to expand their political imaginations so whites can become better democratic citizens and Blacks can refuse expectations of political heroism might seem contradictory because it simultaneously affirms democratic obligations and rejects liberal democracy as the horizon of possibility for Black politics.⁶¹ But this is an unavoidable tension in a book about how racism has narrowed the political imaginations of both Black and white citizens. While I make a number of claims about the obligations democratic citizens have to each other throughout, this is *not* a book about how democracies can manage the experience of political loss. Instead, it aims to challenge certain familiar ways of thinking about democratic politics and citizenship. Political theorists too often romanticize calls to sacrifice for democracy, without paying sufficient attention to ongoing political loss. *Black Grief/White Grievance* calls attention to the costs of political action and to differential expectations of civic sacrifice. I argue that both Blacks and whites need to learn to sit with loss, for different reasons, and to different ends. Whites need to learn to accept the loss of their political, economic, and social dominance without resorting to grievance, and Blacks need to mourn their losses without acceding to the demand (imposed by majority expectations as well as some strands of their own political tradition) to give meaning to them by mobilizing them in service of projects of democratic repair. My aim here is not to develop a

prescriptive account of racial justice activism, but rather to interrogate dominant accounts of democratic politics and suggest alternative conceptions of Black politics that refuse expectations of martyrdom. We can grieve democracy's deficits, but as we do, we must recognize we have never had a genuine multi-racial democracy whose demise we can now all mourn. Political loss has been ongoing for some. We can learn from the experiences of those who have historically been the losers in US democracy, but more importantly, we have an obligation to recognize that loss has been unequally distributed, that some citizens have been expected to disproportionately shoulder the fundamental democratic labor of losing from which others have been exempt.

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