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Loss: The Politics of Mourning (review)

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the culmination of Shea's career. His work on Catholic anti-evangelicalism provides some crucial space for overlooked Catholic voices. Shea clearly relishes a spirited theological exchange. The book will certainly generate such events when used in the classroom.

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Loss: The Politics of Mourning. Edited by David L. Eng and David Kazanjian. University of California Press, 2003. 488 pages. \$24.95.

Walter Benjamin observed that modern historicism is rooted in acedia or indolence of the heart before the losses of the past. Historicism, on this account, is positioned as a kind of melancholia, a pathological empathy with victors and rulers that impedes the ability to mourn victims and the oppressed. In *Loss*, David Eng and David Kazanjian gather eighteen essays to explore how loss has been “animated for hopeful and hopeless politics” (2). Alongside Benjamin’s “*Theses on the Philosophy of History*,” Freud’s “*Mourning and Melancholia*” provides major theoretical stimulus to the collection. But whereas Freud considered normal mourning to involve progressive disinvestment from a lost object, Eng and Kazanjian argue that sustained engagement with the remains of loss may be necessary to creative engagement with the future. The essays are divided into three sections, inspired by Freud’s sense of overlapping possibilities of loss: bodily, spatial, and ideal. In this division, the editors hope to explore psychic and historical modes of mourning that enable new objects, places, and ideals to emerge. In the introduction to the volume, each section is correlated with a cue: black bile with melancholic temper and racialized complexion; acedia with unattainable ideals that are yet experienced as lost, and finally melancholy with mathematical imagination and Cartesian objectivity. In my view, these suggestive images do not adumbrate the intellectual history of loss as successfully as the editors would like to do. But they work as mnemonics to the different “remains” the book addresses, highlighting loss in relation to ideological, religious, and national formations.

The individual essays are more successful because they deal concretely with the aversiveness and fecundity of remains. The collection encompasses diverse approaches that vary in scale and granularity. It includes histories from Thailand, the United States, South Africa, Armenia, Ireland, Viet Nam, and Cuba. Three essays focus on loss and reconciliation in postapartheid South Africa. Many of them treat wrenching texts and images, and they do so with critical attention that intentionally allows the past to flame up—searingly—to revivify wounds of loss as openings onto the future. For readers who are allergic to psychoanalytic theory, one or two of the essays, such as Vilashini Cooppan’s study of Severo Sarduy’s expatriate fiction, may be heavy going—although the play between fiction and Lacanian theory in that particular essay is deft. But

many of the essayists are generating theoretical frameworks for their analyses as they go. It is implausible to address each of them here so I will mention just three.

Marc Nichanian's essay, "Catastrophic Mourning," treats Zabel Essayan's literature on the pogroms against the Armenians at the beginning of the twentieth century. Essayan's book, *Among the Ruins*, witnesses to the experiences of "the stricken" survivors. She does not reconstitute the facts of the pogroms; rather, Nichanian argues, she writes her way out of an experience of madness to transgress the interdiction against mourning. "There is no art without mourning," Nichanian states (99). Essayan's art aspires to represent catastrophic loss as unimaginable, as exceeding all capacity of comprehension or consolation. But the limit of imagination is the limit of mourning, Nichanian argues, so that historical documentary must give way to the kind of testimony that strives imaginatively to enable mourning. His long citations from Essayan's work are harrowing, while Nichanian's own critical voice remains close in mood and tempo to hers. The essay ends with the superimposition of a scene of Christian liturgy on a scene of impending carnage. The limits of imagination are abolished in this convergence of revelation and infinite loss.

Nichanian's essay is so grueling that one is somewhat relieved to discover the correspondence that follows between him and David Kazanjian. Kazanjian asks Nichanian to advance some option for mourning other than pure loss or generative sacrifice. Is there an excess of remains that can enable a future without being assimilated to the modern democratic state? Nichanian's intense suspicion of this possibility is telling. He notes the pressure on survivors to turn memory into forensic evidence of genocide, or as evidence that legitimates a democratic state, and so he rebuffs the possibility that certain kinds of violence can ever found new possibilities.

Charity Scribner in "Left Melancholy" considers the response to loss among artists in the postcommunist German Democratic Republic. She reviews a museum exhibit, curated by Andreas Ludwig, entitled "Open Depot," that displays homely objects from the former socialist era. The exhibit, she argues, creates a space for East Germans to gather and reflect on the significance of their historical moment in the presence of mundane things that typified the former era. Instead of tossing these objects, they are set apart in the space of the museum in a gesture of tender rejection. Scribner acknowledges the fragility of her judgment; perhaps the exhibit is "the fetishization of a diseased past" or a way of segregating or encrypting "the most painful symptoms of absorption into a market economy" (303–304). By comparison, Scribner characterizes Joseph Beuys's artwork, "Economic Values," as an assemblage of "false souvenirs" (307). She objects to the romantic presentation of these objects that invites sentimental reverie over their decay. In Scribner's essay, one is compelled to consider how feelings may be elicited and stabilized through different practices of engagement with material remains. She wants to promote a "tender rejection of mourning" (301) that develops as neither the nostalgic rigidity of melancholy nor full disinvestment from the past.

In "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia," David Eng and Shinhee Han explore a speculative psychoanalytic approach to depression among Asian-Americans. Their essay developed out of a series of conversations between the authors, one a literary theorist and the other a psychotherapist. Although they take Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" as a provocation to their reflections, the authors are interested in considering melancholic feelings as non-pathological responses to experiences of immigration, racial formation, and assimilation. Eng and Han look at experiences of loss in relation to racial and economic norms that can never be attained by subjects excluded from whiteness. The color line means that processes of assimilation can never be complete, so that racialized subjects are suspended in a relation to hegemonic ideals from which they must always be estranged. This suspension folds melancholia into the formation of the subject, the authors speculate, but the depressive symptoms should not be viewed as illness. Instead they express the ghostly presence of a racial interdiction against the full flourishing of Asian-Americans and other racialized minorities. The feelings are symptoms of suspended loss, of the racial structure of everyday life.

The essays in *Loss* are only rarely overtly about religious communities, but they experiment with ways of engaging issues that scholars of religion often address. They weave together themes of historiography, ethics, and hope in response to massive social losses in the twentieth century. The "remains" of such losses are intensely volatile. One can see how they are taken up as evidence in support of or against certain domestic or military policies, how they are used to verify certain positions or to underwrite certain claims. More banal is the sentimental tendency to try to redeem losses through the things we have learned, the "morals" urged, or ennobling sensations felt at a distance. The remains of the dead or the past are called upon to give vibrancy and necessity to the way things turned out or to the way things ought to be. The editors of the collection oppose such uses. They present work that is aimed at cultivating the tact to distinguish ways of relating to remains that do not end in "nostalgic opprobrium," to use Charity Scribner's phrase. They want to explore instead the possibilities of creative yet indeterminate relations to what remains in the wake of mourning. One is prompted to offer, in this context, the category of relics within the study of religion, and the various charisms ascribed to them. This is not to say that relics cannot be put to the uses that the editors oppose—they often are—or that the volatile energies of relics are necessarily good. Yet abstracting from multiple uses, the category of relics offers an analytical lens to juxtapose against Charity Scribner's evocative idea of "false souvenirs."

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New Religious Movements in the Twenty-First Century: Legal, Political, and Social Challenges in Global Perspective. Edited by Phillip Charles Lucas and Thomas Robbins. Routledge, 2004. 364 pages. \$29.95.