
Review Essay

Mourning, melancholia, and race now

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Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy, and the Agony of Progress

Joseph R. Winters

Durham, Duke University Press, 2016, 320 pp.,

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Mourning in America: Race and the Politics of Loss

David W. McIvor

Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2016, 240 pp.,

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Despite calls to build a more inclusive age of multiculturalism, the United States remains haunted by racial conservatism. We are in an age of unprecedented institutional diversity and equal protection under the law, yet our collective consciousness is rife with unresolved racial grievances. Indeed, the uneven persistence of social injustice along racial lines disrupts contemporary racial grief-work and compounds racial grievances. As such, racial grievances of the past and present collide in ways that both challenge and necessitate the work of mourning. How do we account for the forces that continue to undermine the form and function of citizenship in a pluralist democracy? Moreover, how might we do so in ways that register and address compounded historical and contemporary racial grievances? How does a nation go about healing psychic wounds, while some wear fighting gloves and others refuse to acknowledge that there is something for which to fight?

Past publications—Jermaine Singleton’s *Cultural Melancholy: Readings of Impossible Mourning, Race, and African American Ritual* (2015), Paul Gilroy’s *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2005), Anne Cheng’s *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (2000), and Judith Butler’s *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (1997) – consider the work of mourning inevitable and argue that melancholy is subject to racial formations,



gender formations, or ritualized reconstitution. Two books in particular, both responses to the Obama era and the racial backlash that gave birth to the Black Lives Matter movement, have entered these conversations to explore the productive capacities of melancholy and mourning: *Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy and the Agony of Progress* (2016) by Joseph R. Winters; and *Mourning in America: Race and the Politics of Loss* (2016) by David W. McIvor. These books complement one another, opening fresh ways to understand and address the paradoxes surrounding the struggle for racial progress.

As opposed to positioning melancholy and mourning as isolated processes that must be worked through individually and moved beyond, McIvor's *Mourning in America* and Winters's *Hope Draped in Black* situate them as companion tools in the ongoing work of addressing racial grievances. The authors highlight the status of melancholy and mourning as analytics to be used in the promotion of awareness and discernment as we take on the collective work of forging the battle against social and racial injustice. The corollary is that the work of mourning – of coming to terms with and moving beyond the social loss wrought by social injustices – and melancholy – that is, the distilling and harnessing the social loss wrought by social injustices – must be paired in the work of transformative grieving.

The question of why power and implicit bias misalign legality and justice along racial lines continues to perplex and polarize the U.S. citizens. This is partly because the ways whiteness and the quotidian engagements and habits of mind associated with white people are only obliquely linked to the unconscious and incessant weaponization of blackness and black bodies. Nevertheless, McIvor's notion of 'democratic mourning' and Winters' notion of 'melancholic hope' chart a path beyond this national impasse.

These intellectually challenging and forward-thinking texts frame observations and directives that do not find their much-needed expression in our contemporary multiculturalism. First, a proper, democratic mourning of the individualized nature of the crimes committed against black life is an enterprise steeped in black feminist inquiry. Moreover, an outlook filtered through a melancholic hope that both anticipates and neutralizes ongoing crimes against black humanity is a task steeped in intersectional praxis. Indeed, the democratic work of mourning and melancholic hope hinge on our willingness to outstrip the pain of racialization through the development and sustained address of inquiry that emerges from sensitivity to the contexts of grieving and everyday injustice.

An intersectional exploration of the continuation of the U.S. narratives of racial and social progress alongside neoliberal politics and rhetoric highlights the ways these discourses coalesce to obfuscate the propagation of a virulent necropolitics embedded within our contemporary society. Although Winters and McIvor do not acknowledge this directly, their books work in tandem to underscore the ways that black feminist theory and praxis can be drawn on to mitigate the disproportionate violence leveled against vulnerable communities. These texts encourage us to



engage melancholic hope and democratic mourning in tandem, offering a paradigm for enacting a two-pronged queer theoretical praxis that mines intersectional inquiry to develop creative solutions to shared problems – problems that impact segments of vulnerable population uniquely and disproportionately.

Both books think through insights from Sigmund Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917) astutely. When Freud outlined two ways of working through loss over a century ago, the complex landscape of social loss and racial grieving did not factor into his calculus. Freud situates mourning at the limits of melancholia. According to Freud, mourning is the successful integration of loss into consciousness. In melancholia, Freud maintains, a loss that is unmourned and barred from recognition is displaced discreetly onto the subject's ego, enacting an unconscionable loss of self. For Freud, mourning is a healthy response to loss, and melancholia is an unhealthy one, because it can never be overcome after a lapse of time, and it perpetually haunts the subject's ego.

The central commitment of *Hope Draped in Black* is to a more expansive consideration of the melancholic cast of mind that attends narratives of racial progress. Winters' notion of 'melancholic hope' renders the pervasive misrecognition directed toward the historical and ongoing offenses against people of color in the U.S. an unhealthy and irresponsible response. For Winters, 'melancholic hope' is a push for racial and social justice progress that acknowledges the incomplete nature of past triumphs. 'The notion of racial progress', Winters reminds us, 'obscures the ways race operates to justify death and its various intimations – loss, exclusion, silencing, repression, hunger, and so forth' (p. 239). On the basis of close readings of Toni Morrison's *Paradise* and Ralph Ellison's essays on jazz and the blues, Winters invites a renegotiation of linear notions of progress, myopic notions of exceptionalism and coherence, and binary notions of racial difference that render lives and circumstances lived beyond these frames subject to silence, sanctioned violence, or death. Melancholic hope shines a halogen light on the ontological and discursive circuitry that underpins the easy trafficking in American exceptionalism rhetoric that makes laudable and acceptable death threats against Muslims, Arabs, and Latinos living in the United States. In his discussion of the dangers of exceptionalism narratives, he points to how John McCain's 2008 concession speech reinforced America's collective self-image as an exceptional nation, as a place unequivocally defined by opportunity, tolerance, and freedom.

Although the U.S. celebrated itself as an ideal democracy during the Obama era, the discourse of national exceptionalism persisted and engendered a national pride that also reinvigorated race pride. Winters writes: 'After reassuring a gentleman at the meeting that Obama is a decent man, McCain offered the microphone to an elderly woman who expressed her distrust of the future president. She confessed that her distrust was motivated by a suspicion that Obama is an Arab' (p. 239). He continues, 'He rejoined in a civil manner, reassuring the woman and the audience that Obama is a "decent family man and citizen" ... McCain's rejoinder attempts



to defuse the woman's suspicion by making a tacit distinction between "decent family man and citizen" and the threatening Arab other" (pp. 239–240). Winters opens up space for understanding the way racial anxiety cloaks and mobilizes the intersectional nature of oppression across national, gender, and sexual lines. *Hope Draped in Black* compels us to rethink notions of progress and pain beyond the black–white binary toward the address of the multilayered workings of hegemony.

The book also renders visible 'the limitations and dangers involved in projects that underscore the significance of race while downplaying the struggles, erasures, and losses attached to other identities and subject positions' (p. 160). If melancholic hope provides a conceptual lens for highlighting the paradoxical working of oppression under the auspices of racial progress and national cohesion, David W. McIvor's notion of 'democratic mourning' issues an invitation to pair this offensive strategy with more tactical and multivocal modes of grieving and working through. The democratization of mourning, McIvor posits, is an ongoing and dynamic preemptive strategy against the patterns of misrecognition accompanying rituals of grievance and reconciliation that fail to effect transformative, structural change.

Drawing on scholarly discourses of truth and reconciliation, Greek tragedy, and psychoanalysis, McIvor highlights our capacity to mine moments of conflict and discord for structural and existential change. Presupposing that racial grieving structures and processes designed to promote social change inadvertently preserve and perpetuate violent patterns of misrecognitions, McIvor makes a case for mining the tensions, dissonance, and disavowals characteristic of such spaces of racial grievance for more 'inclusive, dialogic encounters across entrenched lines difference' (p. 121). For McIvor, public mourning can be pathological, perpetuating racism discretely in and through the rhetoric of mourning, unless infused with the 'generative natality' of political life (p. 65). In the trenches of racial discord, amid ongoing violence and subjugation, is where, McIvor suggests, we might employ our most tactical maneuvers beyond unresolved racial grievances. I have called this cast of mind the 'melancholic haze', one that keeps the dead alive yet disavowed and set for reconstitution in the face of ongoing racial offense and strife (Singleton, 2015, p. 99).

McIvor astutely highlights the capacity of public expressions of grief and rage to 'shut down social reflexivity and make coalitional politics and civic labors less likely' (p. 184). The Black Lives Matter movement, according to McIvor, sidesteps this pitfall. McIvor aptly draws a distinction between merely recognizing injustice, and 'wrestling with the dominant norms of recognition and the anxieties and defenses that limn the circuitry of social interaction' (p. 184), as expressed in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*. Only in recognition of this distinction can we engage in the dialogic work that hinges on a keen sensitivity to context, so as to be didactic and effective. For Rankine, McIvor notes, the Black Lives Matter movement 'can be read as an attempt to keep mourning as an open dynamic in our culture' (p. 177). Dissolving the ideological borders of our circumscription – and the resulting



misrecognitions – requires us to avow the claims of racial traumas, knowing the struggle is subject to change at every turn.

Attention to the ongoing and variable nature of this mourning is one of the most striking features of *Mourning in America*. While not made explicit by McIvor, the democratic work of mourning – of exhuming and reshaping the social circuitry of recognition and misrecognition – is based in intersectional inquiry and praxis. McIvor warns against incorporating the notion of ‘authenticity’ into the politics and practice of mourning, citing the way it ‘ignores dimensions and fractures within black identity, dimensions inferred by class, gender, and sexual difference’ (p. 141). The sexual underpinnings of the misalignment between the form and function of citizenship along racial lines is one of the most overlooked and pernicious misrecognitions with which the Black Lives Matter movement must wrestle. The mutually reinforcing discourses of racial and sexual difference form a nexus of recognitions and misrecognitions that underwrite the necropolitics rendering black bodies subject to disproportionate violence and death.

One of queer theory’s major contributions to critical race studies is the grammar it provides for reading the impact of the mutually reinforcing discourses of racial and sexual difference on black life and race relations. The status of the black body as the national locus of racial and sexual difference underpins the paradoxical terrain of both inclusion and despotism upon which black bodies stand in the contemporary U.S. society. On Friday, June 25, 2015, the same week the Supreme Court announced the legalization of gay marriage, President Obama asked the nation to mourn the nine black lives lost in the Charleston church massacre. A full reckoning with the underpinnings of this tragedy would require us to confront the way Obama’s presidential inauguration set the pendulum of black progress and despair into rapid motion. More specifically, reading the presidency of Obama through the lens of Winters’ notion of ‘melancholic hope’ hinges on understanding the status of whiteness as an ideological proposition and, moreover, process. Whiteness has expanded its borders of inclusion to exceptional figurations of blackness and queerness in ways that rendered ‘less exceptional’ racial and sexual minorities of color subject to unprecedented sanctioned violence at the hands of the law.

What David L. Eng calls ‘queer liberalism’ pairs with the discourse of color blindness in ways that exacerbate the necropolitics waged against certain members of marginalized communities (2010, pp. 2–3). President Obama’s embodiment of the abstract property of whiteness, and the extension of this domain to the LGBT community through the National Defense Authorization Act and the Marriage Equality Act, undermined the racial and sexual exclusion upon which white heteropatriarchal authority stands. Increasing levels of anxiety over the porous borders of whiteness and its changing face have given way to an ever-increasing private sphere governed by a racialized liberal security state. Amidst all the self-congratulatory discourse and relative privilege afforded certain racial and sexual



minorities, this racialized liberal security state waged war against those on the margins of marginalized communities. The dominant narrative of American exceptionalism rose alongside heightened competition for domestic advancement, global capitalism, and the diminished federal funding of state programs and initiatives to make space for a hyper security state to which those on the periphery of marginalized communities fall prey disproportionately. Anxiety over an increasingly fragile white heteropatriarchal norm, policing-for-profit, and poor-choice-baiting triangulate to ensnare poor, black, and/or queer 'persons of irresponsibility.' The nation's expansion of the abstract property of whiteness to include certain racial and sexual minorities in the face of its diminishing returns in a globalized economy begs a melancholic reading that does not gloss over the racial oppression and violence that narratives of progress instigate and secure. For Winters, the danger of overlooking those 'individuals, strivings, and memories that are not immediately relevant' and that 'present an obstacle to a unified, harmonious future' looms large (pp. 10–11). In fact, the consequence of resisting arrest and/or being black amidst a concurrent militarization of both American policing and public life, the decline of federal funding for state initiatives and programs, and the egoistic backlash of a declining white heteropatriarchal authority and centrality can be lethal.

Violence and coercion thrive in social climates in which privilege is relative, fragile, and transferable. What is more, figurations of blackness and difference function as central arteries in these social and libidinal networks of loss and compensation. A striking feature of the deaths of Oscar Grant, Sandra Bland, and Michael Brown is the fact that they were all prefigured by ungendering name-calling, issued from victim to convicted or alleged perpetrator. Eric Garner was convicted to 'death by excessive force,' which points to the asymmetries of crime and punishment that shore up when black assailants and suspects are subject to arrest. In part, the deaths of the Charleston Nine are the result of attempts by state and local municipalities to balance budget shortfalls through the sale of handguns and licenses to an increasingly over-medicated populace struggling to cope with the simultaneous globalization-stimulated racial and class anxieties. Jailed on false arrest charges, the acquittal and discharge of Marcus Jetter after the surfacing of lost dash cam footage registers a racialized police state and juridical system trafficking in the neoliberal narratives of black irresponsibility and poor choice.

If Winters reminds us that racism is embedded in memorials and rituals in observation of racial progress, McIvor pushes for the development of a grammar for decoding the underpinning norms, anxieties, and defenses that render modes of racial healing and reconciliation ineffectual. The libidinal currents that interlock categories of race, sexuality, and gender discreetly have always worked with the shifting demands and forces of nationalism to secure or undermine community across the racial divide. As such, racial truth and racial healing, according to McIvor, are challenging to align. Neoliberal racial ideology makes this pairing ever



more precarious. From its very inception, according to Michael Omi and Howard Winant, neoliberalism was as much a racial project as a class project (2015, p. 69). The neoliberal racial ideology of color blindness was designed to dismantle the welfare state and apply the same market-based rules across racial lines. Indifference and insensitivity to the ways free market capitalism and the clamor for privatization render black, poor, and/or queer lives subject to exclusion, devaluation, and death disproportionately is a neoliberal norm. As the flows of capital work to obliterate the middle class, this indifference grows unchecked.

What can queer theory's focus on desire, nonlinear trajectories, and untidy lines of demarcation provide in aid of efforts to understand and circumvent neoliberal racial ideology and practice? The political project of woman-of-color feminism is a conscious departure from identity-based forms of reconciliation and collectivity. How do we challenge the norm of indifference? How do we create and entrench new norms and meanings in the face of neoliberal racial ideology? How do we secure safety and promise in the interstices of identity categories within marginalized communities?

Winters and McIvor invite more publications exploring the intersections of mourning, melancholia, and civic engagement. Subsequent volumes could contribute to these powerful paradigms for exploring the democratic and generative possibilities of racial grieving in the face of ongoing racial and social injustices. Situating identity and community as interstitial and dynamic libidinal forces, these two books also mark the fruitfulness of woman-of-color feminism and praxis on this pressing social justice front. Taken together, we are reminded that power flows as an intricate and contradictory assemblage and thus strategies and tactics in the service of racial healing and democratic pluralism must flow accordingly.

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