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# Grieving Time: The Recollection and Reproduction of Loss in Madeleine Thien's *Certainty*

LISA KABESH

"In what was to have been the future. . . ."

— Thien (3)

WITH THIS INTRODUCTION to her novel *Certainty*, Madeleine Thien puts her reader into an uncertain position: how can the reader grasp the temporality of a narrative that opens with the future perfect situated in the past tense? Throughout her novel, Thien troubles a progressive concept of temporality, a troubling that is mediated not simply through standard narrative devices like flashbacks, but through a continuous repetition and revisiting of events and images. The past is not simply represented as anterior, then, as a time or event to which the narrative may shift *back*; rather, the past repeats in the present and, as such, is also constantly *imminent*, about to arrive. Thien's concern with time becomes significant not only in its troubling of a progressive, teleological narrative, but also in its engagement with trauma and loss. I argue that in *Certainty*, Thien proposes a restructuring of how we conceptualize trauma and loss in time, suggesting a reproductive potential in the continued engagement with loss. This potential for reproduction resides in the repetition of loss and trauma in time, through the subject's repeated and transformative engagement with loss.

In a review of the development of theories of loss and melancholia, Judith Butler notes that "the presumptions that the future follows the past, that mourning might follow melancholia, that mourning might be completed" have all been "poignantly called into question" (467). For Butler, the troubling of these presumptions is a product of the paradoxical temporality of loss, as loss reveals that "the past is irrecoverable and the past is not past; the past is the resource for the future and the future

is the redemption of the past” (467). Yet, we must ask ourselves what this disruption of a teleology of loss achieves. If loss is not past, and if mourning does not necessarily follow loss, then where does the subject of loss stand in relation to the lost object? This line of enquiry intersects with contemporary discussions of loss and melancholia at two points: first, with theories of melancholic subjectivity and identity formation, and second, with the theorization of political agency around a shared or communal loss. I propose that a discussion of the temporality of loss, and of Thien’s specific treatment of time and loss in *Certainty*, offers a framework by which to imagine the productive potential of multiple forms of loss, both for individuals and communities.

In an article addressing the temporality of loss, Lily Cho identifies what she terms the “polarization” (434) of theories of loss and melancholia. This polarization arises from Freud’s distinction between “healthy” mourning and “pathological” melancholia, but this distinction also marks a temporal divide. Freud asserts that mourning constitutes the “withdrawal of the libido” from the lost object and a “displacement of it on to a new one” (249). “Healthy” mourning thus constitutes the reinvestment of the ego in a new object. Melancholia, on the other hand, occurs when reinvestment in a new object does not take place; instead, the lost object is internalized or introjected and becomes the foundation for “an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object” (249). In other words, “pathological” melancholia constitutes an “unhealthy” inability to get over the past. Cho specifically challenges the ontological division between “healthy” mourning and “unhealthy” melancholia in regards to racial melancholia, and while Thien does not specifically refer to race in her novel — she gives no phenotypical descriptions of her characters, for example, and it takes careful reading of family names and family genealogies to apprehend what might be termed a character’s race or ethnicity — the losses of the racialized subject are yet of vital importance to the text. *Certainty* is structured around the loss of a partner and daughter; however, this supposedly private death — the death of a cherished family member — intersects with multiple and differing experiences of loss that cross geopolitical boundaries and what otherwise might appear to be discrete subject positions. In fact, much of the loss, trauma, and pain at work in Thien’s novel is connected to the post-WW II period of decolonization in Asia and Africa. Gail’s father, Matthew, for example, witnesses the execution-

style killing of his father by Japanese occupying forces in North Borneo; Kathleen, a woman Gail interviews, is tied to her father's traumatic experiences in a prisoner-of-war camp; and Sipke, whom Gail knows as the partner of her father's first love, struggles with the horrifying scenes he has witnessed as a photojournalist in states experiencing the violent turmoil of independence movements in Indochina, then Algeria, South Africa, and Indonesia (230). Thien's engagement with the violence of decolonization in her novel thus marks an engagement with the racism of imperialisms — English, French, Dutch, and Japanese — and their fallouts.

Applied to the melancholic subjects of Thien's text, the diagnostic classification of a "healthy" or "unhealthy" response to loss, therefore, becomes highly problematic in its pathologization of subjectivities bound to the losses imposed by the racisms of a colonial past and their continued articulation in a post-colonial order. It is imperative, then, to challenge the positioning of melancholia as pathological, for, in so doing, we can challenge a construction of the racialized subject as ill, debilitated, or abnormal. Anne Anlin Cheng has worked to depathologize melancholia in her work on the losses of the racialized subject in an exploration of the potential for an agential engagement with loss. In "The Melancholy of Race," Cheng successfully moves a discussion of the racialized other as the lost *object* of white normativity to the melancholic *subject* who can transition from "being a subject of grief" to a subject of what Cheng terms "grievance" (3).<sup>1</sup> In so doing, Cheng recognizes the agency of the racial melancholic, yet this agency does not translate necessarily or inevitably into productivity, but rather into the potential for productivity and political activism. In their introduction to *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, David Eng and David Kazanjian challenge the pathologization of melancholia by returning to Freud's own problematization of his distinction between "healthy" mourning and "unhealthy" melancholia. Eng and Kazanjian point to Freud's recognition of the role of the internalization of a lost object in the formation of the ego; they thus successfully highlight the productive role of the melancholic response to loss in identity formation (4). Eng and Kazanjian go on to argue that melancholia further becomes "the precondition for both the ego and the work of mourning" (4). Consequently, we come to see that a discrete semantic division cannot be maintained between pathological melancholia and healthy mourning; rather, the two appear

contiguous. What is more, in “A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia,” Eng and Shinhee Han challenge Freud’s configuration of melancholia as a “one-person” pathology and argue that the refusal or inability to “‘get over’ the lost ideal of whiteness . . . is less individual than social” (345). I wish to emphasize here that work to depathologize melancholia does not signify that melancholic subjectivity is necessarily productive, nor does it attempt to elide the very real and negative effects of melancholia. Eng and Han affirm, for example, that “the depression often accompanying melancholia is extremely dangerous, characterized by the tendency to suicide,” and add that this suicide “may not be merely physical; it may also be a psychical erasure of one’s identity — racial, sexual or gender identity” (346). I emphasize, then, that melancholia is neither necessarily pathological nor inevitably productive; instead, I wish to stress that efforts to depathologize melancholia allow for the potential for productivity in the valorization of melancholic subjectivity and the movement toward claiming social and political agency.

Such attempts to depathologize melancholia, however, tend to write melancholic losses in the past. While the depathologization of melancholia offers “a way to valorize the incurability of certain griefs” (Cho 428) and further suggests the potential for the political mobilization of such griefs, it relies on a configuration of loss as “that which has to have already happened” (Cho 427). To put it another way, efforts to mobilize melancholia rest on a configuration of loss in the past perfect. This is problematic for two reasons. First, as Cho puts it, posing loss as “an ‘inheritance’ risks taking for granted the ‘subjective states’ which may still be in process” (427). That is to say that situating loss in the past perfect limits the formation of subjectivity to a completed and inescapable cause, and would appear to likewise limit the agency of the subject. Second, and perhaps more significantly, denying a continued negotiation of loss and melancholia glosses over precisely how the melancholic subject or community can move from “grief” to “grievance.” If the past is not past, and mourning does not necessarily follow loss, how does “grievance” come to follow “grief”?

This disruption of a teleology of loss calls to mind Benjamin’s conceptualization of history and progress in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” Benjamin’s image of the angel of history, “his face . . . turned toward the past” (259) as the storm of progress “irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned” (260), mirrors

the problematic positioning of a subject in relation to losses anchored in the past. If the storm of “what we call progress” (260) ceases, or if the losses of history are cleaved from the teleology of progressive time, to what direction does the angel of history, or the melancholic subject, turn? For Benjamin, the end of a progressive view of history translates into a redemptive vision of the past. The arrest of teleology is productive or even reproductive, as it is “*pregnant* with tensions” (264; emphasis added). Benjamin’s concept of the “time of the now” (265) is therefore not simply a valorization of the present; rather, it communicates a pregnant present, a present imbued with immanence, “shot through with chips of Messianic time” (265). One must then not so much turn to the past, but rather bring the past to bear on the present. As Eng and Kazanjian observe, “According to Benjamin, to mourn the remains of the past hopefully . . . is a *creative* process, animating history for future significations as well as alternate emphathies” (1; emphasis added). Similarly, Butler notes that loss is “oddly fecund, paradoxically productive” (468). I assert that the paradoxical productivity of loss arises from its paradoxical temporality, where past losses move from a teleological history to a continued presence.

In *Certainty*, loss comes to inhabit the present, not simply as a spectre of the past but as an “oddly fecund” immanence. Thien does not represent past losses as those that have already happened, nor does she simply suggest that the effects of a past loss extend progressively from the past into the present. Rather, loss inhabits the present of the text, even while its event occurred in the past. As mentioned in the opening of this essay, the novel opens in an uncertain temporality. The first paragraph of the novel recounts a lost future, or a lost potential, with Ansel waking to the presence of his lost partner:

In what was to have been the future, Ansel rolled towards her, half awake, half forgetful. He curved his body around hers and Gail’s warmth drew him back into sleep. Morning passed into afternoon, the rest of the world waited outside, but he and Gail were just rising from bed, they were fumbling into their clothes, they knew that the day was long. (3)

Gail haunts Ansel as an absent presence; at a dinner falling on the six-month anniversary of her death, an “empty chair and place setting, intended for spirits departed, is to Ansel’s right” (9). For Ansel, Gail’s

absence is also active: “Gail is here beside him, laughing in delight at the spread of food. She hoists the wine bottle to make sure that every glass is full” (11). Ansel is further able to continue to call up her presence, or her voice, as he listens to her radio documentaries. Loss in *Certainty*, then, persists; what is more, it repeats throughout the novel, imbuing the text with a sense of imminent loss. While the novel opens six months after Gail’s death, the structure of the text configures her loss as either present, as in the above examples, or about to arrive. Ansel’s memories of her death and the conditions surrounding it unfold as the narrative develops, and as a result, the reader is placed in a position of constant anticipation. In the first chapter, enigmatic intimations of her death appear in the mention of Ansel and Gail’s last conversation, “a telephone call, long distance” (7), and in Clara’s memories of her daughter intersecting with a fragmentary reference to “Prince George, the hotel room, the suitcases of clothes all disintegrating” (17). By the third chapter, Gail’s loss remains on the horizon, although it appears a little more clearly, as Ansel recalls the onset of Gail’s illness while working in Prince George (86-87). The loss of Gail becomes both “a loss that is spread out over time, bits and pieces that break down and gradually disintegrate” (87) and a loss that is arriving, that is undergoing a process of reconstruction or reproduction.

This negotiation of both the *immanence* and *imminence* of loss — of its ongoing presence in the present and of its arrival or return in the future — becomes a creative, or reproductive, process in Thien’s novel. Gail’s death is not the only loss present in the text, however. Rather, *Certainty* is a novel that tracks multiple losses and sites of trauma, including the losses of multiple generations. While these forms of loss and trauma are certainly not commensurate, and while the characters of the text respond to these losses differently, in each instance loss repeats in the text and consequently appears both as present and as that which is always about to arrive. One way in which loss is configured as both immanent and imminent in the novel is in the repetition of loss and trauma from generation to generation. Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory” as a form of memory that is mediated through “an imaginative investment and creation” (22) is useful here. Hirsch defines postmemory as “the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic

events” (22). Hirsch thus distinguishes between memory as that of the survivor and postmemory as that of the child of survivors (21-22). The concept of postmemory is significant not only in its identification of the effects of trauma and loss on subsequent generations, but also in its recognition that these effects do not necessarily stem directly from the past. Hirsch explains, “I propose the term ‘postmemory’ with some hesitation, conscious that the prefix ‘post’ could imply that we are beyond memory and therefore perhaps . . . purely in history” (22). Postmemory is not simply an effect or descendent of its antecedent losses; rather, postmemory is an active engagement with a narrative of loss, or even with the absence of a narrative of loss. The process of “imaginative investment and creation” that postmemory entails, then, is not one of looking back to recall a lost object, but rather a productive engagement with loss in the present.

In *Certainty*, we can recognize a number of characters that must actively engage with narratives of loss of a previous generation. Kathleen, the daughter of a survivor of a POW camp, must mediate postmemory. Kathleen’s childhood was dominated by a narrative of trauma that preceded her birth or, more accurately, by a narrative that was not told, that *cannot* be told, as her father cannot break the code that encrypts his journal from that time. Gail, likewise, grows up dominated by a narrative of trauma and loss that preceded her birth. Again, she mediates a narrative that is not told, that in this instance is wilfully withheld. Matthew, Gail’s father, never reveals the details of his past to his daughter. Yet, a narrative of trauma and loss is still communicated through silence, evidenced by the “list of eccentricities” that Gail once kept about her father (206). These eccentricities, although not vocalized, speak to his experiences during and directly after the Japanese occupation of North Borneo. Gail explains that her father is an insomniac whose insomnia sometimes slides “into depression” (206). The list goes on: “Her father was afraid of the dark. He could not eat certain foods: sweet potato, cassava and tapioca, which he called *ubi kayu*. . . . He had a fascination with Japan, a quick temper” (206-07). For Gail, then, her father’s experiences of trauma and loss are not isolated in the past. Instead, the manifestations of that past trauma inhabit the present. What is more, while she never hears the totality of her father’s story, she turns to the testimony of others in her work — work that entails both a listening and an aesthetically productive response to loss. Gail’s work as



a radio producer and documentarist thus marks a creative engagement with memory and loss.

The generative potential in the disruption of a teleology of loss becomes clearer with an analysis of the creative mediation of trauma and loss in Gail's work. In *Certainty*, characters mediate different forms of loss differently. On the one hand, recollection of trauma in the novel is a function of memory, and Thien's characters deploy differing strategies for mediating memories of trauma and loss. Matthew is largely silent, depressive, and melancholic; William Sullivan records his experiences in a POW camp in Hong Kong in a journal but does so in a code he himself cannot break; and Clara commemorates her daughter by visiting her grave. Yet Thien also introduces the recollection of trauma as a function of collecting, an archival recollecting of the traces of trauma, both in the form of photographs and recorded testimonies. These forms of recollection, though, are not commensurate. Rather, as Pilar Cuder-Dominguez suggests in her paper on representations of the artist in the novel, Thien privileges Gail's artistic production as a radio producer over Sipke's work as a war photographer.<sup>2</sup> Cuder-Dominguez argues that this privileging is a question of the ethics of the representation of trauma, pointing to the photograph as a mode of representation that is decontextualized and thus open to dangerous (mis)interpretations. According to Cuder-Dominguez, *Certainty* becomes a "critique of the visible" (12). I assert that the privileging of the aural over the visual in Thien's novel is not only a matter of the ethics of art, but also a question of how we locate trauma in time. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Cathy Caruth turns to the Greek etymology of the word to define trauma as a wound but is careful to note that a traumatic event does not simply constitute a wounding; instead, she emphasizes that trauma "is not just any event but, significantly, the shocking and unexpected occurrence of an accident" (6). Her definition of trauma as a form of accident is significant in that the subject of trauma experiences an element of fright, or "the lack of preparedness to take in stimulus that comes too quickly" (62). It is this "lack of preparedness" that leads to an inevitable return of trauma, as the traumatic event "is not fully perceived as it occurs" (18). Trauma thus becomes "latent" (17) or "belated" (7), as the subject of trauma must revisit that which was not seen, what one was not prepared to see. As Caruth explains, "What returns to haunt the victim . . . is not only the reality of the violent

event but also the reality of the way that violence has not yet been fully known” (6). The subject of trauma, or of traumatic loss, then, will not experience trauma as a known memory of a past event, but will instead experience trauma as a latent event, repeating in time.

Visual representations of trauma in *Certainty*, consequently, become problematic not simply in their lack of ethical context, but also in their tendency to fix trauma in the past. As a war photographer, Sipke is praised for his ability to “catch and distinguish the defining moment” in his photos (229). When he describes the last photo he took as a war photographer, a photo of a traumatic event that forced him to abandon his work, he explains,

It’s the last good photograph I have taken, but I can’t bear to look at it. I keep asking myself, what happens when the context is lost and only the image remains? People look at that picture now, in magazines and books, and they speculate about it. They don’t know what happened before or after. All they see is this one moment, disconnected from the past or the future. (245-46)

Sipke is clearly anxious here about the isolation of the traumatic event from its context, an isolation that “feeds [the viewer’s] imagination” and leads to “speculation” (246). The photograph becomes the object of a voyeuristic consumption and is further open to misinterpretation and manipulation. While Cuder-Dominguez focuses on the danger of speculation that Sipke’s photograph feeds, I wish to draw attention to Thien’s identification of the photograph as “one moment, disconnected from the past or the future” (246). Sipke’s photograph removes the traumatic event not only from its political and human contexts, but also from its continued presence in time.

This decontextualization of trauma that Sipke’s work performs becomes an essentially violent act in *Certainty*. We learn that Sipke, as a war photographer, “tried to follow Robert Capa’s famous dictum: ‘If your pictures aren’t good enough, you aren’t close enough’” (229). The imperative to get as close as possible to the subject of the photograph, to the point where the photographer becomes a part of the scene, where “his body dissolv[es] into the scene around him” (Thien 229), bespeaks the realist assumption that lies behind Sipke’s photojournalism. This assumption of realism is best delineated by Roland Barthes, who argues that a “specific photograph . . . is never distinguished from its refer-

ent" (5). According to Barthes, "The Photograph is never anything but an antiphon of 'Look,' 'See,' 'Here it is' . . . and cannot escape this pure deictic language" (5). Yet the realist notion that photography is an essentially deictic or referential mode of representation overlooks the codes that inform the processes of selection and production involved in photography. Allan Sekula points to the fallacy of the conception of the photograph as referential or evidential, suggesting that "within the dominant culture of photography, we find a chain of dodges and denials: at any stage of photographic production, the apparatus of selection and interpretation is liable to render itself invisible (or conversely to celebrate its own workings as a kind of moral crusade or creative magic)" (446). Sipke's work as a war photographer is problematic precisely because it performs such "dodges and denials." Sipke sees himself both as invisible, with "his body dissolving" into the scenes that he photographs, and as a deliverer of a truth. To Sipke, "The photograph is revealing, it triggers something that you know, a truth that you haven't yet found a way to express" (Thien 238). This view of the photographer as a passive medium of reality or the "truths" of reality functions to deny the codes that inform the photographer's gaze and the contexts that place the photographer at a scene; in other words, the codes and contexts that inform and construct such "truths." Sipke's growing unease with his work, then, reflects a growing unease with the realist, revelatory culture of photography. In Sipke's discomfort, we can recognize Susan Sontag's image of the photographer as "the diligent hunter-with-a-camera" who views reality "as an exotic prize to be tracked down" (54-55). For Sontag, the realist project of photography becomes a predatory project of hunting, scavenging and consumption: "For more than a century, photographers have been hovering about the oppressed, in attendance at scenes of violence, . . . in order to document a hidden reality, that is, a reality hidden from them" (55). Sipke's sense of shame over his photos of "the mutilated bodies of men and women who had been tortured and killed," of "two small children, crawling through the bombed wreckage of their home," of "a dead child abandoned in a field" (230) speaks to a questioning of his role as an ostensibly transparent, objective observer and medium of reality.

The referential mask of photography allows for the possibility of the performance of a different type of violence in *Certainty*. In a realist construction of photography, the photographer does not merely pose as

an objective lens that elides a project to hunt and consume the photographic object; rather, the realist presumption of referentiality further functions to seize the photographic object as an object of an eternal, immutable past. Barthes points to this violent seizure in his recognition of the “immobilization” (91) of time in photography. According to Barthes, “when we define the Photograph as a motionless image, this does not mean only that the figures it represents do not move; it means that they do not *emerge*, do not *leave*: they are anaesthetized and fastened down” (57). Put differently, photographic subjects are frozen in an eternal past, unable physically to move forward in time. Since the subjects of Sipke’s photographs are traumatic events, his photography runs the risk of rendering trauma eternal, and thus of *representing* the shock and horror of trauma without mediation. As a result, the seizure of traumatic moments in Sipke’s work potentially renders viewers of his photographs victims of a visual violence. To return to Caruth’s definition of trauma as an accident for which the subject is unprepared, Sipke’s war photography carries the potential not simply to represent trauma but also to re-inflict it on unprepared viewers. Barthes discusses the affective qualities of certain photographs as a form of punctuation, as that which will “wound” or “prick” like a “pointed instrument” (26). Significantly, this wounding or pricking is triggered by the unexpected, and is accordingly defined by Barthes as “that *accident* that pricks me” (27; emphasis added). The referential images of trauma that Sipke produces, then, become potential sites of a re-wounding, thereby repeating trauma without transforming it.

The stillness, or stilling of time, that a photograph performs thus potentially renders the photograph violent, a violence that Barthes identifies, “not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion *it fills the sight by force*, and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed” (91). In effect, this violent stilling or seizure of time in photography functions to render the photographic subject monumental. As photography seizes its subject as a monumental image of the past, the photograph becomes a melancholic object to which the melancholic subject must eternally turn back. As Barthes explains in a comparison with film, “the Photograph . . . is *without future* . . . ; in it, no protensity, whereas the cinema is protensive, hence in no way melancholic” (90). The stillness of the photograph functions to deaden its subject, to freeze that subject in an eternal, monumental moment of time from which

there is no possibility of future movement, transformation, or production. This seizure of time becomes much like Benjamin's identification of a concept of a "homogenous, empty time" that the concept of historical progress requires (263). The subject of the photograph is deadened in an empty time of progress and becomes eternally past. As such, the photograph comes to perform loss — it situates its objects irretrievably in the past, without future — and in *Certainty*, Sipke's photography performs loss as irrecoverably past, as that which has already happened. The anxiety surrounding Sipke's war photography in *Certainty* thus becomes an anxiety over how loss is situated in time. Photographs become melancholic objects anchored in an eternal past, or what Sontag terms "instant antiques" (80), to which melancholic subjects will always be turned, propelled with their backs to the future.

Gail's work as a radio documentarist, in contrast, opens up a space for future generative possibilities in its negotiation of trauma and loss in time. To help distinguish the different temporalities at work in Sipke's photography and Gail's documentaries, I turn to Dori Laub's theory of testimony. Like Caruth, Laub recognizes that a traumatic event is unseen or unknowable in its occurrence:

Massive trauma precludes its registration; the observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind are temporarily knocked out, malfunction. The victim's narrative — the very process of bearing witness to massive trauma — does indeed begin with someone who testifies to an absence, to an event that has not yet come into existence. (57)

Significantly, Laub emphasizes the need to communicate absence in the act of bearing witness to trauma. Sipke's war photography functions more as evidential or historical document than as productive testimony. As Laub explains, "While historical evidence to the event which constitutes the trauma may be abundant and documents in vast supply, the trauma — as known event and not simply as an overwhelming shock — has not been truly witnessed yet" (57). As historical documents, Sipke's photos place trauma in the past. While this may function to communicate the shock of trauma, it does not lead to an engagement with the unknowability of trauma and the violence that precipitates it.

Gail's work as a documentarist, however, allows for a testimony to absent or unseen losses and thus positions loss as that which is about

to arrive, latent, and in-formation in the very process of giving testimony. When describing the reels and reels of interviews that she refuses to throw away, Gail compares testifying about loss to finding a lost box: “You know that feeling when you’re moving house, going through boxes, and you find something unexpected? That’s what I feel is happening to them. Inside their minds, they open the box, and there it is right in front of them, almost as if they’re seeing it for the first time” (84-85). The act of testifying, then, does not constitute the retelling of a past event; rather, it represents a construction of a narrative of a trauma or loss that arrives or is discovered, as if for the first time, in its active telling. Laub clarifies that “knowledge in the testimony is . . . not simply a factual given that is reproduced and replicated by the testifier, but a genuine advent, an event in its own right” (62). It is the advent of loss that allows for a productive potential to emerge in and through loss; Laub emphasizes the creative process involved in testimony as the space where the “‘knowing’ of an event is given birth to,” marking “the creation of knowledge *de novo*” (57).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the conceptualization of loss as that which is about to arrive allows the subject of loss to negotiate his or her engagement with its futurity — with how he or she will tell, narrate, and mobilize that loss in the future. To return to Cho’s discussion of the temporality of loss, a distinction must be made here between the prophecy of loss and the imminence of loss. Cho writes, “Feeling loss proleptically [as that which is imminent] is crucially different from feeling it as a prophecy. It is precisely the unknowability of loss’s prolepsis that is important here. Prophecies predict certain futures. Prolepsis is predictive but uncertain; it lies on the edges of possibility” (434). The configuration of loss as imminent, thus, produces the potential for an active and agential engagement with loss. Gail’s work in *Certainty* as a radio documentarist engages with the prolepsis of loss; unlike Sipke’s photographs, which isolate loss in the past, Gail’s documentaries situate loss as unfolding along with the testimony of the subjects she interviews. The process of testimony that Gail, as listener, facilitates allows these subjects to construct their losses actively and to negotiate their grief, a form of agency that extends even to the withholding of testimony. One woman, for example, whose son drowned in an accident, becomes suddenly angry with Gail’s questions. It is not the telling of her loss that appears to bother the woman, but its recording; as she explains, “words

that I put in the world can never be taken back” (210). The woman takes action, then, and Gail remembers the incident as, indeed, a series of actions: “frantic gestures, the ribbon pulled out of the cassette, spooling onto the ground” (210).

The documenting of loss that Gail performs in the text is thus subject to ethical risks similar to that of photography — the recording of words that “can never be taken back” is suggestive of the potential to freeze loss irrevocably in an unchanging historical record. However, Gail, as both listener and producer, takes on a productive and, indeed, *reproductive* role in the negotiation of loss. As a listener to the testimony of others, Gail becomes part of the productive process of knowing loss, as witnesses negotiate and construct loss and trauma *de novo* as if “seeing it for the first time.” Indeed, her role as listener makes such testimony possible. Her production of documentaries around these testimonies further extends this creative process as she literally shifts from listener to producer. In the role of producer, Gail labours toward a generative *reproduction* of loss. We learn that she “works with the belief that histories touch” (209); she thus works to reproduce histories of loss in a weaving together of interviews, testimony, music, and sound “in the hope that stories will not be lost in the chaos of never touching one another, never overlapping in any true way” (210). While Sipke’s photographs isolate traumas in a linear conception of history, Gail’s radio documentaries work to bring narratives of trauma into generative spaces of potential reproduction. Moreover, Gail’s work with testimony remains sensitive to its *timing*. Gail is devoted to her archive of tape and testimony: “She collects tape the way others collect rare books, safeguarding them with a feeling of reverence” (195). However, Gail’s “devotion” lies not in the collection itself, or in the archival record it provides, or in any sense of historical accuracy to which it might be presumed to speak. Instead, we learn that “for Gail, the devotion lies in more than the words spoken. It is in the words spoken at a specific moment in time, in a particular place. A child singing in the background, a pause in the telling, an old woman wetting her lips, smoothing her dress. A man who forgets the presence of the microphone, who begins a conversation with himself” (195). What remains of importance, then, in Gail’s work — as well as in the grief work the novel itself performs, in its depiction and construction of multiple forms of loss — is the refusal to relegate loss and any of its productive “grievances” to the past.

For Gail, it is imperative to recognize the place of past lost in the *present*, to recognize the moment of its telling in time, even as that telling gestures to a time now past. The novel is structured in such a way as to perform this timely mediation of loss. As mentioned above, the loss of Gail unfolds with the plot of the novel; indeed, it inhabits multiple temporalities. Her death, a past event, is recognized in the present of the text and yet is always arriving in its future, or in its telling. The same can be said for the other losses recounted in the text: the death of Matthew's father and the trauma surrounding the Japanese occupation of Borneo occur in the past, haunt the present, and loom on the horizon of the novel's future; the loss of Sipke's wife, Ani, to cancer, likewise shares this uncertain temporality; and, finally, one loss resides only in its imminence — the death of Al, suffering from HIV-AIDS, is expected with the close of the novel, his loss already felt by his sister. Indeed, in the midst of the scene detailing the discussion of his prognosis between Al, his doctor, and his sister, the text interrupts itself; interjected between exchanges in a dialogue, we learn that “outside, in the hallway, time continues. They can hear the voices of nurses, of visitors in a nearby room” (299). Throughout the novel, aural and visual cues remind the reader that the losses represented in the text are situated in a present that is passing, and a future that is arriving. Again and again, the narrative interrupts itself with seemingly insignificant asides, with “a group of school children . . . laughing down the sidewalk, two by two, holding hands” (202) as Gail sits down to work one day; with “a woman call[ing] out, then a screen door open[ing] and slowly clos[ing], the hinges creaking” (210) as she writes an email; with Clara imagining the image of her husband “rising from bed, standing at the curtains, gazing out at this starlit night” when, from “across the hall, she can hear the floorboards creaking” (16). Each of these cues, often aural, remind the reader of Gail's devotion not to the words of a story, or to their ostensible referentiality, but to their utterance in “a specific moment in time, in a particular place” (195). *Certainty*, thereby, becomes a text whose narrative structure performs loss, wherein the representation and reconstruction of loss becomes constitutive not only of a past, fixed record, but also of a changing present, the recognition of which allows for the potential to mobilize these narratives beyond the isolation of singular losses, to avoid the “chaos of never touching.”



In configuring loss as imminent, Thien effectively clears a temporal space where the subject of grief can grapple with an inevitable and yet unknown or unknowable loss. The subject of grief is not bound to a past, immutable loss; instead, loss is mediated in a present pregnant with productive potential. Indeed, the invocation of the multiple and often intersecting forms of loss apparent in *Certainty* provides a site for the investigation of the productive potential of melancholia in movements of identity politics. David Eng points to the need to recognize the “very possibility of multiple states of injury” and the “intersecting subject positions” of gendered, queer, racialized, postcolonial, and diasporic melancholic subjects (“Melancholia” 1276). In *Certainty*, I recognize a movement toward not only the identification of intersubjective states of loss, but also the potential for the mobilization of such intersubjective griefs to forms of productive and collective “grievance.” Thien’s restructuring of the temporality of loss opens up a space for the subjects of grief to shape and construct narratives of loss, as well as the potential for the ethical mobilization of past lost in present and future “grievances.”

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cheng deploys the term “grievance” specifically for its association with an “implied logic of comparability and compensation” (6). In so doing, she draws on the term’s legal connotations in order to focus attention on what she recognizes as oft-overlooked sources of legal and political grievance. Her use of the term, then, articulates the transition of racial grief or injury to viable social claims (3). Throughout the remainder of this paper, I employ the term as Cheng defines it: as the process by which social injury — especially racial injury — can be mobilized to obtain political goals, to incite change, or to demand restitution.

<sup>2</sup> I agree with Cuder-Dominguez that Thien privileges the aural in *Certainty*; however, this privileging of the aural over the visual may appear to conflict with the negotiation of postmemory that I recognize at work in Thien’s text. Hirsch’s concept of postmemory is one that is explicated through photographs, specifically through Holocaust photographs and the graphic novel *Maus*. While Hirsch privileges the image in her analysis, she asserts that both “images and narratives . . . constitute [postmemory’s] instruments and [their] very medium, extending well into subsequent generations” (22). Hirsch, thus, leaves open the possibility of postmemory manifesting in narrative form. Whether textual or aural, acts of telling constitute the “imaginative investment and creation” (22) that defines the mediation of postmemory.

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