

Book Review

Juliet Hooker: *Black Grief/White Grievance: The Politics of Loss*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023. Pp. xiv, 339.)

doi:10.1017/S0034670524000342

It is a striking experience to read Juliet Hooker's powerful new book, *Black Grief/White Grievance*, in the context of the United States' November 2024 presidential election. As I write these words, the election is only seven months away, and as you read this review, it probably is over. Either way, Hooker has put her finger on a fundamental characteristic of American political life that the 2024 election—whatever its outcome—likely will lay bare. That characteristic is the racialization of political loss in the United States. All democracies involve political loss, and healthy democracies distribute the possibility of loss equally among their citizens. The United States has never done this. Indeed, it appears to be fighting harder than ever to secure the racial inequality of political loss. As a group, white Americans expect to be the winners, and in turn they expect Black Americans (and often other people of color) to be the losers. To put it mildly, white Americans typically do not handle it well when they lose, or even when they merely fear that they might lose. As Hooker insightfully argues, white people's grievance over their loss—real or anticipated—is a central driving force in American political life today. Paired with white grievance is the one permissible response to losing granted to Black Americans: grief. Whatever happens in November 2024, white grievance and Black grief are likely to fuel the election's outcome and its aftermath, and Hooker's book will shed useful light on the post-2024 American political landscape.

After introducing the concept of political loss, *Black Grief/White Grievance* includes four core chapters and a conclusion, which are interspersed with brief interludes of poetry, photographs, and song lyrics. The interludes are an important part of Hooker's claim that political loss is more than a mere harm or an injustice. It is, of course, an injustice that the labor of losing required by a functional democracy is not evenly spread among American citizens, and that injustice causes harm. However, loss has significant "aesthetic and affective registers . . . [that] seek to name or make visible that which is unrepresentable," which the categories of injustice and harm cannot do (7). With its interludes, the book thus skillfully makes room for what exceeds political argumentation: the ineffable aspects of loss.

The first chapter, "White Grievance and Anticipatory Loss," examines white Americans' refusal to accept political loss. White grievance is fueled

by racial entitlement and resentment, and it often is triggered by the fear of a possible loss, rather than an actual one. It operates with a zero-sum view in which any minor “win” or improvement in the lives of nonwhite people is experienced as a monumental loss for white people. On this calculus, racial equality is equivalent to Black domination and white subordination (39). White people are unwilling to relinquish their white priority, that is, their conviction that they rightfully take priority over people of color. If white privilege suggests a class status or wealth that many white people do not have, white priority is something that all white people possess sheerly because of their alleged racial superiority. This is why any kind of political loss is unacceptable and generates significant white grievance. White people are never supposed to lose in the game of who counts the most.

The need to expand Black political imagination is the main focus of chapter 2. In “Black Protest and Democratic Sacrifice,” Hooker eloquently argues that Black suffering should not be framed in terms of repairing or saving American democracy. Too often, however, this is precisely how Black people’s suffering is portrayed. Witness House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s 2021 attempt to praise the conviction of George Floyd’s killer, “Thank you, George Floyd, for sacrificing your life for justice” (89). Black people should refuse the role of democratic martyr; they are not responsible for saving American democracy from itself. In addition, Hooker is skeptical of beliefs that white people’s moral psychology will change once they are faced with the horrors of nonwhite suffering. White shame felt at displays of racial violence toward Black people has not generally led white people to renounce racial injustice, and Hooker—rightly, I think—casts doubt on the likelihood that it ever will (104–10).

Hooker highlights the relationship of fact and emotion in chapter 3, “Representing Loss between Fact and Affect.” Reading Harriet Jacobs and Ida B. Wells as “exemplary theorists of loss” (130), she weaves together Jacobs’s narrative use of affect in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Wells’s post-Reconstruction-era documentation of lynching in the United States. Rather than oppose the methodologies of Jacobs and Wells, Hooker understands them as complementary. They both work to make Black suffering visible and to do so without converting it into a spectacle for white consumption, sympathy, or pleasure. In a similar fashion, chapter 4, “Maternal Grief and Black Politics,” draws on Black women’s experience of suffering, mourning, and loss to challenge the idea that “the development of an antiracist white moral imagination continues to rely on the instructive power of the Black corpse” (213). Mamie Till-Mobley’s grief at the open casket of her son, Emmett Till, is the quintessential example of how Black mothers’ suffering due to the murder of their children has been mobilized into a public mourning that is supposed to improve American society. Hooker uses the example of Till-Mobley and the experience of other Black women to criticize the demand that Black grief be displayed in public within very tight constraints: only sadness, no anger or frustration (218). This chapter also highlights the

potential of the sonic to “allow for a more noninstrumental, contrapuntal approach to Black grief” than the visual often can provide (219). If photographs of Black suffering have been co-opted into spectacles for white consumption, perhaps auditory expressions, such as slave spirituals, can help Black people and communities experience loss without converting it into a public resource.

Ultimately, that is precisely what Hooker would have us all do, whatever our race. We all “need to learn to sit with loss” while realizing that we need this “for different reasons, and to different ends” (227). Hooker’s goal in this book is not to help the United States or any other democratic nation better manage political loss. It also is not to help white people learn to handle loss better, even as the book clearly demonstrates white people’s failure to develop key emotional and cognitive capacities required for democratic society. As noble as it might sound, Black people should not be seduced by that aim. Helping white people eliminate their sense of white priority and become better citizens would be just another form of democratic labor unfairly dumped on Black people. Hooker’s goal instead is to urge Black people to resist the pressure to immediately transform their grief into a grievance that a nation can use for its alleged self-improvement. This does not mean becoming passive or apathetic, on Hooker’s account. Rather it would enable Black people to pause a supposed future in which all wrongs have been made right so that they can dwell in the present, where they can “hold the unrepairable past in view” (227).

Will the United States be able to sit with the political loss that inevitably will occur in November 2024? If Hooker is right, the answer is probably no when it comes to white people. Her book will be all the more important for understanding white people’s reactions to the election results, whatever those may be. Hooker’s insights also will be all the more important for Black people so that they can reimagine for themselves the world to come.

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