

Forgetting Loss in Madeleine Thien's *Certainty*

While theories of melancholia have been ascendant in the fields of gender, queer, postcolonial, and critical race studies in the past two decades, scholars of this topic have tended to keep coming back to the same problem: if subjects of melancholia refuse to forget, what happens in politics and what happens to them? These two effects do not always map onto each other in the same way. Cultural theorists of melancholia have done an exceptional job of thinking through all the ways in which continuous grief can be mobilized for creative, political, social, and ethical projects and ends, but they have only hinted at the psychic harm that this process can incur.¹ Perhaps in their concerted effort to move the discussion of melancholia beyond its associations with narcissism, pathology, and the psychic domain in general, they have gone too far in one direction. What is the effect on traumatized subjects who turn, or who are turned, back to look at their trauma? How can we envision a political project that takes better ethical care of those who bear the burden of remembering? Going a step further, I ask: is there a space left for forgetting in our endeavours to develop a politics of loss?

This essay engages this question through a reading of Madeleine Thien's novel *Certainty*, a novel that seems to pose most urgently questions that have to do with the ambiguous value of continually returning to a traumatic past. In its exploration of how reengaging the past is inflected differently for different generations living in the aftermath of World War II, *Certainty* can be read in the context of what Marianne Hirsch has described as the "ethics and aesthetics of remembrance in the aftermath of catastrophe" ("Generation" 104). Drawing on Heather Love's concept of the "backward turn" and Hirsch's

concept of “postmemory,” I argue that the impetus to keep certain wounds open and alive in the public sphere—to keep our gazes focused on a difficult past in order to combat historical erasure—must be tempered by a consideration of the psychic and material costs of such acts. Thien’s novel calls attention to these costs through an emphasis on the theme of return to trauma and on the necessity, sometimes, of forgetting.

The Costs of Looking Back

In attempting to restore a productive value to forgetting in relation to critical discourses of melancholia, let me first briefly contextualize why remembering has been so important for scholars of critical race and queer studies in North America. In her influential book *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*, Ann Anlin Cheng asks the profoundly important question of how affects—specifically, melancholia felt as a result of racism—can be mobilized to serve political and social justice for racialized subjects in the United States. She turns to the famous Supreme Court ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* as a case study of how the decision was the first instance in United States history of “the expansion in the notion of justice to accommodate the ‘intangible’ effects of racism” (4). While Cheng uses *Brown v. Board* as an example of the potential link between racial grief and social grievance, she is also quick to point out the difficulty of talking about the “melancholia” of racialized peoples, especially since it seems to reinscribe a whole history of affliction or run the risk of naturalizing that pain” (14). Yet, as Cheng acknowledges, “it is surely equally harmful *not* to talk about this history of sorrow” (14) since memory in this context provides us with important and necessary insight into the components of racialization—“the institutional process of producing a dominant, standard, white national ideal, which is sustained by the exclusion-yet-retention of racialized others” (10).

According to David Eng and Shinhee Han in their article “A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia,” it is this hegemonic ideal of whiteness from which Asian Americans are continually estranged since a social structure is in place in America that ensures they remain in a state of “suspended assimilation” (345). Adopting a psychoanalytic approach to studying depression among Asian American youth, Eng and Han bring the question of race to bear upon Freud’s psychoanalytic theory of grief in “Mourning and Melancholia.” Challenging Freud’s association of melancholia with a pathological condition that “emerges from the disturbance of a one-person psychology,” Eng

and Han emphasize the *social* basis of melancholic feelings (345).² While the mental health issues of Asian American students have been for the most part individualized and attributed to essential cultural difference, Eng and Han argue instead that these issues may be traced back to structural forms of racism and exploitation that are ongoing and linked to a long history of racist institutionalized exclusions, from Japanese internment to Chinese exclusion (347). The melancholic refusal to “get over” this history thus signifies an agential subject position rather than a pathological one since, as Eng and Han explain, “[d]iscourses of American exceptionalism and democratic myths of liberty, individualism, and inclusion force a misremembering of these exclusions, an enforced psychic amnesia that can return only as a type of repetitive national haunting” (347).³ Collective remembering, then, functions as an important antidotal force against racial melancholia—the “psychic splitting and national dis-ease” of Asian Americans engendered through experiences of immigration, assimilation, and racial formation (349).

In her book *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, Heather Love reveals the similar political stakes of recuperating memory for queer subjects who have had their histories and identities under erasure. Love argues that “we need to pursue a fuller engagement with negative affects and with the intransigent difficulties of making feeling the basis for politics (14). What distinguishes Love from other theorists of melancholia is not her goal to recuperate negative affect as a politically productive tool, but her nuanced consideration of the challenges that this approach imposes upon “groups constituted by historical injury” (1). To illustrate her concept of the “backward turn,” Love invokes a number of classical figures who turn to the past: “Lot’s wife turning to look at the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah; Orpheus turning back toward Eurydice at the gates of the underworld; Odysseus looking back at the Sirens as his boat pulls away; Walter Benjamin’s angel of history turning away from the future to face the ruined landscape of the past” (5). Love seems to position these figures along a spectrum of sorts—one that recognizes the differential costs paid in the act of turning back: Lot’s wife is destroyed as she turns to a pillar of salt; Orpheus saves himself, but loses Eurydice; Odysseus and the angel of history continue to move forward, but the former is bound to the mast and the latter has the wind tearing at his wings. In other words, none of the figures escapes the engagement with the past unscathed, and some suffer complete annihilation. Yet Love reminds us that “an absolute refusal to linger in the past may entail other kinds of losses” (10). In the end, Love asserts that “as long as

homophobia continues to centrally structure queer life, we cannot afford to turn away from the past; instead, we have to risk the turn backward, even if it means opening ourselves to social and psychic realities we would rather forget” (29). The wider goals of the movement supersede the risk to the individual, who cannot afford to forget but who will pay a price for not forgetting.

Given that Love ultimately endorses a politics of remembering even as she acknowledges the costs, I am prompted to ask again: is there a space for forgetting within the fight for social grievance? How can we move forward in this fight at the same time that we allow ourselves, and others, to turn our backs on past events that remain too painful to look at? Might it be that some subjects are not yet ready to look back while others are ready to stop looking? I am interested in theorizing the value of forgetting, of turning away from a traumatic past, in a way that is not at odds with the project of becoming subjects of grievance. I am cognizant, however, that such an argument raises delicate problems when we are talking about the pasts of marginalized groups. To speak of forgetting these pasts in order to move forward immediately triggers alarm bells of reactionary, conservative discourse. Whereas alternative modes of remembering and remembrance are often regarded as subversive cultural forms, forgetting is, for the most part, seen as complicit with hegemonic forms of power.⁴ While the value of remembering—or rather the costs of forgetting—for political movements that seek redress has been widely theorized, this essay argues that the costs of remembering for the individual must be held in tension with the necessary project of continuing to grieve losses endured by a whole community. Finding ways to live with one’s own trauma or to ethically relate to the trauma of others is not to forget injury, but to allow a critical and lived space for forgetting when remembering threatens to re-injure. Following Cheng’s assertion that one place “where such complexity gets theorized is literature” (15), I now turn to a discussion of how Madeleine Thien’s novel *Certainty* reveals the limits of theories of productive melancholia and reflects a turn to forgetting.

Returning to Trauma

In *Certainty*, the character Matthew Lim embodies the figure of the melancholic, undertaking two return trips to the site of trauma (Sandakan, North Borneo—later Malaysia). As a result of witnessing the murder of his father during the Japanese occupation of Sandakan during World War II, Matthew suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder akin to what Cathy Caruth describes as “a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event

or set of events, which takes the form of repeated hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event” (4). From the outset of the novel, Matthew’s returns are associated with a desire for a cure: “In the decades that followed [the war], [Matthew] returned only twice, both times thinking that he could find a reason, a person who could bind him together, contain his memories, finally” (47). This person is Ani, Matthew’s childhood friend and first love, with whom he reconnects on his first trip to Sandakan. They are reunited only to be torn apart again by the community’s memory of Matthew’s dead father’s actions as a war collaborator. Fearing for the future of her unborn child who would bear the Lim family legacy, Ani ends the relationship with Matthew and keeps her pregnancy a secret from him. To Matthew, a future with Ani embodies “a life free from uncertainty” (166), a cure to the grief that threatens to overcome him; however, place contains the wounds of the past, as Ani reminds Matthew: “You should have known that forgetting could not last. Not in this place” (167). It is the refusal to forget on the part of the people in Sandakan that guarantees the impossibility of Matthew’s return. Here, Thien begins to explore the notion of the cost of remembering by demonstrating how the community’s memory is the basis for Matthew’s exclusion. This attention to the costs of holding on to the past is not a call to “normal mourning” in the Freudian sense, but a recognition that the work of mourning—work that Butler argues is rooted in an ethical recognition of the precarity of the other⁵—can in some circumstances necessitate the act of forgetting.

Thien’s novel emphasizes that conditions of structural oppression in the present can also foreclose the possibility of forgetting. While Matthew manages to start a new life by marrying a woman named Clara Leung and then moving to Vancouver, it soon becomes apparent to Matthew that forgetting for him cannot last in the new place either: “When Matthew came home, exhausted, ill, he said that he wanted to return to Australia, to Malaysia, that he had underestimated how different this country would be. He had been mistaken, he said, to believe he could start over, leave Sandakan and all that happened there behind” (134). Both the hostility of the adopted country and the pull of the homeland are represented as mutually reinforcing factors that influence Matthew’s desire to return. In a novel which strives to demonstrate what characters have in common as they struggle to cope with genealogies of loss, Matthew’s breakdown demonstrates that not all characters bear the costs of these losses equally. The racism, poverty, and everyday struggles that occur in the context of immigration can play a role in causing the traumas of

racialized diasporic subjects to resurface in the hostland. Daniel Schacter has explained in his book *How the Mind Forgets and Remembers* that remembering is a process of reconstructing the past based on the conditions of the present. As he puts it, “present influences play a much larger role in determining what is remembered than what actually happened in the past” (129). In *Certainty*, Thien suggests that Matthew’s sudden desire to return to the Sandakan is at least partially engendered by feelings of unbelonging in Canada.

Instead of enabling a process of repair and healing, however, Matthew’s return seems to break him further apart. In Sandakan, Matthew experiences an uncanny encounter with the past as he observes a film crew shooting a movie about the Japanese prisoner-of-war camps in Sandakan during World World II. In his book *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age*, Viktor Mayer-Schonberger argues that the increasing reliance on digital remembering may disrupt the reconstructive dimension of human memory that filters information based on necessity. In our digital era, the ubiquity of triggers that can recall events the mind has forgotten threatens to undermine human reasoning by “confront[ing] us with too much of our past and thus imped[ing] our ability to decide and act in time” (119). Watching a scene “repeated many times” in which a POW is shot in the head by a Japanese soldier, Matthew “felt as if a stone at the bottom of his life had rolled loose, as if the contents of his memory could no longer be contained. They spilled into the air around him, vivid and uncontrolled. Why was this happening, he had wondered, when he had tried so hard, given up so much, to leave it behind?” (Thien 284-285). Here, Thien brings together several strands of imagery that she has employed throughout the novel—the glass jar, the road, the seed—to figure Matthew’s retraumatization in witnessing a scene reminiscent of his father’s murder. As Caruth has influentially argued, trauma is a kind of psychic wound that is “unavailable” to the traumatized subject as an event, but is only experienced as a latent return, a compulsive repetition. Furthermore, trauma is not merely a privatized event, for Caruth writes that it “seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (4). What happens when traumatized subjects are turned back to look at the story of that wound if they are not yet, or perhaps never will be, ready to tell it themselves? Standing at the site of trauma, Matthew asks himself: “When would the war be over for him? Sometimes, he said, one had

to let go of the living just as surely as one grieved the dead. Some things, lost long ago, could not be returned” (285). In Matthew’s reflections, Thien illustrates the high psychological costs that can be incurred by subjects who are “triggered” by representations of their traumatic histories. As clinical psychologist Elizabeth Fortes has stated in an interview with CBC Radio, these subjects “are nervous; their system becomes flooded with neurobiological information that once again brings them close to the traumatic response.” The effects can even be fatal if trauma is triggered in the wrong environment.

Thien’s novel engages this problem by linking Nietzsche’s arguments about the value of forgetting to scientific theories of trauma recovery and memory.⁶ In a conversation with Ansel about how her radio interviewees sometimes recall memories unexpectedly, Gail states, “It’s Nietzsche. The ability to forget is what brings us peace” (85). Gail’s insight prompts her partner Ansel to add that “[h]e was on to something in a biochemical way, too. If there’s trauma, or a difficult memory, sometimes that severs the links. The memories themselves don’t disappear, but you can’t find your way back to them, because the glue that connects the different streams is somehow dissolved” (85).⁷ The inability to find one’s way back to some traumatic memories, then, is not a failure but rather a preservation mechanism.⁸ Nobel Prize winner and Holocaust survivor Eric Kandel has recently done groundbreaking work on the neuroscience of memory and has discussed the bioethics of medicalised forgetting in an interview with CBC Radio. Kandel explains that drugs have been developed that can medically prevent “post-traumatic stress disorder, while allowing [trauma patients] the experience and some aspect of the memory, except emotionally reduced.” Kandel does not come down on one side or the other in this debate, insisting that this issue needs to be “discussed, debated, and decided upon,” not within the confines of science, but in the public sphere at large. Thien’s novel also emphasizes the importance of opening up this kind of dialogue about remembering and forgetting trauma: “[Matthew] had once gone back to find it, the place between the rows of trees, but what he had tried to keep safe was lost. His childhood, a time before the war. A glass jar that moves from his father’s hand to his, a continuous question that asks, how am I to live now, when all is said and done and grief must finally be set aside” (305). Here, the past shifts from a fixed, static object into a question about survival in the present. As *Certainty* illustrates, the politics of loss should function not as an either/or prescription to remember or to forget, but rather as a mode of interrogation that seeks to maintain a careful, ethical balance in between.

Thien's novel also suggests that the maintenance of this ethical balance can be complicated by the medium through which trauma is represented. The character of Sipke Vermulem is a war photographer who begins his career with an optimistic view of the value of his profession, for he says to Ani: "The picture shows us that this suffering is made by people, and because it is made by us, it is not inevitable. That was the reason I wanted to be a photographer" (246). Sipke's words here recall Judith Butler's argument in her book *Frames of War* that a photograph can relay affect and institute a mode of acknowledgement that "argues' for the grievability of a life" (98). Haunting images of war, Butler argues, "might motivate . . . viewers to change their point of view or to assume a new course of action" (68). Sipke appears to become disillusioned with such a view of photography, however, after taking a photo at the end of the Algerian War that depicted a man with kerosene and a torch walking towards a barred house with a mob behind him (244). Paralleling in some ways the scene in which Matthew watches helplessly as his father is shot, Sipke is unable to stop the man and the mob from setting fire to the house of a suspected war collaborator, even as Sipke tells them that the entire family is inside. The afterlife of this photograph convinces Sipke that photographs of suffering do not always do the ethical work of haunting and grievability, as Butler herself has acknowledged. Sipke says to Ani:

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. It feeds their imagination, but it doesn't give them knowledge. (245-246)

Thien is concerned here with the relationship between the medium of representing trauma and the imagination of the viewer/listener. Without an ethical context, images of war and atrocity can have the effect of desensitizing viewers and can be framed to serve conservative agendas. Sipke's changed perspective on photography reflects Susan Sontag's critique that the photographs elicit an ethical pathos in viewers only momentarily, whereas "[n]arratives can make us understand" (83). Just as Butler suggests that Sontag perhaps draws too stark a division between the affective mobilizing potential of narrative versus photography (69), Thien's treatment of visual images, both photography and film, is neither uniformly condemning nor uncritically celebratory. Eleanor Ty, in her article on Thien's novel, puts this point another way by suggesting that "Thien's view of visual and audio

media is . . . neither fully modernist nor postmodernist in attitude. . . . Instead of an attitude of fear or criticism, she sees machines as necessary and useful apparatuses, almost as extensions of our selves, our bodies, our memories.” Indeed, Thien presents digital recording media as important technologies of remembering and transmitting the past, as evidenced by the positive relationship that many characters in the novel have with technology.

At the same time, however, Thien’s novel forces a reflection on the importance of thinking, more than ever, about how, why, and when we reconstruct trauma in the digital age. Listening to Sipke’s account of the iconic photo of the war in Algeria, Ani recalls finding her dead father’s body on the airfield in Sandakan during World War II—a memory which prompts her to ask, “[w]hat good did it do, after all, to remember, to hold onto the past, if the most crucial events in life could not be changed? What good did memory do if one could never make amends?” (247). Ani’s words echo critic Moris Farhi’s view that “memory, unless transformed into meaningful states that enable us to develop, will cause great devastation. Memories of trauma, if left to fossilise—or deliberately allowed to fossilise in blind obeisance to tradition—will wreak irreparable harm” (25). Acts of memory, Thien’s novel suggests, do not *always* elicit ethical responsiveness or change; these acts can sometimes make us paralyzingly unfit for action, as Sipke announces: “I would forget that day in Algeria, if I could” (247).

Anchoring the Past, Failing to Save

While characters such as Matthew, Clara, Ani, Sipke, and William Sullivan struggle with memories of a traumatic past that they have experienced firsthand, the second-generation characters in *Certainty*—Gail, Kathleen, and Wideh—all bear a relationship to their parents’ traumatic histories that can be characterized in terms of what Marianne Hirsch calls “postmemory”—“a generational structure of transmission deeply embedded in . . . forms of mediation” (“Generation” 114).⁹ Although Hirsch limits her discussion of postmemory to the Jewish Holocaust, she gestures to the relevance of her analysis “to numerous other contexts of traumatic transfer” (108). According to Hirsch, postmemorial fiction “attempt[s] to represent the long-term effects of living in close proximity to the pain, depression, and dissociation of persons who have witnessed and survived massive historical trauma” (12). Hirsch argues that in displacing and recontextualizing personal and collective images of trauma in their artistic work, the postmemorial generation “has been able to make repetition not an instrument of fixity or paralysis or

simple retraumatization (as it often is for survivors of trauma), but a *mostly* helpful vehicle of working through a traumatic past” (“Surviving” 9). Hirsch tells us that without an imaginative and reconstructive relationship to the past, repeated images of trauma have the capacity to “retraumatize, making distant viewers into surrogate victims who, having seen the images so often, have adopted them into their own narratives and memories, and have thus become all the more vulnerable to their effects” (8). Dora Apel reinforces this notion of the vulnerability of the postmemorial generation, whom she describes as having a “compulsion toward forms of reenactment” (3) that often “end in a kind of crisis, a greater sense of traumatic history’s elusiveness, but also its pervasiveness and its imminence” (188).

In *Certainty*, this crisis of postmemory is reflected in the character of Gail, who is constructed as a curious listener deeply affected by the silences in her family life. She grows up knowing that there is a secret in her father’s past to which she is not privileged—“a secret that has coloured her life, her childhood” (259). Postmemory, Hirsch explains, describes the second generation’s “curiosity and desire, as well as their ambivalences about wanting to own their parents’ knowledge” (“Surviving” 11). The narrator recounts that “Matthew would tell [Gail] stories about his childhood before the war, about Sandakan, until he realized that she remembered so much. She wanted to hear everything, to know how the story continued. His words ran dry” (18). Met with her father’s silence and hesitation to disclose details of his past, Gail infers pieces of his story instead from listening to the sounds of her father’s nightmares and the whispers of secret names, from observing the morning-after signs of his insomnia and the waking hours he spends in his armchair, letting his tea go cold (208). Thien’s novel illuminates how we encounter the question of trauma transmission as the perplexity of living, understanding, and writing the broken intimacies of the present. Matthew’s past comes to have material effects on the present when the narrator recounts that “in the last few months, [Gail] has felt as if, day by day, she is losing footing. There are fissures, openings, that she no longer knows how to cover over” (259). Throughout *Certainty*, the trope of vertical movement, both descent and ascent, is central in figuring the structure of the trauma, and in this passage, the metaphor of falling is indicative of Gail’s precarious psychological state in needing answers that can ground or anchor her in the present. Gail’s inherited memories, filled with absences and gaps, cause her to become figuratively “unhinged” from a stable ground of memory and identity; ironically, however, it is Gail’s encounter with Sipke

and his counsel to allow some things to remain in the past—“to respect what is mysterious”—that ends up providing some measure of clarity for Gail (272). Sipke’s meditation encapsulates a dimension of Thien’s ethical project: Finding a way to care for the most vulnerable in the present means returning to the past in order to discover provisional, not absolute, truths that can help shape the path forward.

Thien presents the idea that an ethics of representing trauma must entail a respect for silence or uncertainty—an allowance for the details that, in Thien’s words, have been purposefully “lost, forgotten, or pushed away” (qtd. in Chong 11).¹⁰ Thien illustrates how Gail, in the production of her radio documentaries, embodies this figure of an ethical respondent to trauma in a recollected scene where Gail interviews the mother of a recently drowned teenaged son. During the interview, the woman suddenly becomes angry at Gail for asking questions that the woman perceives to be intrusive, prompting Gail to stop the recorder and to give the cassette tape to the grieving woman: “‘If only you could understand,’ the woman had said, clutching the tape. ‘The words that I put in the world can never be taken back’” (210). Invoking the issue of the ethical implications of interviewing victims of trauma in the media, this scene brings to mind Fortes’ claim that although “there is a long tradition of testimony in the survivors of trauma . . . there is a proper environment to speak about the trauma.” Furthermore, Fortes believes that the “media has to have an ethical position to respect these traumatic histories.” Thien illustrates in her novel how this ethical position can involve taking no action at all.¹¹ Sometimes the psychic costs of remembering cannot be undone. Bringing pain into politics cannot function as a relentless recuperation of affect for the purpose of spectacle or politics. Thien’s novel seems to make a particular appeal to the postmemorial generation to understand most intimately when it is important to draw the line.

Allowing this space for forgetting—for some elements of the past to remain in the past—can be difficult since, as Hirsch explains, the postmemorial generation’s experience is often “shaped by the child’s confusion and responsibility, by the desire to repair, and by the consciousness that the child’s own existence may well be a form of compensation for unspeakable loss” (“Generation” 12). In *Certainty*, this “desire to repair” is often figured as a theme of failing to save. Gail explains that “[f]or as long as she can remember, she had wanted to save them [her parents]. She imagined her parents turning to her, seeing her finally, and the past would fall away. That is what she had hoped for when she was a child” (212). This imagined “turning to”

Gail by Matthew and Clara is an act of turning away from the past, the trauma, and towards the future; however, it is a turn that Gail believes she has failed to bring about. Thien's novel is, in fact, replete with characters who believe that they have failed to save someone in the past: Matthew wishes that he could go back in time to prevent the murder of his father (167); Ansel spends night after night studying Gail's test results, trying to find "the detail that might have saved her" (95); Ani dreams about her mother telling her "to stop searching backwards," that Ani "cannot save" them because "the past is done" (172); Clara is told by her father "that what she believed was false," that she could not have saved the boy she watched fall to his death (123); Sipke is plagued by the memory of failing to stop the mob from setting fire to the family of the war collaborator. Thien uses this theme of the failure to save not only to comment on the dangers of becoming fixated on changing the past, but also perhaps to engage in a critique of historiography as being what Heather Love describes as a fantasy of "heroic rescue" (50).

Engaging with Michel Foucault's writing in which he discusses the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, Love argues that Foucault exposes how our desire to recuperate figures from the past often has more to do with our desire to secure an identity in the present than with saving those figures. According to Love, the classical myth offers an apt emblem of the work of the historian since Orpheus' "failed attempt to rescue Eurydice is a sign of the impossibility of the historical project per se: the dead do not come back from beyond the grave, and this fact constitutes the pathos of the historical project" (50). The practice of queer history is doomed to failure, yet not turning back at all, Love insists, would be a betrayal of the dead. In this sense, failing to save the dead is not a failure at all, but rather an acceptance that "[t]aking care of the past without attempting to fix it means living with bad attachments, identifying through loss, allowing ourselves to be haunted" (43).

In *Certainty*, William Sullivan, like the figure of Eurydice, appears to Gail as a ghost from the past who is calling out to be saved. When he was a Canadian POW in Hong Kong during World War II, Sullivan encrypted his diary so that the enemy could not read it, but later he could not remember the encryption code. Gail's friend Harry Jaarsma explains that "Cryptography is a kind of protection," and he advises the listeners of Gail's radio documentary to "[t]hink of the Sullivan diary as a message from the past, but one that has been buried beneath many layers" (104). The forgotten code of Sullivan's diary reinforces Thien's recurring Nietzschean theme that forgetting is an survival mechanism of the mind. But Thien also uses

the diary as metaphor for the lures of the past that can threaten to consume those in the present, for Jaarsma further explains that, as a cryptographer, “you assume that there is something to be pursued, some meaning to be unravelled. It is exactly the kind of thing that can destroy a person” (105). Thien suggests that the postmemorial generation is particularly susceptible to this condition since their inherited memories are already so thoroughly permeated by narrative voids. They are like the obsessive codebreakers of Jaarsma’s analogy, the Orpheus of Love’s analogy of queer historiography.

In this respect, Thien constructs many parallels between Gail and Kathleen as subjects of postmemory: Kathleen believes that cracking the encryption of the diary will reveal something about the trauma her father endured in the camps—something that will, in turn, explain the years of alcoholism and domestic abuse that he subjected his family to after the war. Kathleen, like Gail, is searching for answers that can explain the broken intimacies of the present. When the “perfect answer to the mystery of her father” (203) turns out to be Sullivan’s log of the mundane, daily rituals of living in the POW camp, rather than a witness account of violence and torture, Thien suggests that some horrors are better left in the past; some intimacies may never be fully repaired. What subjects of grief can anchor themselves to for support are the everyday truths of how, in Caruth’s words, “we are bound to each other’s traumas” (24), for the narrator of *Certainty* explains: “Gail works with the belief that histories touch . . . So she weaves together interviews, narration, 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). The last radio piece that Gail nearly finishes before she dies brings her story together with her father’s story, providing insight into Hirsch’s inquiry about how we can best carry the stories of atrocity survivors “forward without appropriating them, without unduly calling attention to ourselves, and without, in turn, having our own stories displaced by them” (“Generation” 105). Rather than reproducing the horror and shock of past atrocities, Gail’s documentary—and Thien’s novel—lets the truth of the trauma become visible tangentially through the intimate sounds and voices of those puzzling the perplexity of living in the trauma’s aftermath.

Thien takes care, however, not to celebrate the production of the postmemorial project as a redemptive endpoint in a teleology of inter-generational trauma transmission. The most important puzzle that Thien presents in the novel does not have to do with Matthew’s or Sullivan’s pasts, but with the mystery of Gail’s sudden death by illness. Gail’s death establishes a kind of

circular model of grief in the novel that mirrors melancholia's self-reproducing structure. By the end the question that continues to hang over the text is: what is the meaning of Gail's death? Or rather, to what kind of metaphorical speculation does Gail's fatal illness lend itself? At one point, Ansel, Gail's partner, who is a doctor of internal medicine, speculates that Gail had an undiagnosed underlying medical condition, possibly inherited, that made her susceptible to pneumonia (95). The suggestion that Gail dies from an invisible inherited illness that suddenly surfaces at a specific point in her life invites us to connect Gail's death to Freudian melancholia—specifically the belated return of the repressed traumatic event. Thien introduces the possibility that Gail's death is linked to the trauma that has been transmitted to her from her father. The notion of a biological effect of transmitted trauma has been studied by theorists such as Teresa Brennan who argues that the “the emotions or affects of one person, and the enhancing or depressing energies these affects entail, can enter into one another” (3). Emphasizing the physiological impact of transmitted affects, Brennan seeks to challenge the “taken-for-grantedness of the emotionally contained subject [that] is a residual of Eurocentrism in critical thinking” (2). Although she does not explicitly draw a parallel, Brennan's theory of the “process whereby one person's or one group's nervous and hormonal systems are brought into alignment with another's” (9) bears many similarities to the notion of sympathy or sympathetic attraction that has its roots in nineteenth-century medical discourses.¹² While Brennan actually moves away from the view of a genetically-inherited basis to affective conditions, she draws on Jean Laplanche's understanding of the “child as the repository of the unconscious of the parents” (32). Laplanche theorized that the unconscious of the parent could be transmitted to the child, who is especially susceptible to the forceful projections of the parents (33). Brennan explains that her theory differs from Laplanche in that she locates the “transmission of the ‘unconscious’ of the other within an intersubjective economy of affects and energy, in which transmission occurs as a matter of course” (173). Laplanche and Brennan's theories provide insight into the physiological dimension of the postmemorial generation's lifelong proximity to their parents' traumas. As Hirsch has explained, the children of atrocity survivors can inherit the weight of their parents' traumatic knowledge through nonverbal and unconscious forms of communication since postmemory is “often based on silence rather than speech, on the invisible rather than the visible” (“Surviving” 9). Within this interpretive framework, Gail's illness in *Certainty* could be read as a physiological manifestation of the affects that

have been transmitted to her from her father—affects that not only influence and shape the direction of Gail's life, but that actually physiologically “imprint” themselves on Gail in a manner that has fatal consequences. Thien's novel prompts us to consider whether the weight of historical trauma can become even more unupportable for some members of the second generation who are driven to want to remember more than their parents. What is at stake in allowing a space for forgetting is not only the psychic survival of those who have suffered atrocity first-hand, but also of those in the postmemorial generation who perhaps feel most acutely that it would be a failure to forget.

Forgetting Loss

In “After Loss, What Then?”, the afterword to Eng and Kazanjian's *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, Judith Butler describes how the losses of genocide, slavery, exile, colonization can form the basis for a new sense of community—a site that “turns out to be oddly fecund, paradoxically productive” (468). Butler, however, wants readers “to be clear about what this productivity is,” arguing that “[w]hatever it is, it cannot constitute a rewriting of the past or a redemption that would successfully reconstitute its meaning from and as the present” (468). What is notable in Butler's definition here is not its clarity, but rather its ambiguity. Butler tells us only that productive melancholia is a response to loss that captures the traces of the past while not seeking to rewrite or redeem it. At the end of Butler's essay, this ambiguity extends to the productivity of melancholia itself as she writes:

Many of the essays here refer to the sensuality of melancholia, to its form of pleasure, its mode of becoming, and therefore reject its identification with paralysis. But it probably remains true that it is only because we know its stasis that we can trace its motion, and that we want to. The rituals of mourning are sites of merriment . . . but as [Benjamin's] text effectively shows, it is not always possible to keep the dance alive. (472)

Butler implies that while critics have been intent on recuperating the “sensuality” and “pleasure” of melancholia as a “mode of becoming,” they have perhaps not balanced this approach with a consideration of melancholia's potential to incite psychic paralysis. A politics of loss, in Butler's view, requires an acknowledgement that melancholia's mode of becoming and its mode of paralysis operate dialectically.

In many ways, the title of Butler's afterword resonates at the centre of Madeleine Thien's *Certainty*. Set in the aftermath of loss that is both private and historical, Thien's novel explores the value of forgetting in an age when

the atrocities of recent history have become increasingly commodified and mechanically reproduced. As the survivors and the descendants of the atrocities of the past half-century increasingly revisit their catastrophic pasts, *Certainty* demands a critical conversation among trauma, diaspora, postcolonial, and globalization studies that not only recognizes the value of remembering for the collective project of redress and reconciliation, but that also takes stock of the relentless call to remember and of the kinds of representations of trauma that are reproduced in the name of remembering. Thien's novel reminds us that melancholia is, at root, a condition of the traumatized individual psyche. The fragility of this psyche—and its vulnerability to retraumatization through discourse and representation—is not something we should forget or strive to move beyond in our efforts to develop a politics of loss.

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NOTES

- 1 See especially Ahmed, *Happiness*; Butler, "After Loss" and *Precarious Life*; Cheng; Crimp; Cho; Eng and Han; Eng and Kanjanjian; Flatley; Gilroy; Love; Munoz; and Mishra.
- 2 Eng and Kanjanjian note that although Freud initially drew a distinction between mourning—"a psychic process in which libido is withdrawn from a lost object"—and melancholia—"an inability to resolve grief and ambivalence precipitated by the loss of the loved object, place, or ideal"—he later blurred the distinction between these two states (3).
- 3 For an excellent article on the role of melancholia in remembering similar exclusions in Asian Canadian history, see Cho.
- 4 See especially Ahmed, *Emotion*, 33; Baudrillard, 23; Brown, 74; Kinsman.
- 5 For more on Butler's view of precarity and ethics, see *Precarious Life*.
- 6 See *The Use and Abuse of History*, 5-12, where Nietzsche links forgetting to action, arguing for the necessity of forgetting under the debilitating burden of memory imposed by historicism.
- 7 Thien is drawing here on recent developments in brain science that suggest memory is a function of links between neurons in the brain. As Anthony J. Greene explains, "memory is not like a video recording . . . or any of the other common storage devices to which it has been compared. It is much more like a web of connections between people and things. Indeed, recent research has shown that some people who lose their memory also lose their ability to connect things to each other in the mind" (22).
- 8 In his article "Seven Types of Forgetting," Paul Connerton seeks to challenge the commonly-held view "that remembering and commemorating is usually a virtue and that forgetting is necessarily a failing" (59). Connerton argues that while forgetting can be

complicit with regimes of silence and oppression, it can also be a necessary adaptive mechanism to safeguard against “too much cognitive dissonance” (63).

- 9 Like Eng and Han’s theory of racial melancholia as an “intersubjective psychology . . . that might be addressed and resolved across generations” (354), Hirsch’s theory of postmemory is invested in remembering pasts that have been historically silenced or misremembered. Postmemory, with its emphasis on how the postmemorial generation interweaves and reconstructs both (non)verbal *and* archival (often photographic) fragments transmitted to them by the previous generation, is a particularly apt framework for the present study since I have adopted a methodological approach that in part applies visual cultural theory (Sontag, Butler) to talk about textual descriptions of images. Hirsch’s theory of postmemory lends itself to this kind of methodology because Hirsch herself reaches for verbal (rather than strictly visual) art in her definition of postmemory. In many ways, Hirsch’s notion of the second’s generation’s “imaginative investment, projection and creation” of the past (“Generation” 106) embodies the kind of ethical context that Thien’s novel suggests is wanting in the majority of commodified and mass media representations of historical trauma. See Wasserman for more on visual culture and postmemory.
- 10 See Thien’s interview with Kevin Chong, in which Thien describes her experience of travelling to East Malaysia for the first time in search of answers about her familial past.
- 11 See Ahmed, who argues that it “is the very assumption that we know how the other feels, which would allow us to transform their pain into our sadness” (*Emotion* 31).
- 12 See Mary Ann Doan, who explains that “the meaning of ‘sympathy’ in physiology and pathology is, the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us, ‘a relation between two bodily organs or parts (or between two persons) such that disorder, or any condition of the one induces a corresponding condition in the other.’ Sympathy connotes a process of contagion within the body, or between bodies, an instantaneous communication and affinity” (67).

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