

The Destruction of Loss

An Introduction

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1.

A Quranic epigraph opens Sinan Antoon's 2010 novel *The Pomegranate Alone* (*Wahdaha shajarat al-rumman*): "In both gardens are fruit, palm trees, and pomegranates" (Q. 55:68). These pomegranates appear as part of an imagistic flash of heaven, nested between the cadence and intensity of the sura's incantatory refrain declaiming the wonders of the Lord. But in Antoon's novel, the pomegranate tree does not stand near the fruit and date palms as part of the rhythmic disclosure of paradise. It stands alone in the small garden of a reluctant *mghassilchi* (a "corpse washer," the title of the book's 2013 English translation) in Baghdad, who ritually washes and shrouds the bodies that arrive at his door.

"The living die or depart, and the dead always come," reflects Jawad Kazim, the narrator, at the end of the novel.¹ "I had thought that life and death were two separate worlds with clearly marked boundaries. But now I know they are conjoined, sculpting each other. My father knew that, and the pomegranate tree knows it as well" (CW, 184). His father, also a corpse washer (as was his father before him), had loved the pomegranate tree in the courtyard. He would place a pomegranate branch or a palm frond along the two arms of the deceased to lessen their torment in the grave. He would pray for the deceased's forgiveness as he wiped the body on the washing bench: first the right side, then the left, pausing to anoint it with camphor and lotus. The pomegranate tree drank "the waters of death" for decades (the water flowing off the corpse on the washing bench into a runnel out to the tree's roots) (CW, 65). Bodies of strangers, friends, acquaintances pass through the bench. Eventually, after he dies kneeling in prayer, the tree drinks the water that washed the body of Jawad's father. And it flourished, blossoming and bearing fruit every spring. At the end of life, a new beginning: "The dead man looks like a newborn

in swaddling clothes,” the narrator comments after watching his father wash and shroud a body for burial (CW, 21).

Jawad, an artist and sculptor, had first refused to take up the work of his father. He is not religious and may have forgotten what to do. Much later, a visitor reminds him that the living have a debt and responsibility to the dead. Jawad does not know why, but he agrees to return to work in service of the dead and the living. After explosions and violence storm across Baghdad under occupation and war, after he has to shroud killed children and wrap dismembered limbs, he goes to sit under the pomegranate tree amid the horrors of the unending death: “It has become my only companion in the world. Its red blossoms had opened like wounds on the branches, breathing and calling out” (CW, 183). He, too, comes to love this tree, although he cannot bear to eat its fruit. The war continues, destroying lives and livelihoods. “Like me, this pomegranate’s roots were here in the depths of hell. Do the roots reveal everything to the branches, or do they keep what is painful to themselves?” (CW, 184). He sings to it. A nightingale sings back from the tree’s tall branches. Paradise is far away, Jawad had complained, so the bird brought its song near. (Perhaps it is an indifferent distinction between this world and the next, at least when it comes to the pomegranate, for a hadith promises that each of its worldly fruits bears a seed from heaven.) Another body arrives to be washed, and the nightingale flees.

The pomegranate tree offers some solace, perhaps, in its knowledge (shared with the corpse washer and his father) of life and death “sculpting” one another—but it does not offer an escape from a life filled with death. Nor does sleep. The pomegranate even appears in his dreams. While some of these sequences are ambiguous, other nightmares condense biographical images and symbolic referents (e.g., his lost love, Reem, cups pomegranates to her chest, for her amputated breast turned cancerous after the US deployment of depleted uranium in Iraq [CW, 123]). The familiar becomes unfamiliar; fantasies collapse. Such dreams splice the chapters of the novel, marking the equally nightmarish conditions of waking life and death. The boundary between this world and the otherworld (of sleep, of death) blurs. It can no longer be restored, a revelation gone wrong.

Under these conditions, the washhouse (*mghaysil*) loses its way of attending to the dead: it churns dust in the industrial manufacture of death; the rules and rituals of washing and care dissipate into the mechanical reproduction of the corpse:

Bodies are stacked on it. The belt moves toward the right and leads to a huge opening, and outside men wearing blue overalls and white gloves carry the bodies and throw them into a huge truck. Scores of water faucets protrude from the wall, each with an empty washbasin and a bowl under it. I hear a voice yell: “What are you waiting for?” . . . The corpses keep moving to the opening on the conveyer belt. (CW, 75)

I would see six or seven dogs tearing apart corpses, and whenever I tried to pick up a rock to throw it at them, it turned to dust. In another nightmare I would see my entire family being charred. When I'd try to pour water on them from my bottle, I'd discover that it was empty. I'd try to throw sand on them, but I would smell that stench again and wake up. (CW, 118)

In these scenes the *mghaysil* is no longer a site to sculpt loss but becomes a site for the destruction of loss: there, relations to loss are evacuated and rendered impossible. "Even the statues are too terrified to sleep at night lest they wake up as ruins" (CW, 103). Dreams crumble even while conjuring desire. What lies beyond destruction makes itself heard only in the dream, which has what Stefania Pandolfo calls the "uncanny temporality of a vestige."² The loss staged between dreaming and waking life is not overcome by time or human activity. Rather, it gives shape to the articulation of another yearning (for the possibility of sculpting loss): "Desire manifests itself in the dream by the loss expressed in an image at the most cruel point of the object," writes Lacan.³

In Antoon's novel, whose Arabic title and Quranic epigraph double the pomegranate tree of this world and the otherworld, the pomegranate bears the impersonal knowledge of how life and death are not "two separate worlds with clearly marked boundaries" but "are conjoined, sculpting each other" (CW, 184). At the end of the book, after failed attempts to leave the *mghaysil*, Jawad compares his heart to "a shriveled pomegranate beating with death and falling every second into a bottomless pit. But no one knows. No one. The pomegranate alone knows" (CW, 184). Yet the revelatory force of this knowledge is exhausted, and its significance is withheld.⁴

2.

Life and death are inextricable in this artistic production, without contradiction or equivalence.⁵ These are relations of life and death that are without opposition, without sublation. Death cannot be fixed; nor can life. There is no point of departure here, no beginning or end point. "No matter how calmly the corpse has been laid out upon its bed for final view, it is also everywhere in the room, all over the house. At every instant it can be elsewhere than where it is," writes Blanchot.⁶ The generalization of loss inhabited by Antoon's novel, as well as the alleviating functions that defend against it (such as mourning and melancholia), open profound and interrelated questions about time, attachment, and ethics. What does it mean that this condition of foreclosed desire (for the lost *mghaysil*, dreams, histories, futures) becomes generalized across life?⁷

By contrast, precisely the opposition between life and death has long been critical to the theorization of loss. Scholars have discovered a generativity to loss, as in various forms of attachment to the dead. These relations to loss trouble the

conventional distinction between mourning and melancholia. For Freud, mourning is a normalizing relation to loss: it offers a freeing of the ego from its libidinal attachment to the lost object.⁸ By contrast, melancholia occurs through a narcissistic identification with the lost object—an attempt to devour the object and loss into oneself.⁹ “In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself.”¹⁰ But the two are not so easily divided into the normal and pathological. As Judith Butler has long demonstrated, melancholia also names the very formation of the ego to begin with; it makes mourning possible in partitioning object from ego.¹¹

Scholars have thus argued that, rather than being destructive, loss is productive. In the introduction to their edited volume on loss, David Eng and David Kazanjian invite us to attend to how attachments to loss might even creatively offer “a politics of the future.”¹² Or, as David Scott writes, “Political ideals are *founded* on object loss.”¹³ Loss then comes to serve as a beginning of its own, opening onto another horizon: an epochal loss, in the sense of an epoch made by loss. Consider the loss of habitation, of worlds—what scholars have called the Anthropocene. For Anne McClintock, “the Anthropocene is an epoch of ghosts. Our present is haunted by the past and destined to haunt all our tomorrows.” These ghosts are waiting to be acknowledged and recognized, in order to “animate forgotten histories and envision alternative futures.”¹⁴

Such a creative relation to loss requires “an ongoing and open relationship with the past” (in melancholia) rather than a burial of it (in mourning).¹⁵ Jack Halberstam argues that practicing failure and being with the losers it produces can prompt us “to fall short, to get distracted, to take a detour, to find a limit, to lose our way, to forget to avoid mastery.”¹⁶ It is precisely the experience of loss that promises to disrupt the stagnation and stasis of the present. Along similar lines, Ranjana Khanna comments that postcolonial melancholia can offer “the basis for an ethico-political understanding of colonial pasts, postcolonial presents, and utopian futures.”¹⁷ An attention to creative melancholia has thus allowed scholars to reveal and analyze differences in how losses are experienced, inherited, and incorporated by communities, individuals, and traditions.¹⁸

But the relationship to loss is double-edged: grappling with loss can further cement it. Rebecca Comay cautions against privileging “melancholia as somehow most responsible to the historical demands of an epoch devastated by the cumulative horror of its losses.”¹⁹ Intense engagements with loss can also create a fetish of the loss, where its curation and maintenance stands in the way of encountering further consequences of destruction. Melancholia and fetishism, Comay continues, can “collude to produce the illusion of an intact present—solitary, sufficient, immune from past or future threat.”²⁰ While melancholia can enable creative relationships to the past and to what has been lost, it also risks endlessly reproducing the present as

already dead. In such configurations, Derek Hook writes, melancholia amounts “to a psychotic instance of stasis, one in which the broader libidinal world is stopped, and the melancholic subject (or community) takes itself to the place of the dead.”²¹

Moreover, and as Lacan already observed, the creative futures made or compelled by loss can remain “prodigiously tormented by idyllic exigencies”—our age’s wishful thinking (*Wunschgedanken*).²² Thus, notes Gil Anidjar, “we persist in endowing ourselves (and sometimes others) with more powers and capacities, [to] tell ourselves the stories of our great deeds, sing the glorious or tenacious praises of our productive and creative abilities, the wisdom (and, more often, unwisdom) with which we continue ‘making our own history.’”²³ That we can heroically chart our way through narratives of loss in our creative attachment to the past is no surprise. We know that the generative capacities of loss are tied to capitalist production, for example, in which loss can be made to create value: this is what Joseph Schumpeter calls “creative destruction.”²⁴ The war machine and national security industries are only the more dramatic illustrations of destructive production.²⁵ Although turning loss over to mourning and melancholia may yield relations that are variously static or dynamic, stultifying or generative, they still generally presume a time and world after loss. To say nothing of the very promise of an end to loss: Christina Sharpe writes of “chattel slavery and its afterlives, which are unfolding still,” “How do we memorialize an event that is still ongoing?”²⁶ Staying in the wake-work, inhabiting that Fanonian “zone of non-Being,” is made difficult by promises of redemption and creativity—the wishful thinking of our age, Lacan had said. What about the destruction of loss, or its generalization?

Talal Asad observes that “we simply don’t have a language now to speak adequately of the changes in which we live and the threats we face. To develop such a language one requires not only thought but also practical conditions for its development. But the time of danger is different from the time required to meet it practically.”²⁷ That is, Asad does not presume that developing a language adequate to the present will somehow yield enough time to forestall its unfolding. Between our straitened time and inadequate language, it is tempting to either relinquish the present or to reserve it, to condemn fetishistic attachments or celebrate melancholic ones. The essays in this volume do neither: they explore the permutations of loss while remaining attentive to the history of destruction.²⁸ Our contributors write from multiple vantages across varied archives and sites for thought. We are grateful for their offering a set of terms and specific coordinates for thinking the destruction of loss.

3.

The figure of erosion gathers the first contributions to this conversation. In considering environmental and ecological destruction, loss is incontrovertible. But there, too, efforts to ground loss end up losing ground (hence “erosion”): the end

of a habitable earth for humans troubles fetishistic attachments, evacuating the stubbornness of loss, since it offers a temporality outside of human attachments in its irreversible destruction.²⁹ It reminds us that melancholic attachments to loss are never merely matters of choice.³⁰ In her address to world leaders at the United Nations Climate Action Summit on September 23, 2019, Greta Thunberg, then 16 years old, stated as much: “You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I’m one of the lucky ones.”³¹ Underlying Thunberg’s indictment of policy, institutions, and individuals is a deep sense of loss—the theft of dreams, childhood, environment, and possibilities. This conclusion is heightened when we remember that environmental destruction can lead to the end of loss as such. To be more blunt, there is no possibility of lost dreams or childhood if the very conditions of habitation are destroyed. But this apocalyptic vision remains utopian in its imagination of an end rather than the further spiraling of forms of trauma, violence, and inequality. The ongoing catastrophe, marked by the excess of affect central to melancholia, creates new subjects such as “the exhausted,” “the expendable,” and “the childhoodless children” distributed across political distinctions and relations to loss.³²

The question of how to deal with mounting losses is certainly not new, as histories of colonialism, slavery, and genocide teach us. In fact, the theoretical presupposition of a universality to ecological destruction can elide how it is grafted onto and further reinscribes existing hierarchies. Indeed, scholars have forcefully examined how loss, pollution, and environment cannot be divorced from ongoing colonial relations.³³ Rather than simply denouncing pollution writ large, we must consider existing and potential relations in their specificity.³⁴ However, this is a specificity that is not opposed to the abstract so much as directed at blurring the very distinction between “universal” and “particular.” It also reframes the apocalyptic discourse that often frames environmental degradation.³⁵

The essays in the “Erosion” section tackle such specificities on a planetary scale in relation to the destruction of loss. In her essay, “Lessons for Losing,” Mary Louise Pratt centers the loss of language and environmental catastrophe to ask, “How do you live such loss?” and “How can such a losing be lived?” To answer these questions, Pratt turns to playwright and novelist Tomson Highway’s relation to the Cree language and the environmental writer Elizabeth Rush’s work on the rising seas. Pratt finds in Highway and Rush an address that centers survivance tied to laughter and joy in the face of colonial destruction and the killing of language and place.³⁶ “Mourning, grief, and remorse do not energize people to live well, or at all,” she writes. Instead, these authors articulate ways to “live loss in a clear-eyed and affirmative way.”

Similar questions animate Sophie Chao’s “Spent Earth.” Chao explores the travails of spent earth, a chemically unstable waste product created in the bleaching

process during oil refining. In her discussions with her Marind friends, Chao learns that even spent earth has to be mourned, as it has been incapacitated and made destructive. “My friends would often sit or crouch beside spent earth, express their anger, sadness, and grief towards it, and sing and story the destruction and loss that both create it and harm it.” Chao insists on the “granular specificity of loss and its reach in an epoch of planetary unraveling.” What is spent earth? The answer is tied to habitation, extraction, exhaustion, and complicity—all of which require grounding ourselves in the shadow of the plantation that variously envelops us all.

The lure of the epochal could lead us to call this moment a “tipping point” that “opens an unknown horizon.” But, as Abraham Weil cautions in his essay, “Transversal Tipping Points,” this figure already relies upon a certain adequation of the present. Weil’s essay stages an encounter between three so-called tipping points—racial integration in US cities (1950s), transgender politics in the United States (2014), and the onset of mass coral bleaching (2016)—to pose “transversality” as a possible approach to think across “environmental, social, and psychic ecologies.” That is, Weil seeks to link topographies while remaining attuned to specificity. In transversal thinking, we come to understand that destruction and renewal do not follow a logic of emergency, but an indifferent regeneration that emanates from within.

In “This Is Why We Protect the Rivers, This Is How We Love the Rivers,” the final essay of this section, Kali Rubaii offers seven evocative images of water as simultaneously toxic and life-giving. For the Iraqi “river protectors” whom she engages, “river death is an inevitable and irreparable loss. Theirs is a commitment without alternatives. Living well and dying well are the same project.” This project reconfigures other distinctions. In one passage, for instance, unwashed corpses and torture are juxtaposed with a playful scene at the river, as past and present lose focus amid laughter and play. For Rubaii, these are scenes of the “inevitable and irreparable,” “that realm of irreversible destruction.” Like Pratt, Chao, and Weil, Rubaii asks: How do we inhabit this eroding place? How does one love “at the frayed ends of time”? Beyond a quick distinction between mourning and melancholia, these authors focalize the difficulty of grounding loss while losing ground.

4.

Returning to the conditions of the Global War on Terror that opened this introduction, Anila Daulatzai and Sahar Ghumkhor are concerned with the equation of compounding loss and dissolving futures. Their essay, “Afghanistan, Racial Melancholia, and Loss that Exceeds Loss,” examines the melancholic space of psychic limbo inhabited by Afghans today: against ongoing harm and injury, and against a public desire to detail and re-enact Afghan losses, “the destruction wrought upon the individual and collective selves is legible but yet to be grieved, named,

classified, or acknowledged.” Daulatzai and Ghumkhor trace the complex relationship between the white racial melancholia of imperial innocence and the Afghan racial melancholia of imperial assimilation. In this topography, “the symbolic world for Afghans is racially organized on culturally impoverished and psychically alienating terms.” Their effort to articulate the destruction of loss refuses both the secular-liberal desire for confessional subjects of injury and the concomitant desire to discover a resurgent agency. Still, they ask, “When we are summoned to evidence Afghan pain and Afghan injury, for whose recognition do we catalogue this loss and to what end?”

But what has life after catastrophe? What survives and what is destroyed? Importantly, how does one answer this question after destruction—and in what language? One could say, following Marc Nichanian, that these are questions posed to surviving languages by sovereign ones. Surviving languages, Nichanian writes, are “obliged to reflect constantly on their own status, to redefine themselves continually in relation to sovereign languages and to the sovereignty of languages in general.”³⁷ These are the difficult questions that he centers in his essay, “Le souverain, le survivant, le dernier homme” / “The Sovereign, the Survivor, the Last Man,” published here in both French and English. Nichanian argues that Georges Bataille refuses the double bind of the subject as both lawmaking and subject to law. Bataille turns to Kafka as he works through the problem of the survivor-sovereign.³⁸ He comes to an abrupt understanding: “The last man is the subject *without a witness* [*le sujet sans témoin*], and thus the opposite of any subject.” This paradox condenses the formulation “the destruction of loss,” where each term of this genitive phrase solicits a framing context that the other term denies.

Such questions about the survivor invoke ghosts and specters. In “The Ghost and the Censor: Loss in Parallax,” Emily Ng reorients the problem of survival by turning to modern China and Mo Yan’s novel *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*. Drawing on Buddhist cosmopolitics, she argues that witnessing loss, surviving, must be understood by multiplying lives and letting go. Ng teases out this relation to loss by taking a parallax view that juxtaposes the ostensibly knowable historical time of the village with the censor’s formal sign of unknowability—both of which are inflected by ghosts’ global circulation across disparate reading communities. For Ng, the parallax view demands “turning with the dissonant reverberations of loss, in their singularities as well as their contending abstractions.” Rereading Freud, Ng suggests a way of loosening the conceptual hold of mourning and melancholia. In place of making loss transparent, Ng asks: how is the unspeakable staged?

Put another way, what are the conditions of the experience of the unspeakable—or danger? Gil Anidjar also turns to Freud in “That Great Mother of Danger.” Rather than take destruction and loss as “risks” run as part of history, to be

calculated and calibrated, Anidjar contrasts danger: where risk augments, danger subtracts. Anidjar notes that “the former implies a gain or a win in the offing,” whereas “the other constitutes nothing more than a motion and an experience toward . . . nothing” (ellipsis in the original). Rather than danger as tied to a fear of death, Anidjar tracks danger in the fear of loss. He turns then to Freud’s figure of the mother, who is produced as given and concrete by a “double, iterated loss”: only when we lose our “originary loss,” when we lose “she who will become our mother,” can she return as our mother. The mother then is an iteration, like loss, like danger.

For colonial regimes and their anticolonial nationalist counterparts, danger became localized in a figure of “the peasant” marked by an incapacity for citizenship. In her essay, titled “Alterable Geographies: In/Humanity, Emancipation, and the Spatial Poetics of *Lo Abigarrado* in Bolivia,” Mareike Winchell revisits the figure of the peasant and returns to the question of political futures foreclosed in the earlier essays. She asks: how do losses become legible within established frameworks for addressing injustice? Following the work of scholars such as Rinaldo Walcott and Tiffany Lethabo King, Winchell centers “narratives of shared pleasure and subversion.” These refuse the temporality of belatedness or anticipation that structure liberal understandings of emancipation. Her interlocutors do not take loss as given but recast it in ethical and political terms. Therefore, subjection also *generates* “political projects defined by a critical reckoning with the contemporary afterlives of earlier labor violence.” These unfinished projects are neither oppositional nor conciliatory; they demand neither human perfectibility nor historical closure. They take place in the fault lines of loss.

Sometimes history disappears into the fault lines of loss—or it is made to do so. In “Manic History: Losing Children, Losing Memory,” Christopher Bracken underscores the Canadian settler state’s active labor to forget the history of its own violence. The essay opens with the 2013 film written and directed by the late Jeff Barnaby (d. 2022), *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*, which “stages the dilemma of an Indigenous community mourning intergenerational losses in the wake of the settler mania for losing the history of those losses.” Bracken explains that under Duncan Campbell Scott’s Ministry of Indian Affairs, residential school attendance was made compulsory in the name of saving Indigenous children. Scott was also a poet whose sonnets portrayed the doom of Indigenous children. Bracken reads Scott’s policy and poetry together for how this “poetic-administrative project to assimilate Indigenous people into the white body politic” manically relieves the settler ego from self-reproach.

Milad Odabaei’s “Sickness of the Revolution: Loss, Fetishism, and the Impossibility of Politics” also examines the psychic displacement of a historical object. The Iranian revolution is routinely fetishized as the eventual loss of history, offering in its wake only a politics of recuperation. In contrast, Odabaei reads a recurring

dream of parricide in the generation of the children of revolutionaries as a form of “anthropological defamiliarization.” The dream reveals that fetishization of “the revolution” (monumentalized as the scene of an originary betrayal, for instance) forecloses a political relation to “the experience of history,” namely to “the past as past and therefore to the future.” Odabaei invites us to consider the contingency of loss by inhabiting the dream, a speculative horizon that releases fetishistic attachments to the revolution.

The trajectory of or release from history is also at stake in Amaryah Shaye Armstrong’s “Losing Salvation: Notes toward a Wayward Black Theology.” Armstrong queries the historical problem of salvation and its ties to emancipation, secular and Christian, from the vantage point of black studies and black theology. Rather than simply rejecting black theology as a lost cause in grappling with loss, tied as it is to Christian forms of redemption, she demonstrates that a “wayward, rather than confessional, form of black theology is already operative in realms of black studies that are nontheological.” Armstrong compellingly argues that this form of black theology, active in the ostensibly secular work of (among others) Saidiya Hartman and Christina Sharpe, is tied to estrangement and exile. Such “gnosis in blackness” foregrounds “the theological rebellion that is immanently generated from black feminist encounters with redemption’s failure.”

As Kee Howe Yong shows in “For We Are Also What We Lost,” the historical failure of emancipation opens multiple registers of loss in Thailand’s far south. His Malay Muslim interlocutors inherit a history of struggle and a violent present whose implications are experienced unevenly. Some recall the loss of a glorious past. Others locate the loss in the exhaustion of their everyday relations. Still others find historical loss to actually constitute the present. Across these cases, Yong demonstrates the ethnographic instability of the relationship between loss and history. Indeed, the history of loss itself is lost between these interlocutors: although they are all “captives of the present,” all betrayed by their political and religious leaders, their mutually exclusive apprehensions of loss dissolve the possibility of a common historical horizon.

Presented here in both Spanish and English, Juan Carlos Medel’s “El milagro, el despertar, y la fiesta: Reflexiones para un Chile postneoliberal” / “The Miracle, the Awakening, and the Celebration: Reflections for a Postneoliberal Chile” grapples with the recent political horizon of Chile. For Medel, the uprisings of 2019 augur a return to the Pinochet regime and a loss that cannot be mourned in neoliberal Chile. Drawing on the work of Byung-Chul Han while also critiquing it, Medel asks: How do self-realization and self-destruction coincide in Chile? How do neoliberal competition and capitalist accumulation differentiate between winners and losers, producing exhaustion and burnout? In the end, we are asked to consider the question of dignity against market-assigned value. But dignity cannot merely be tied to

recuperating what was lost. Instead, Medel asks, how does one interrupt a state and institute new social horizons while asserting a right to mourn?

Deepti Misri further investigates the relationship between recuperation and the right to mourn in “Paradise Lost? Memorializing Kashmiri Pandit Loss in *Ghar ka Pata*.” She examines the memorial aesthetics and politics of a diasporic film that mobilizes a family visual archive to document how Kashmiri Pandits remember collective loss. Beyond the film’s “fading sense of home,” Misri shows that its “fixation on vertical genealogical descent at the level of both blood and memory leads it to enshrine a bordered and vulnerable Kashmiri Pandit family, obscuring the violence of the family itself and also ruling out a horizontal examination of Kashmiri Pandits’ historical relationship to Kashmiri society at large.” In doing so, she raises the problem of competing formations of loss. How might Kashmiri Pandits relate to Kashmir other than as a lost object? And what political future would such a relation augur?

The issue concludes with an artistic feature by Lebanese visual artist Ali Cherri. (One of these images also graces the cover of this volume.) These images are excerpted from a project titled *Dead Inside*, comprising vibrant watercolor sketches of dead creatures: fish, foxes, squirrels, birds—and, oddly, vehicles. The changing guises of death—as an interruption of life, the realization of life, perhaps a line of flight—across these images blur the boundary between life and its other side. What is the emergence of death from within life, or death as the realization of life, in the absence of its location? What form of loss is this, without qualification or context? By the end of the series of images, passing from feathered to furred body to finally the rusted hulks of crashed automobiles, another form has come into view: an image of death-in-life.

Rather than adjudicating the viability of mourning or melancholia, which here come under pressure as conceptual frameworks for working through loss, we note that destruction includes destruction of the form of loss itself. Beyond the politics of mourning or melancholia, their normalcy or pathology aside, generalized destruction signals the fundamental ambivalence at the heart of loss. The destruction of loss questions these possibilities of relation: creative and fetishized, displaced and static. By centering the destruction of loss, the essays in this volume express a critical urgency that remains both indispensable and insufficient.

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Acknowledgments

We thank each of the authors for thinking with us through the destruction of loss; the *Critical Times* editorial team — especially Breana George, Samera Esmeir, Jessica Ling, Ramsey McGlazer, and Kyra Sutton — for their support through the preparation of this journal issue; and Ananda Abeyssekara, Anne-Marie McManus, Cecilia Palmeiro, and Elizabeth Povinelli for contributing to this conversation. And we thank Yannik Thiem for their early discussions in conceptualizing the project.

Notes

1. Antoon, *Corpse Washer*, 184. Hereafter cited in the text as *CW*.
2. Pandolfo, *Impasse of the Angels*, 181.
3. Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 59.
4. In the penultimate paragraph of “Faith and Knowledge,” in the section titled “. . . and pomegranates” (. . . *et grenades*), Derrida offers this “emblem of a still life” (*emblème d’une nature morte*, literally “a dead nature”): “an opened pomegranate, one Passover evening, on a tray” (100). This “emblem” appears at the end of an essay concerned with originary and irreducible duplicity, binding, and splitting, in the section promising to explode the general premises that encrypt knowledge away from the realm of the living. The emblem bears dangerously opposing values together: myth and memory, calculation and the incalculable, destruction and institution. In Michael Naas’s gloss, Derrida’s Passover pomegranate is an emblem of exilic loss and possible recovery, already divided, exposed, and abandoned in its mortal nature (Naas, “Pomegranate Seeds and Scattered Ashes,” 227).
5. Derrida, *Life Death*; Marovich, *Sister Death*.
6. Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, 259.
7. We have each explored how specific political-theological traditions grapple with loss and generalized destruction. See Iqbal, *Ethnographies of Tribulation*; Judge, “Prophetic Sovereign.”
8. Mourning reorients the longing for the lost object, even though there is understandable opposition to the withdrawing of such attachments. As Freud writes, “People never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them” (“Mourning and Melancholia,” 244).

9. Melancholia can therefore function as an appropriation of loss itself, in which the ego defends against loss. For example, Juliana Schiesari writes that a melancholic attachment is a “narcissistic fixation on the loss, wherein a certain kind of satisfaction is gleaned in the idealization of loss as loss, in the perpetuation and even capitalization of that sense of loss” (*Gendering of Melancholia*, 52).
10. Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 246.
11. Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 169–70.
12. Eng and Kazanjian, “Mourning Remains,” 2, 8. For “the politics of the future,” see Kazanjian and Nichanian, “Between Genocide and Catastrophe,” 139.
13. Scott, *Omens of Adversity*, 100.
14. McClintock, “Ghost Forest.”
15. Eng and Kazanjian, “Mourning Remains,” 4.
16. Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 120–21.
17. Khanna, *Dark Continents*, 30.
18. For an incisive account of the domesticating role of context in intellectual history, see (among others) El Shakry, “Rethinking Arab Intellectual History.”
19. Comay, “Sickness of Tradition,” 90.
20. Comay, “Sickness of Tradition,” 90.
21. Hook, *(Post)Apartheid Conditions*, 200.
22. Lacan, “On Freud’s ‘Trieb,’” 722.
23. Anidjar, “Destruction of Thought,” 308.
24. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*. The literature on such apparatuses is vast. For example, Michelle Murphy notes the relation between family planning and capitalism. She writes, “According to a capitalist experimentality, the world is open to perpetual rearrangements and losses, where new conditions for creating value can always be generated even, perhaps even especially, out of the very precarity that is its externalized side effect” (*Economization of Life*, 93).
25. As Joseph Masco argues, the United States has coupled nuclear technologies with a national security culture organized around fear, “a perverse orchestration of international and domestic politics through visions of an abrupt collective end” (*Future of Fallout*, 2–3). Tim Choy calls this “anticipatory nostalgia” (*Ecologies of Comparison*, 13).
26. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 20.
27. Iqbal and Asad, “Thinking about Method,” 214.
28. Walter Benjamin’s enigmatic “destructive character,” in his short essay of the same name, “obliterates even the traces of destruction” (542). Gil Anidjar comments that this is “the end of history and of narrative order (subject or agent, active verb, passive object)” (“Political History of Destruction,” 157).
29. Chakrabarty, *Climate of History in a Planetary Age*.
30. Hook, *(Post)Apartheid Conditions*, 169.
31. Thunberg, “Greta Thunberg’s Speech.”
32. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*; Chaudhary, “Subjectivity, Affect, and Exhaustion.”
33. For example, Max Liboiron writes that “pollution is best understood as the violence of colonial land relations rather than environmental damage, which is a symptom of violence” (*Pollution Is Colonialism*, 6–7).
34. Liboiron does not mark a distinction between the two. See Liboiron, *Pollution Is Colonialism*, 153.

35. Choy, *Ecologies of Comparison*, 27. This is an important point since it allows us to rethink the dilemmas of what Peter Osborne calls “epistemological melancholia” that arise from the problem of abstraction (“Reproach of Abstraction,” 22).
36. Vizenor, *Survivance*.
37. Consider this response by Nichanian when asked to identify the surviving language of which he writes:
 Ach. This is where the problem lies. . . . You understand, don’t you? If we say: this language is Armenian, we will have to go into an infinity of details and explanations. Which Armenian? Why is it a surviving language? What is a surviving language? It will be endless, or simply incomprehensible. And irrelevant to the topic. And the subject is still the “last man.” How do you put yourself in the place of the “last man”? How do you manage to incarnate death, I mean: to incarnate the dead witness? (Marc Nichanian, pers. comm., December 10, 2022)
38. Kafka had pondered these paradoxes. As he writes in his diary entry of October 19, 1921: “Anyone who cannot cope with life while he is alive needs one hand to ward off a little his despair over his fate . . . but with his other hand he can jot down what he sees among the ruins, for he sees different and more things than the others; after all, he is dead in his own lifetime and the real survivor” (*Diaries*, 394). We thank Judith Butler for bringing this passage to our attention.

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