From Generic Tragedy to Political Genres: Stow's *American Mourning*

George Shulman

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sary to "resist any accommodation to the ruling powers" (255). This "dialectic of realism and utopia" (254) reframes the crisis of socialist politics, which set the foundation for the ethical turn, as a problem of defeat rather than one of loss (211).

As I take it, one upshot of this recasting of loss is to reconstitute democratic socialism as a political horizon against which the theorizing of a political ethic and political responsibility takes place. But if the ethical turn diagnosed and emerged from substantive internal fissures and crises within socialist theory and practice, reinvigorating the latter requires a more thorough rethinking of its limits as an orienting political project and a reconsideration of the ways that the defeats of socialism have opened up new political horizons. For instance, the decline of the socialist vision of redistributive justice was followed especially in the postcolonial world with the language of reparative and transitional justice. To be sure, these new languages participate in the moralization of politics that Vásquez-Arroyo identifies with the ethical turn. However, they have also created the conditions for a robust debate about reparations for transatlantic slavery and native genocide.[1]

Indeed, what is striking about post-Cold War invocations of responsibility is they have issued in the militaristic humanitarianism Vásquez-Arroyo critiques while also inspiring novel demands for reparations for historical injustice. *Political Responsibility* provides us with a conceptual vocabulary to discern the differences between these two projects, but their historical co-emergence in the aftermath of socialism requires further reflection.

Note

1. For example, following on the heels of the successful reparation claims for British torture in Kenya during the Mau Mau rebellion, fourteen Caribbean states sued Britain, France, and the Netherlands for reparations for slavery. See, David Scott, "Preface: Debt, Redress," *small axe* 43 (March 2014): vii-x.

From Generic Tragedy to Political Genres: Stow's *American Mourning*

George Shulman

Simon Stow, *American Mourning: Tragedy, Democracy, Resilience*. Cambridge University Press, New York 2017, 234 pp. ISBN: 978–1–316–61058–9

Simon Stow rightly argues that American politics could become more democratic if suffering and loss could be represented in ways that were more self-reflective, and less self-defeating. His new book's focus on practices of mourning

is an illuminating way to think through a generative alternative. Despite the temptation to give up on national politics altogether, I appreciate his effort to use mourning to imagine how national attachment might be reshaped into a more democratically constructive form of political subjectivity. His discussion of eulogy and tragedy shows that any effort to be politically effective entails questions of genre, because HOW people speak shapes WHAT they can and cannot say, or do. His rhetorical approach to texts ranging from Greek tragedy and Thucydides to American political speeches and journalism on 9/11 and military funerals allows Stow to model an important kind of political theorizing that rejects simple binaries between the theoretical and literary as well as the political and aesthetic. As he recovers local examples of American political speech to contest dominant forms of mourning (and the destructive forms of nationhood they enable) Stow also models the agonistic approach to democratic politics that he endorses theoretically. These themes and approach make *American Mourning* both timely and important.

Stow's ambition is to analyze the dominant way that American elites and media understood and responded to the 9/11 attack. The book both diagnoses and addresses a subsequent politics of permanent war ("on terror"), which threatens the democratic values and practices it claims to defend. The title *American Mourning* shows Stow addressing this national subject by attributing its pathologies to the wrong kind of mourning, and by proposing that the right kind of mourning might foster an ambivalently self-critical and democratically resilient kind of nationalism. Let me outline the steps in the argument.

First, because loss and death are inescapable aspects of life, and mourning is a universal social practice, the premise of the book "is that the stories we tell about the dead help shape the political outcomes of the living" (2). Mourning practices are pervasive, pedagogic, and potentially transformative; how we grieve, including what lives we count as grievable, is thus a politically consequential site of both subject-formation and contest about collective life. Because "public mourning" always "employs grief for political ends," and because the goal of political theory is "to allow citizens to do consciously what they have hitherto done unconsciously,"(2) the "diagnostic" and "prescriptive" task of the book is to distinguish between "democratically productive and unproductive mobilizations of grief"(5). Stow thus diagnoses the dangers in forms of mourning he variously describes as "nationalist," "romantic," and nostalgic," and he prescribes a "tragic" alternative which, he claims, would be better for democratic flourishing. His political hope is that "ritualized moments of shared national focus," if "properly cultivated" by a tragic form of mourning, could be "employed as a source of critical reflection on and as a corrective to problematic aspects of our democratic life and politics"(16). In this regard his assumption is that "patriotism, sacred space, and public mourning are not in themselves problematic, but rather HOW we love our country, WHAT we do in her sacred spaces, and HOW we mourn her losses; far from sapping the polity of its democratic energies, these activities can be and historically have been democratically productive"(191).

Approached diagnostically, the dominant kind of mourning is a symptom; it expresses an "uncritical" and "unreflective" nationalism that reproduces self-congratulatory and sanitizing celebrations of victory, and, in response to injury, false hopes that violence could restore our pre-injury condition or pro-

tect us from future injury (197) In contrast to this kind of mourning, which governed the cultural and political response to 9/11, a "tragic form of mourning" is "democratically productive" because it "alerts the polity to the tragedy of its condition"(191). For Stow that tragic condition is defined not only by conflicting standpoints and mortal vulnerability to loss, but also and perhaps especially by excess, as a "grief-wrath" (or *menis*) that embraces self-righteous vengeance, and more broadly as excessive investment in one-sidedness (35). Whereas the bad form of mourning secures blind self-regard and violently defends idealized sovereignty, tragic mourning empathizes with the suffering of enemies, as if to acknowledge the losses that even victors will undergo, or in their own blindness, bring on themselves (26,59/61).

In one register, Stow defends tragic mourning in pragmatic terms: it "promises a more considered realist response to the actions of the nation's foes, encouraging a critical perspective more akin to that of tragedy's audience than that of its protagonists"(21). It is "realist" because, by grasping the tragic character of life and the "shared humanity" entailed by subjection to it, it helps citizens resist the "excess" associated with demonizing of adversaries, self-righteous one-sidedness, and unnecessary violence (21). In this regard, Stow persuasively argues that mourning practices really might affect how citizens shape foreign policy, conceive military service, and receive returning veterans (12). But *American Mourning* is "ambitiously prescriptive"(2) in a second register because it supports tragic mourning with an impassioned defense of "mortalist humanism" as an ethical frame for political life (58). Stow argues that tragic mourning is "predicated on and supportive of" the claim that "in the face of death, human beings achieve a form of equality as moral and political agents," and that democratic politics "presupposes" this humanism (63/98/101). The text shifts from specific claims about mourning to bold and risky claims about the relation of politics and agonism to "ethics" and (mortalist) "humanism." What joins these two dimensions is Stow's abiding concern to resist any narrowing of the frame defining grievable life, but while the discussion of events, practices, and texts is richly instructive, the engagement with humanism pitches the book to another level of significance, to engage the important debate among political theorists about ethics and politics

On the one hand, Stow moves from one dimension to the other through readings of Pericles' *Oration* and Thucydides' *History*, Aeschylus' *The Persians* and *The Eumenides*, but also Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address," as well as speeches and sermons in the "African-American tradition of tragic mourning." He thus claims that mortalist humanism need not be imposed from the outside, as if by a philosopher-king, but is an "indigenous" tradition of tragic mourning that citizens can renew and elaborate to contest the dominating forms of mourning and nationalism (20). On the other hand, he argues not only against a certain kind of nationalism, but also with and against theorists—Bonnie Honig and Nicole Loraux are key interlocutors—who worry that "the ethical turn" or "mortalist humanism," depending on how it is interpreted, can ignore or displace too much of politics and endanger the agonism essential to vibrant democratic practices. Stow's large theoretical and political ambition is to insist on a fruitful synergy, not an opposition, between democratic agonism and humanist ethics. This important debate gives the book real significance, though as I will suggest, his claims about ontology and ethics—and his view

of genre and tragedy—are complicated by the politics of race, which he rightly emphasizes, but may mismeasure.

Stow frames and enters this debate by arguing that human beings must be taught (even "trained") to face rather than disavow their tragic condition (63). Stow approvingly quotes James Finlayson on the priority of the ontological over aesthetic or political creativity: "the question of the tragic enjoys a certain priority over the question of tragedy. The works of theater we call tragedies exist because of the tragic, not vice versa" (62). By this openly anti-performative view, life generates art, or art follows life, but not the other way around. For Stow, the inference is that exposure to properly tragic forms of theater or mourning enables us to face our ontological (tragic) condition, and develop a "humanism" that is "democratically productive" because it chastens one-sidedness while fostering inclusive reciprocity and self-critical subjectivity. Tragic theater or mourning instantiate a "democratically productive form of humanism," he argues, that "does not turn away from action or seek to overcome conflict," but turns potentially excessive antagonism into democratic agonism (105).

It is not immediately apparent, but upon a second reading of the text, I realized that Stow configures the ethics-politics relation in two ways. In one, he casts mortalist humanism as "a necessary *precursor* to democratic politics;" "acknowledgment of shared humanity … makes politics possible" because it fosters conflict "between fellow human beings" or "members of an imagined or actual community," whereas "the absence of humanism makes conflict something occurring between members of different species "(132/105). But a second configuration depicts a "potentially agonistic tension between the appeal to the conflictual aspects of the political and the universalistic appeal to the human," which "might transform conflict without necessarily negating or overcoming it" (131). Either way, Stow insists his point is "not to overcome conflict but rather to tame it in a more productively agonistic fashion" (135). Still, I see two, related problems with these arguments. On the one hand, whether moralist humanism is cast as the philosophical grounding or as the ethical supplement that agonism requires, I resist the picture of ethics as external to, untouched by, and therefore able to contain the excessive or de-humanizing conflict Stow deems "democratically unproductive." On the other hand, I see important political differences between a humanist ethics conceived as a "precursor" to an agonist politics versus humanist ethics placed in "agonistic tension" with conflictual politics. Stow does not attend to the difference, but enlists both. The bigger problem, and these differences, appear in his account of race politics.

In his engaging discussion of Frederick Douglass speeches and African-American mourning practices, Stow claims "that African-Americans must first count as people before they can count as citizens" (99). Conversely, he construes black rhetoric, politics, and mourning as teaching mortalist humanism to whites. For Franz Fanon, Sylvia Wynter or Saidiyah Hartman, though, Enlightenment conceptions of the human rest as such on negation of black humanity. Claims about the human, defined by the not/less-than human, justify division and engender violence; every universality entails this remainder. These (post)colonial thinkers show how the reduction of some to animals, monsters, things—despite formal citizenship—is the unthought premise of

humanism; those marked as black *cannot* be recognized as subjects in the civilizational terms set by white supremacy, but also, these terms create a death-in-life, a burning house, for all of us, as Baldwin put it. For the black radical tradition, humanism is no remedy for the demonization or exclusion that Stow rightly opposes, but a contributing cause; it is a false universal irredeemably contaminated by white supremacy, by the violence and domination that Stow claims it transcends and can tame.

If racial domination is linked to humanism, and entails non-relation within relation, what politics should its excluded or targeted others enact? As Stow emphasizes, some try to persuade whites to see their humanity, invoking mortalist humanism to demand recognition as subjects, as in one version of civil rights politics. Stow is surely right to see "an African-American tradition of tragic and self-consciously political responses to loss"—and to see its appeal to humanism—in struggles against slavery, jim crow, and police violence. But as Douglass argued, as Du Bois came to see, and as Stow sometimes credits, if the problem is disavowal of domination, not ignorance, then a politics of "scorching irony," voicing a grief and rage whites deem "excessive," and not reasoned argument about humanity, is needed. Indeed, Bayard Rustin and Malcolm X agreed on little but that reluctant whites must be *coerced* into relations that might change hearts over time. Though they surely disagreed about how, for each, political agonism comes first and humanist ethics may (or may not) follow.

As many Black theorists and activists place politics *before* ethics, they also doubt the viability of civic inclusion through a politics focused on formal recognition of black humanity by the national state. A historic chorus of black voices has thus defended a locally-scaled, post-or-ante national politics of horizontal solidarity. They want mourning practices to sustain black militancy and solidarity in the face of white disavowal, not to teach whites ethics. (Though if whites want to teach themselves something from these practices, I am sure that would be a welcome development.) These radical voices do not necessarily disavow universalism in principle, but they approach that horizon not by appeals to formal rights recognized by the nation-state, but rather by practicing a resolutely political solidarity.

Stow's engagement with race thereby enriches a book framed mostly in terms of democratic states, war, and enemies: by the perspectival reversal that Stow values in tragedy, race troubles not only his claims about the relation of politics and ethics in how we define grievable life, but also his effort to categorically distinguish "productive" and "unproductive" ("properly cultivated" rather than "excessive") grief, anger, and one-sidedness. Who decides these categories, with what political purposes and effects? When are calls to "tame" conflict a form of repression, when a needed reminder about self-limitation? Who decides? From what subject position? With which values in mind? If ethics is invoked as if it resolves such questions, we foreclose the contingency that is the real ground of vibrant agonism; we will not emphasize enough how an ethic requires mobilizing political power to sustain and enforce it. If we see ethics as an element of political judgment, as one criteria among others, our practice is enriched. Sometimes Stow treats ethics as one such element; at others it is the ground. Either way, the limits of the civil rights movement reflect the fateful dependence of ethics on politics.

Stow does face these issues when he considers the relation of the historic civil rights movement to Black Lives Matter. He depicts "an older black mourning tradition" in decline, partly because of its success in promoting civic inclusion, but also because the black church has been taken over by the prosperity gospel and younger people are increasingly absent. In Stow's view, BLM "eschews the tragic understanding of hope embodied by its precursor... in favor of a more focused and vehemently expressed anger," but still "seeks to establish [black] humanity through a politically focused form of mourning"(99). Against those who fear its anger, Stow says the "disruptive tactics and civil disobedience" of its precursor are "strategically employed" because it still "embodies another key element in the tragic mourning tradition—a democratically oriented politics of "mortalist humanism" (98). BLM relinquishes the "ambivalence" of the earlier movement, but it channels anger in "democratically productive" ways because it accepts the humanism that Stow calls "a necessary element of or precursor to meaningful democratic agonism"(102). Stow is right that BLM asserts a kind of (even mortalist) humanism, but it is also crucial to say that it does so not by the overt universalism he values, but rather by "scorching irony," a politically dramatic assertion of the unjust particularity of black death amidst the indifference of white life. Does it matter that the genre here is not even tragedy, the genre preferred by Stow, but rather, a post-biblical form of prophecy, or perhaps an emergent genre not yet nameable?

In Stow's view, life is a "tragic condition," and therefore we require "tragic" forms of art, and of mourning practices, that teach us to face reality with a "resilience" he considers the great gift of tragedy. As art should imitate life, so "the pedagogic function" of tragedy is "to help its audience avoid" the fate of characters brought down by hubris or excessive pathos and one-sidedness (122). Like many of us, Stow values tragedy for dramatizing finitude and ambivalence, but he also writes as if tragedy answers rather than poses questions about life, as if it gives a clear lesson to live by. He thus stands with Haemon, against the excessive one-sidedness of Antigone and Creon, but if both have views of the whole and what it should be, from what perspective do they look one-sided or excessive? Sophocles' play harbors a prophetic alternative to the tragic, though, in the voice of Tiresias, who wants to pay humanist respect to the dead, but also understands the importance of intemperate speech to power. It is then not clear whether Stow should assume that Sophocles stands with him. In making tragedy the vehicle of mortalist humanism, as if that ethic is the only valid lesson to draw from "tragic conditions," as if—indeed—tragedy has lessons, Stow moralizes, like many of us do when we specify political purpose for this art. When we didactically (unambivalently) teach the value of ambivalence we short-circuit the very experiences of suffering and irresolution that tragedy compels us to undergo. "Acknowledgment" then risks becoming merely cognitive insight about "our tragic condition," not a visceral surrender to it, and the valuable defense of an ethical frame for politics risks a "knowingness" that protects the very privilege and innocence we entrust tragedy to disrupt. *Any* of us writing about "tragedy" are caught in this paradox insofar as we make tragedy serve a pedagogic purpose.

As Stow's properly ambiguous account of Black Lives Matter also suggests, however, tragedy is not the only genre that apprehends the reality of life.

Finlayson says we create the genre of "tragedy" because life is "tragic" and good art imitates life, but maybe we perceive life as tragic because tragedies teach us to, whereas other genres make "life" a different object to apprehend, by rendering so-called tragic aspects in viscerally different ways or by foregrounding aspects of life and registers of experience devalued or foreclosed by tragedy. Despite my own attachment to tragedy as a genre, the claim that it is ontologically privileged, or uniquely necessary, denies how much life imitates art, and so the extent to which our ontology is an effect of our practice, not its ground.

What if our premise is that our sense of reality is inescapably mediated by genres? We can still deploy a genre of tragedy to trouble a nationalism framed by the genre of romance. Granting how tragedy troubles and not only supports the mortalist humanism Stow defends, we could also frame our politics -our investments, acts, and conflicts- by other genres, prophecy, say, or the comical irreverence of Groucho Marxism, Arendt's romance of natality, Wittgenstein's realism, or Wolin's allegory of fugitive contest with the iron law of oligarchy. What if we begin not with ontology or ethics, but instead by asking: what genres do we live, what aspects of reality do they make in/visible, and by what (mixing of) genres might we apprehend reality and live otherwise? To ask these questions is not to leave Stow's book but to suggest the range and urgency of the thinking it provokes about loss and genre, ethics and politics.

Behind Every Successful Entrepreneur of Himself is His Wife: Cooper's *Family Values*

Leigh Claire La Berge

Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism*. Zone Books, 2017 (hc) $29.95, 416 pp. February 2017 ISBN: 9781935408840

After a decade of critical-theory oriented books that approached neoliberalism broadly as a historical period (see David Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*) or as a dominant ideology (see Wendy Brown's *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*), scholars are now raising more discrete and exacting questions: what did self-proclaimed neoliberals do and how did they do it? Nancy MacLean's, *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for American* (2017), examines the work of neoliberal James M. Buchanan in the context of racial desegregation in Virginia after the Brown v. Board of Education decision. Quinn Slobodian's *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (2018) traces the rise of the neoliberals in the context of decolonization and growing interstate economic cooperation. Policy