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**EMERGENCY POETICS:**

**POSTWAR AMERICAN POETRY AND THE SHAPE OF PUBLIC CRISIS**

BY

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## **ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION**

Emergency Poetics:

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From the formalization of Cold War civil defense to the rise of homeland security, emergency management in the United States has always been structured by power and privilege. “Emergency Poetics and the Shape of Public Crisis” tracks how postwar poets have responded to this trajectory by illuminating crisis conditions at the margins of state-sponsored emergency powers. Historically, the project follows the legacy of civil defense, a Cold War security paradigm that prioritized domestic comfort and security in the face of geopolitical threats. This insular paradigm later served as the basis for handling natural disasters, public health crises, and terrorism—all forms of public emergencies, declared or otherwise, that have magnified social and cultural exclusions in the name of national security. While recent studies of poetry have focused on discrete crisis genres such as terror, climate change, or financial collapse, this study reveals how

multiple crisis genres are normalized and obscured, thus giving form to the lives and histories that have been rendered disposable along the way. I turn to a variety of poetic forms, from the shorter, witness-based poems of Denise Levertov and Essex Hemphill, to the longform multimodal experiments of Claudia Rankine and Cheena Marie Lo, to examine the way their experiments with address, temporality, citation, and constraint bring into view more historically attentive poetic modes of public care. By elevating forgotten bodies, affects, and temporalities outside the narrow frames of state-sponsored emergencies, these poets probe the limits of poetry's powers to imagine how crises are rendered socially, politically, and culturally legible.

Individual chapters focus on Denise Levertov's "empathic projection" of wartime experience, from the homefront to the distant violence waged in Vietnam, Essex Hemphill's elevation of the sensualized black gay body in protest of the federal government's burying of the AIDS epidemic, Claudia Rankine's catalogue of "lonely" subjects who are silenced by the racialized noise of the national security state, and Cheena Marie Lo's attention to the many forms of institutional and cultural neglect that magnify the devastation of "natural" disasters. These poets have a shared investment in extending the way poetic subjects are made imaginatively available as witnesses to disaster, members of communities, citizens of a nation, and imaginers of a world that endures beyond them. This is perhaps the most important outcome of an emergency poetics: to be more alert to possibilities for non-hierarchical survival, hope, solidarity, and exchange even when they may not be available in the politics of the present. In this way, emergency poetics make the most dangerous contours of normalized violence

visible in order to remake the terms of their exclusions—and, in turn, to remake the way we think about our capacity to care for others.

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United States Military Academy, followed by another year advising military cadets at Boston College. I am indebted to my former students for showing me how to be a better instructor and mentor. At West Point, many terrific colleagues gracefully (and sometimes, hilariously) modeled for me the kind of academic I want to be.

Long before graduate school, in what now feels like another life, I was many things: a cadet, an officer, a logistician, an administrator, a teacher. I learned quickly that the role of a teacher fit me best—but those other ways of being, and the many lifelong friendships formed along the way, have shaped the core of who I am. There are too many to thank in this space, but they know who they are. It is never lost on me that I remain rooted to the world through all of you. That sense of rootedness has made me a better scholar and teacher, and certainly a better person. Thank you for keeping me there.

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Finally, I am dedicating the culmination of this project to the memory of my grandmother, Stella Kam Moon Mew. She passed in November 2019, just as this project was gathering speed toward its conclusion. She would have been delighted to know that I finished that degree I'd been talking about for so long. I miss her terribly.



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## Introduction

What is poetry's relationship to state-sponsored crises—or, as we might call them in juridical terms, states of emergency? How do some emergencies come to matter more than others, and what impact has the history of formalized emergency response had on the way we imagine, describe, and respond to ongoing disasters? We might associate the term “emergency” with the declaration of collective pain and suffering, and the corresponding need to quickly intervene within the scope of a clearly delineated disaster event. The term emergency evokes associations with spectacular urgency, along with a sense that a crisis should be temporary if reacted upon quickly enough. Yet this is seldom how public emergencies function in contemporary American public life. In practice, there have been crushing political stakes for determining who and what counts most in a crisis—or, what counts as a crisis at all—thus making emergency management an exercise in power rather than one in public care.

These stakes have lasting consequences for the writing of poetry, too: as we shall see, the question of writing ethically responsible (and, therefore, politically engaged poetry) all too often emerges in American poetry in response to the major collective disaster conditions of its time. The poets in this study—Denise Levertov, Essex Hemphill, Claudia Rankine, and Cheena Marie Lo—reimagine the way crises are made socially, politically, and culturally legible in the postwar period. They experiment with range of poetic forms, from lyric self-expression, to documentary poetics and poetries of witness, to conceptualisms that trouble the subjects, historical scope, and duration of crisis. For these writers, poetic form is shaped by—and, in turn, has the potential to imaginatively reshape—the contours of national crisis discourse. Their work challenges

the totalizing hierarchies of emergency narratives, from the dominance of civil defense rhetoric in the midst of the Vietnam War, to the multiple discriminatory failures of the AIDS epidemic, to the excesses of the war on terror and the unchecked devastation of Hurricane Katrina. In so doing, these poets also expose some of the politics of postwar American poetic form: specifically, those that circulate around poetry's capacity to bear witness to crisis without capitulating to nationalist currents of security and spectacle.

This dissertation's period of study begins in the late sixties, with the infusion of Cold War civil defense sensibilities into the federal government's handling of natural disaster and public emergencies more generally. This history is important because it formalized the relationship between national crises and external threats to national security, with a particularly heavy emphasis on war. One useful place to begin teasing out its socio-political currents is in a 1968 Department of Defense pamphlet, titled "In Time of Emergency: A Citizen's Handbook on Nuclear Attack, Natural Disasters." While this was the latest in a series of pamphlets aimed at prepping citizens for nuclear attack, it was among the first to conceptualize emergency as a catch-all term for preventing or alleviating mass human suffering at the federal level.<sup>1</sup> By 1977, twenty-six million copies of "In Time of Emergency" were in circulation. Here are the pamphlet's opening lines:

A major emergency affecting a large number of people may occur anytime and anywhere.

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<sup>1</sup> See Davis, *Stages of Emergency*, which details the "prodigious array of free literature for mass distribution, most famously the 'Bert the Turtle' cartoon book for children in 1952, and in 1955 another illustrated pamphlet for adults with a similar style of line drawings ('Facts About Fallout'), followed by the more specialized 'Rural Family Defense' (1956), 'Facts about Fallout Protection' (1957), and 'The Family Fallout Shelter' (1959)," followed by "prolific literature on school fallout shelters" in the sixties (28).

It may be a peacetime disaster such as a flood, tornado, fire, hurricane, blizzard, or earthquake. It could be an enemy nuclear attack on the United States.<sup>2</sup>

This statement epitomizes a proactive, even paranoid, posture for a variety of threats—occurring “anytime and anywhere”—that is now commonly associated with state-sponsored emergencies. Originally motivated by the postwar memory of air raids and atomic bombs, the federal government’s articulation of constant, open-ended threats toward the civilian population drove the construction of a heretofore nonexistent national security apparatus. This apparatus formed the basis for what we now as emergency management.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the fifties and sixties, emergency management was defined and formalized in almost exclusively military terms, a trend that continued until the development of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in 1979. In the 1950s, the federal government established the National Security Resource Board, the Federal Civil Defense Administration, and the Office of Defense Mobilization.<sup>4</sup> These organizations formed the early models for civil defense, a Cold War security paradigm designed to bring the lessons learned from total war to the preparation of a civilian

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<sup>2</sup> *In Time of Emergency* 1.

<sup>3</sup> See Collier and Lakoff, “Distributed Preparedness,” which details the US’s response to strategic bombing in World War II (most of which was waged by the US itself). As Collier and Lakoff put it, “[p]ost-WWII civil defense efforts were, in some sense, the defensive counterpart of strategic bombing doctrine. US strategists began to see national territory from the vantage of an enemy in a total war—as a space of potential targets” (10).

<sup>4</sup> See Collier and Lakoff, “Distributed Preparedness,” and “Vital Systems Security.” Beginning with the 1947 National Security Act, the United States Strategic Bombing Survey, the National Security Resources Board (NSRB) and the Federal Civil Defense Administration (FCDA) and Office of Defense Mobilization (ODM) in 1950, early emergency planning efforts centered entirely around civil defense and later moved outward, in the sixties, to include a range of smaller emergency planning and response programs designed to handle matters of public health and natural disasters. These organizations were all consolidated into FEMA in response to a series of environmental disasters in the sixties and seventies.

population for nuclear war, a stateside emergency of unimaginable scope. The “Time of Emergency” pamphlet shows this paradox continues to show this influence: despite the foregrounding of natural disasters in its opening sentence, the majority of the pamphlet details personal protection and self-help measures in the event of nuclear attack and subsequent nuclear fallout.

In fact, the idea of “self-help”—or more accurately, self-reliance—is integrally and paradoxically bound up with the federal government’s early conceptualizing of emergency response. In 1950, a National Security Resources Board (NSRB) report, *United States Civil Defense*, featured the following illustration:

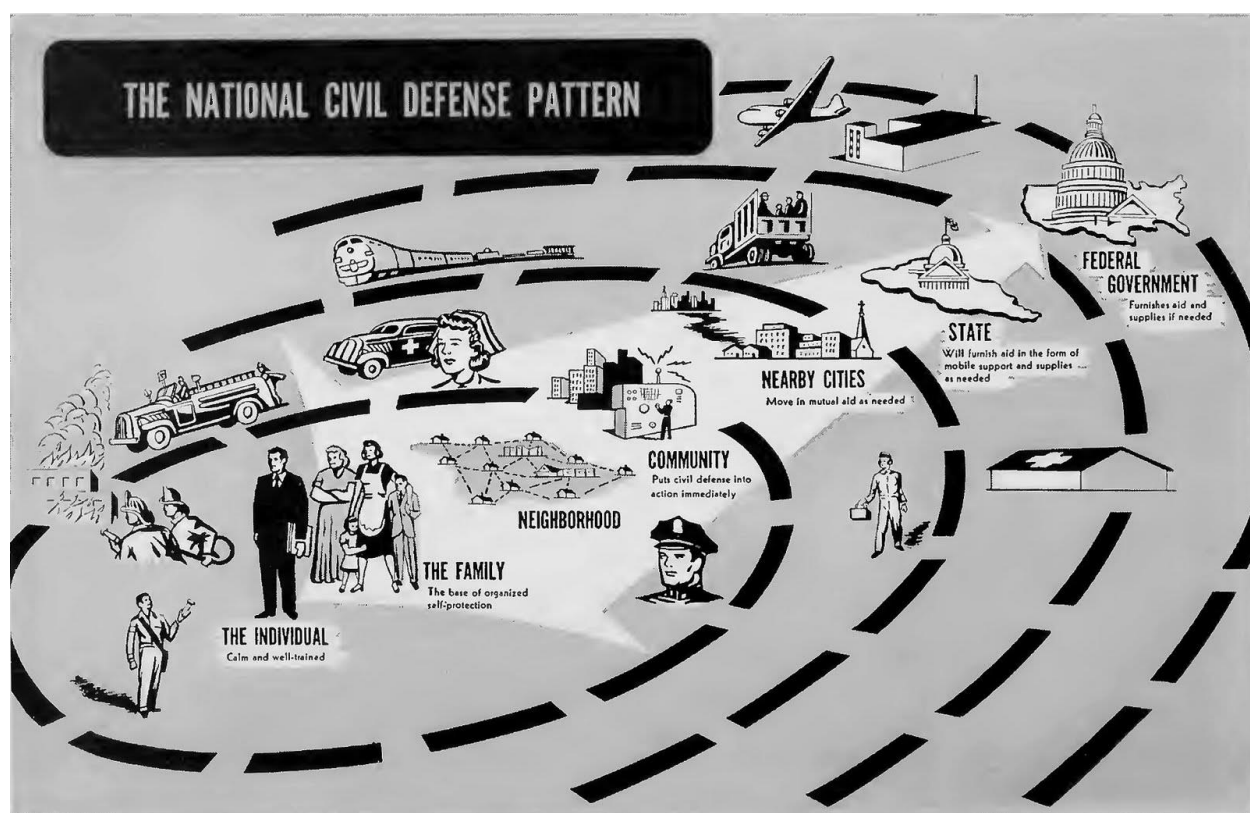


Figure 1: The National Civil Defense Pattern. Public Domain<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> NSRB, *United States Civil Defense* 2.

In this graphic, a man in a suit, along with members of his immediate family, comprise the centerpiece—or, to quote the caption, “the base of organized self-protection”—of the nation’s civil defense strategy. In addition to training children to “duck and cover” in their schools, early architects of civil defense urged suburban families to treat the single family home (animated with stocked pantries, underground bunkers, and first aid supplies) as the nucleus of the nation’s defense against “a sudden devastating attack.”<sup>6</sup> And rather than present this vision of suburban independence alongside a swift and robust government response, civil defense emphasized the independent actions of local, typically ad-hoc community alliances over city and state entities. These entities were poised to act only “as needed,” as the captions say—or, in the case of the federal government, only “if needed.”

The actual enactment of civil defense policies, of course, would have done little to protect citizens from nuclear attack—and the comforting vision of suburbia that bolstered the civil defense paradigm, furthermore, hardly spoke for the protection of *all* Americans. The layers of protection shown in the “National Civil Defense Pattern” assumed the uniform social and economic mobility of American citizens, along with accompanying assumptions about the availability of unified neighborhood and community networks of support. These assumptions matched the victory narrative after World War II that was bolstered by a prosperous wartime economy, the growth of nuclear families, and the idealized vision of suburbia—all of which concealed growing racial and class divisions, to include increasingly unequal access to housing, economic prosperity, social safety nets, and legal protections. Under the spell of what Elaine Tyler May called a postwar

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<sup>6</sup> *United States Civil Defense* 1.

“aura of unity,” even growing public anxiety about nuclear war could be assuaged (at least for some) by the reassuring tropes of the white, middle class nuclear family working to protect individuated visions of upward mobility.<sup>7</sup>

In this project, I take state-sponsored emergencies as my subject in order to examine their contradictions of total mobilization and presumed self-reliance under a national culture of emergency, which had unevenly shaped who and what gets made a subject of public crisis. While the establishment of FEMA in 1979 (and later, the Department of Homeland Security in 2003) presented the veneer of robust, cabinet-level government attention to declared national emergencies, the historical record of postwar emergency management has been uneven at best. Under what it called an “all-hazards approach,” FEMA applied civil defense’s loose networks of coordination among private and public agencies (in addition to stockpile programs, warning systems, and scenario-based exercises) to a broad range of crisis genres that included natural disasters and, eventually, matters of public health.<sup>8</sup> The movement from civil defense to “all hazards” was intended to streamline federal emergency functions, but it also made all emergencies generalizable, with little precedent for handling particular disaster scenarios.<sup>9</sup> Highly particularized crisis genres, each of which required unique forms of robust planning and

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<sup>7</sup> May writes in *Homeward Bound* that “Americans of all backgrounds rushed into marriage and childbearing, even though many of these newly formed families—most notably, large numbers of Americans of color—were excluded from suburbia” (8). In this way, “[r]acial and class divisions were concealed beneath an aura of unity in the aftermath of the war.”

<sup>8</sup> According to Andrew Lakoff in *Unprepared*, most civil defense measures were treated with “skepticism, both among national security strategists and within the general population, about the efficacy of civil protection measures when faced with the devastating prospect of nuclear attack. Nevertheless, the normative rationality underlying civil defense—the injunction to continually prepare for a catastrophic threat that might or might not arrive—along with many of the techniques it fostered, would eventually serve as the basis for a more general approach to health and security threats” (21).

<sup>9</sup> See Lakoff, *Unprepared* and Graff, “The Secret History of FEMA.”



anticipatory action, were thus uncomfortably folded into a reactionary national security apparatus. This narrow approach left little room for the consideration of long-standing crisis conditions such as crumbling infrastructure, declining social programs, widening economic inequality, and the stark racial and class divisions that are embedded in all the above.

The federal emergency apparatus's omission of any sustained consideration of social welfare is not a bug: it was implemented by design, with the idealization of both self-reliance and military mobilization at its core. As historian Michael Hogan has observed, the development of civil defense coincided with the beginning of a transition from a "welfare state" to a "warfare state."<sup>10</sup> The postwar political consensus toward small government, free market politics, anti-communist fears, and unfettered military spending (to include social safety nets exclusively for servicemembers) shrunk the very entitlement programs that would have shored up the possibility of securing mass public protection from major disasters.<sup>11</sup> This trend has only accelerated under neoliberal late capitalism, which further normalized the dominance of free market austerity, socioeconomic inequality, and military adventurism in the name of American

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<sup>10</sup> *A Cross of Iron* 119. See also Dauber's *The Sympathetic State*, which argues that the "disaster relief welfare state" was a standard feature of American life throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, in which federal government spending for victims of fires, flood, and hurricanes was considered standard practice and a moral necessity. This changed, of course, with the rise of national security state, which Lakoff, in "Preparing for the Next Emergency," describes a "huge military buildup" that "arguably took the place of what in Western Europe became the welfare state" (255).

<sup>11</sup> See Light, *From Warfare to Welfare* and Mittelstadt, *From Welfare to Workfare* and *The Rise of the Military Welfare State*. Mittelstadt observes in *The Rise of the Military Welfare State* that "in the 1970s and 1980s the military's social and economic supports grew while civilian social welfare contracted. Beginning in the 1970s and extending through the end of the century, a critique of the putative excesses and failures of the Great Society prompted retrenchment of civilian social welfare programs, especially, though not exclusively, for the poor. . . . Yet amidst government spending cuts and salvos against welfare clients and public workers, as well as the decline of private employment security, the military expanded its welfare functions" (5).

exceptionalism.<sup>12</sup> In this way, the culture of emergency produced by the national security state has been shot through with ideological opposition to a standard of public care that has long been on the decline.

To make matters worse, many of the nation's most persistent failures in social welfare exacerbate and prolong major crisis events, like epidemics and environmental disasters, at the expense of those most vulnerable to emerging and ongoing crisis events. These long-standing disparities, I argue, are evident in various forms of postwar poetry, which have extended the terms of lyric address, poetic witnessing, documentary poetics, and procedural constraints in order to reveal and reimagine emergency culture's focus on security, speed, and spectacle. Concerned with elevating the offstage violence done by state-sponsored crises, the poets of this project seek to imagine another state of emergency—one which draws closer attention to that which has been left out of the frame of emergency thinking as we know it.

### **States of Emergency**

The poets in this study give formal shape to what one might call a *real* state of emergency, across multiple crisis genres, that illuminates longer and slower emergency conditions under the shadow of the national security state. By invoking a "real state of emergency," I am echoing the words of Walter Benjamin in his eighth thesis on the philosophy of history: "[t]he tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a

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<sup>12</sup> See Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, and Aihwa Wong, *Neoliberalism as Exception*.

concept of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism.”<sup>13</sup> As Giorgio Agamben explains in his own gloss on this statement, Benjamin’s “real state of emergency” marks a crucial distinction between a “fictitious” emergency, or a state of exception that indefinitely suspends the rule of law, and the real conditions experienced by those most vulnerable to the disciplinary mechanisms of the state.<sup>14</sup> Benjamin’s words draw our attention to the slow-burning emergencies of dehumanization that include, but are not limited to, the state of exception—or, for that matter, to the experience of the individual suffering citizen. And by invoking “tradition[s] of the oppressed” as his inspiration, he recalls the potential for collective political imaginaries to exist outside the confines of state power.

To think this way means to treat emergencies as that which must be reclaimed from the politics of oppression, rather than by defining them entirely through the disciplinary language of the state. This means thinking differently from Agamben himself too. Agamben’s work has dominated contemporary scholarship on collective crisis, mainly because his 2005 book, *State of Exception*, came in timely response to the excesses of American power during the war on terror. By Agamben’s lights, *any* state of emergency forecloses the possibility of democratic functioning and human flourishing. For him, emergencies and state power are essentially synonymous terms. The problem with this lens, however, is that it eclipses the multiple temporal and subjective registers of contemporary crises—especially those that do not fall under the spectacular parameters of war and national security. It relies on the assumption that everyone is equally reduced

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<sup>13</sup> *Illuminations* 257.

<sup>14</sup> *State of Exception* 59.

to “bare life” under the state of exception, without attention to the economic, social, racial, and heteropatriarchal divisions that punctuate the uneven experience and duration of disaster.<sup>15</sup>

Because state-sponsored hierarchies and the unequal conditions of the rule of law are already well-established under the national security state, they need no state of exception to take powerful effect. The rule of law, in fact, *keeps* such exclusions in place, as part of the everyday and normal functioning of the juridical order for a citizenry whose legal recognitions are focused around the idealization of the white heteronormative nuclear family.<sup>16</sup> And when disaster events *do* occur, like Hurricane Katrina, normalized crisis conditions on the ground, like overcrowded and poorly managed prisons, play an instrumental part in further disciplining bodies already in pain.

But what is a real state of emergency, if not a state of exception? Unlike Benjamin’s occasion for writing in resistance to the quintessential state of exception, fascism, this project is concerned with a more granular attention to the normalization of economic, racial, gendered, and sexualized inequities. The exposure of these inequities, which have been guided by an emergency culture beholden to exceptionality, demand a different order of witnessing for crises that are both acute and ongoing, and both personally and collectively experienced in ways that exceed our usual frames of

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<sup>15</sup> Critiques of Agamben’s state of exception are now well established. See Negri, “The Ripe Fruit of Redemption,” Honig, *Emergency Politics*, and Weheliye’s *Habeas Viscus*, which critiques the racelessness and narrowly legalistic language of Agamben’s bare life politics.

<sup>16</sup> As Alexander Weheliye observes in *Habeas Viscus*, “racialized and gendered suffering at the hands of political brutalization are always already imbricated in the construction of modern humanity. Suffering, especially when caused by political violence, has long functioned as the hallmark of both humane sentience and of inhuman brutality. Frequently, suffering becomes the defining feature of those subjects excluded from the law, the national community, humanity, and so on due to the political violence inflicted upon them even as it, paradoxically, grants them access to inclusion and equality” (75).

reference. Imagining a real state of emergency, by these lights, begins to look more like Rob Nixon's "slow violence," a critical attention to "violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all."<sup>17</sup> Slow violence, as Nixon puts it, poses "representative, narrative and strategic challenges" due to its "relative invisibility"—a challenge that, as we shall see, is already being addressed and debated in postwar poetic form.

In the context of the postwar US, we might examine slow violence in terms of what Lauren Berlant calls a "crisis ordinary" made possible by "decades of class bifurcation, downward mobility, and environmental, political, and social brittleness that have increased progressively since the Reagan era."<sup>18</sup> Their effects—among them, the deterioration of social safety nets, crumbling public infrastructure, and economic and social instability—are sanctioned by dominant cultural expectations of "the good life," or the expectation of economic opportunity and social mobility even when evidence to the contrary is already in full view. Berlant's memorable shorthand for this phenomenon is "cruel optimism." Another word for it might simply be American exceptionalism, which provides an economic, juridical, and even moralizing framework of justification for the very inequities that produce social and physical harm.

In this project, I take cruel optimism as a major point of contention, but with one exception to the way it has so far been defined. Not unlike Agamben's universalizing assessment of bare life, one thing missing from Berlant's analytic frame is a fuller accounting of the violence done to those for whom good life fantasies have never been

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<sup>17</sup> *Slow Violence* 2.

<sup>18</sup> *Cruel Optimism* 11. Berlant later defines "the ordinary" as an ongoing "impasse shaped by crisis in which people find themselves developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on" (8).

sustainable for any duration. Berlant defines cruel optimism in terms of “the conditions under which certain attachments to what counts as life *come to make sense or no longer make sense*” (my emphasis)—a claim rooted in the assumption that “what counts as life” was, at some point, lost.<sup>19</sup> But for the subjects and scenes of disaster in this study, loss is already an ongoing phenomenon. It is the fact that loss has always been ordinary—that “certain attachments” have never made sense—that makes their lives synonymous with having to endure disaster as an ongoing state of affairs.

The poets in this study take up the embeddedness of cruel optimism in emergency culture so that they can hold open its limitations, and its exclusions. What, they ask, can exist (or, what can be imagined to exist) outside the state’s universalizing boundaries, many of which are held up by the enduring power of cruel optimism? I argue that thinking of emergencies in this way demands a collective ethic of public care with more capaciousness and complexity than what we may find in otherwise valuable terms of analysis like state of exception, bare life, crisis ordinaries, and cruel optimism. While these terms help diagnose some of the most dangerously sustainable crisis conditions of our time, they are not usually key terms in the chapters themselves. Instead, they form the analytic foundation that the poets in this project seek to expand. The point of this project is to study how the assumptions of sudden loss that accompany major crisis events, like September 11, undermine that which was already lost in an era of amplified state-sponsored security. To invoke a real state of emergency, by contrast, requires an imagination in which one universalizing category of reference is not replaced with another.

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<sup>19</sup> *Cruel Optimism* 13.

The cultivation of a different formal shape for the aesthetic, historical, and political stakes of emergency is central to this study. The main formal question I ask is: how might poets illuminate the actual conditions of experienced emergency in such a way that it does not repeat the politics of exclusion encoded in emergency culture's exceptionalist tropes? Specifically, what role does poetry play in reconceptualizing forms of shared intimacy, historical duration, and critical futurity that narrowly shape the way we understand collective crisis and mass destruction? From forms of lyric address and discourses of embodiment, to experiments with collage, citation, appropriation, and constraint, the poets in this study move between the personal and the social, and the exceptional and the ongoing, to construct multiple lenses by which to view the experience of emergency. By elevating unruly voices, bodies, affects, sites, and temporalities of multiple disaster categories, speeds and durations, they challenge the boundaries of crisis thinking, and they exhort their readers to reimagine new forms of perception and belonging in the world. In this way, emergency poetics becomes a site of imagination for staging a politics of public care.

### **Taxonomies of Exclusion**

If an emergency poetics constitutes a stark political departure from the dominance of security, spectacle and hierarchy, then its manifestation in poetic form means reimagining aspects of lyric poetry, poetics of witness, documentary poetry, and conceptualism that have historically been treated as separate (and sometimes opposed) categories of representation. To think about “the real state of emergency”—and to think alongside the work of poets who are doing the same—serves to disrupt the formal

mechanisms of normalized hierarchies wherever they may be found. Once emergency has assumed the shape of state-sponsored crisis, it becomes encrusted with violent taxonomies of exclusion under the guise of freedom and equality. In terms of poetic form, it becomes necessary, too, to uncover its own taxonomies, its own tendencies toward universalizing principles, and the implicit forms of gate-keeping that surround its study.

We might begin with a category that seems like a natural fit for an emergency poetics: the poetry of witness. Historically, this body of poetry has been vital to the representation of those who have experienced historical extremity—particularly for survivors and witnesses to genocide, internment, exile, and war. These poetic accounts of personal trauma tend to privilege the role of the eyewitness, but they can also include the systemic conditions under which such witnesses are rendered vulnerable. In her 1993 anthology, *Against Forgetting*, Carolyn Forché defines the poetry of witness as a merging of the personal and political that reveals “how larger structures of the economy and the state circumscribe, if not determine, the fragile realm of individuality.”<sup>20</sup> But Forché has also described witnessing as an “encounter with the literature of that-which-happened,” which relies on one’s personal experience of a single, devastating crisis event (usually a war) whose details are “as evidentiary . . . as spilled blood.”<sup>21</sup> This description doubles down on the poetic authenticity (even, in some cases, the memorializing) of singular sufferers and crisis events. But to limit the position of the poet to the eyewitness—and to limit the object of witnessing to the equivalent of spilled blood, yet another wartime motif—is to limit the ways in which poets can speak to crisis at all.

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<sup>20</sup> *Against Forgetting* 31.

<sup>21</sup> “Reading the Living Archives.”



Because emergency poetics occurs on a range of different affective and temporal frequencies, they merge the expression of extremity with the witnessing of normalized violence made ordinary. From expressing the limitations of witnessing distant war to the tracking of multigenerational histories of dispossession, the poets in this dissertation reject the presumed authenticity and limited purview of a single authoritative speaker, and in so doing, they imaginatively bear witness to histories of dispossession that exceed the scope of a discrete disaster event. And even when eye-witnessed instances of trauma, abuse, or othering are glaringly evident—consider the widely televised aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, or the video-recorded refrain, “I can’t breathe,” uttered by Eric Garner, and now George Floyd—witnessing, at least as it has been traditionally defined, is not enough on its own.<sup>22</sup> The imperative to bring the inhumane, the unspeakable, and the invisible to the level of public evidence requires more than eyewitnessing—it requires a different order of conceptual work.

As some of the most persistent debates in postwar poetic studies have also shown, a poetics of emergency thus takes into account forms of poetic experimentation that do not neatly fit into the taxonomies of lyric, poetry, on the one hand, and conceptualism on the other. As Christopher Nealon has observed, “it has been difficult for critics to probe the historical imagination” of postwar poetry “because of the overlap of two critical traditions—a New Critical tradition in which modern poetry has been understood generically, as always gesturing back to an originally oral ‘lyric’ in one sense or another,

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<sup>22</sup> See Cathy Park Hong’s “Against Witness,” where Hong writes, in response to Garner’s death: “We were all witnesses. We all saw. Yet witness accounts matter little when prosecutors can mishandle evidence and mislead the jury, when evidence is up against the Law that makes impossible the criminal conviction of police officers who act with impunity. When the verdict was announced, one felt robbed of one’s eyes.”

and a poststructuralist tradition in which the idea of textuality takes on . . . powerful philosophical overtones.”<sup>23</sup> Criticisms of the aesthetic autonomy of the postwar lyric (or, what is sometimes called mainstream poetry) are plentiful.<sup>24</sup> And there are equally critical accounts of avant-garde Anglo-American poetic inheritances, which Jahan Ramazani, among others, has critiqued for its “mononarrative of innovation” that “often misses the importance of . . . widening [poetry’s] formal possibilities.”<sup>25</sup> Poetries that do not neatly fit the binaries of mainstream and experimental, meanwhile, have been historically minimized for being presumably excessive, formally uninteresting, inauthentic (or, excessively authentic, depending on who is making the critique), or some combination of these charges.<sup>26</sup>

One thing that Nealon does not say explicitly about the presumed binaries of lyric and avant-garde is that they both reflect the concerns of a mainly white, male, and middle class (or, elite) body politic.<sup>27</sup> As Jennifer Ashton has argued, lyric and self-declared anti-lyric forms of expression tend to make equally universalizing moves—if not toward a generic representation of liberal subjectivity, then toward a desire for a minimal unity, or

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<sup>23</sup> *The Matter of Capital* 2.

<sup>24</sup> See Wang, *Thinking its Presence*, Ashton, “Labor and the Lyric,” Javadizadeh, “The Atlantic Ocean Breaking on Our Heads,” and Skillman, “Lyric Reading Revisited.”

<sup>25</sup> “Poetry and Race: An Introduction” xxviii. Nealon, in *The Matter of Capital*, is also critical of avant-garde poetries that “stepped in to fill the gap left by New Critical insistence on the aesthetic autonomy of the poem,” but ultimately “tended merely to name, then draw back from, the conditions that arguably made it urgent to restore to the study of poetry a sense of high intellectual stakes” under an era of multiple crises produced by late capitalism (3, 4).

<sup>26</sup> See Wang, *Thinking Its Presence*, Ramazani, “Poetry and Race,” Shockley, *Renegade Poetics*, and Cathy Park Hong’s “Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde,” where she writes: “[t]o be an identity politics poet is to be anti-intellectual, without literary merit, no complexity, sentimental, manufactured, feminine, niche-focused, woefully out-of-date and therefore woefully unhip, politically light, and deadliest of all, used as bait by market forces’ calculated branding of boutique liberalism.”

<sup>27</sup> See Javadizadeh, “The Atlantic Ocean Breaking on Our Heads,” and Cathy Park Hong, “Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde.”

a generalized account of personhood.<sup>28</sup> The presumed racelessness, classlessness, and genderlessness of lyric tropes are often implicit—as with Robert Lowell’s confessionalist dictum, “why not say what happened?”—and we can say the same of avant-garde tendencies toward a minimal unity, as evidenced by George Oppen’s insistence on a strict poetic minimalism in response to public crisis. At other times, poetry’s exclusions are more overt, and its various forms of gatekeeping have not improved with time or with the benefit of perspective. As recently as 2011, Tony Hoagland defended his use of racialized language in a poem he wrote “for white people”—for his “tribe.”<sup>29</sup> In 2015, conceptual poet Kenneth Goldsmith, who has repeatedly made the case for conceptualism as a “postidentity literature,” rearranged and recited Michael Brown’s autopsy in front of a full room at Brown University.<sup>30</sup> And in the same year as Goldsmith’s stunt, Michael Derrick Hudson published his work in *The Best American Poetry* under the name of a Chinese high school classmate, Yi-Fen Chou, because Hudson deemed his publication chances more likely under an Asian-sounding pseudonym.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See “Labor and the Lyric,” in which Ashton argues that a “grounding of poetry in personhood and recognition is as symptomatic as it is descriptive of . . . lyric and antilyric investments . . . and of the material developments that have occurred along with them, developments that go by the name of neoliberalism” (222).

<sup>29</sup> See Rankine, “Open Letter: A Dialogue on Race and Poetry” and Spahr and Young, “The Program Era and the Mainly White Room.” Hoagland’s poem, “The Change,” depicts a narrator, watching tennis, “wanting / the white girl to come out on top, / because she was one of my kind, my tribe,” in opposition to another girl (presumably Serena Williams), “so big and so black,” with “some outrageous name like Vondella Aphrodite.” When Claudia Rankine, his colleague at the University of Houston at the time, questioned him, he responded by saying, “the poem is for white people.”

<sup>30</sup> See Chen, “Authenticity Obsession, or Conceptualism as Minstrel Show,” which also describes Vanessa Place’s tweeting of the most racist dialogues from Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind*, which she called “radical mimesis, direct representation of the thing itself . . . the thingness of racism.” Goldsmith’s comment about “postidentity literature” comes from his own book on the subject, *Uncreative Writing* (85).

<sup>31</sup> See Yu, “Poetry and its Public(s): On Goldsmith, Place, and Yi-Fen Chou.”

These examples carry their own brand of presumed American innocence—an enactment of cruel optimism in poetic form—that treats matters of difference with superficiality and historical indifference even when their authors claim otherwise.<sup>32</sup> Goldsmith’s reading of “Michael Brown’s Body,” for instance, doesn’t just resituate Brown’s death as free-floating textual play: it puts what Goldsmith himself called a “horrific American document” on display without attending to Brown as a person, or to the long history of black dispossession that precipitated and sanctioned his murder.<sup>33</sup> The momentary trendiness of Goldsmith’s ideology, however, is now mostly over. The urgency of Occupy Wall Street, the Movement for Black Lives, Occupy Oakland and Standing Rock, among other movements, has led Cathy Park Hong, among others, to call for “a new era, the poetry of social engagement” that “challeng[es] the structural inequities within literature” and in American culture more generally.<sup>34</sup> But the residue of the old binaries, of course, remains, and some of the cultural divides that drive the literary debates surrounding them are as strong as they ever have been. It’s fair to say, even, that some of postwar poetry’s debates about form, history, and privilege have striking similarities to emergency culture’s own exclusionary tropes.

This project participates in those debates by defining a body of poetic work that has long been attentive to the boundaries around the most privileged and spectacle-bound subjects and objects of crisis. These boundaries track across the realms of political rhetoric, legal recognitions, and literary and critical accounts of what “counts” as a

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<sup>32</sup> On Goldsmith’s Michael Brown reading, Chen writes: “[r]ather than presenting a free-floating self playing with apolitical signifiers, . . . Goldsmith’s recent work articulates something deeply, even sentimentally political: American nationhood.”

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Chen, “Authenticity Obsession.”

<sup>34</sup> “There’s a New Movement in American Poetry and it’s Not Kenneth Goldsmith.” See also Chen and Greiner, “Free Speech, Minstrelsy, and the Avant-Garde.”

properly authentic or aesthetically relevant literary form. As Nikki Skillman points out, “[i]mplicit in critical descriptions of what kinds of feeling are especially lyrical or not” (and to this I would add what kinds of forms are adequately experimental, or not) “are tacit assertions of whose feelings are valuable and whose are not; implicit in critical descriptions of the scope of lyric” (or, I would argue, poetry more generally) “are assertions of which themes and perspectives belong in the realm of the literary and which do not.”<sup>35</sup> As the poets in this study engage the question of who and what counts as a subject of public crisis, they also reveal alternate forms of recognition for human and literary subjects, poetic and political environments, and matters of historical accounting.

## **The Chapters**

The dissertation chapters are organized around public disasters that shaped—or, tellingly, failed to shape—emergency culture over the course of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first century. I examine poetic responses to crisis events across multiple genres: war, public health, environmental degradation, socioeconomic inequality, and public infrastructure. The poets in this study differ in their positions and their commitments, but they have a shared investment in re-shaping the way poetic subjects are imagined and made available as witnesses to disaster, members of communities, citizens of a nation, and survivors of a contingent future. In these chapters, the scope of poetic witnessing, the tenuous status of the lyric, and the representational value of conceptual form serve as mutually constitutive sites of resistance to emergency culture’s

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<sup>35</sup> “Lyric Reading Revisited” 425-426.

exclusionary failures. In this way, emergency poetics figures as an urgent site for reimagining crisis in poetic form, in politics, and in everyday life more generally.

The first chapter, “Denise Levertov’s ‘Histrionics’,” argues that Denise Levertov’s poetry challenges the formal and social limits of witnessing distant war. Contrary to George Oppen’s suggestion that Levertov limit her writing to “authentic” accounts of domestic experience, Levertov’s war poetry interrogates the disjunction between the “here” of the Cold War homefront, a frequent object of domestic strategic concern, and the “there” of the Vietnam War’s state-sanctioned violence. Her willingness to simultaneously embrace these seemingly disparate domains offers a corrective to the Oppen-esque conviction that it is excessive to write poetry outside one’s immediate sphere of experience. In turn, Levertov’s poetry resists the tendency for the Cold War’s tightly bound focus on domestic affairs to mute the violence of the Vietnam War, and it challenges the way that Oppen’s minimalist poetic ethic was itself influenced by the narrow enclosures of Cold War domesticity.

Chapter two, “Essex Hemphill’s Evidence of Being,” tracks the evolution of the civil defense model into the realm of public health, where AIDS revealed the devastating federal abandonment of those at the margins of the white, heteropatriarchal nuclear family. In response to the government-sanctioned demonizing of those most vulnerable to the AIDS epidemic, Essex Hemphill wrote and performed poetry that illuminated the precarious materiality of black queer life against multiple conditions of exclusion—from the security-bound apparatuses of the federal government, from within largely silent black communities, and from within gay activist communities. Where more widely studied AIDS elegies straightforwardly lament the ongoing losses of primarily white

men, Hemphill addresses a longer and more complex cultural history of dispossession that made the epidemic particularly deadly for black gay men. From marginalization within black families and churches, objectification within gay public spaces, to the state's regular disciplining of black and gay bodies, Hemphill calls out the overlapping structural inequalities of the AIDS epidemic. In so doing, he overwrites these inequalities into a world-making poetics of pleasure and survival—one that established a vital field of publishing, performance and imagined survival for “out” black gay men.

The third chapter, “Claudia Rankine’s *Loneliness*,” examines the expansion of emergency culture under the magnified reach of the national security state, which fundamentally altered the way citizens move and behave in public space. I show that *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*, Rankine’s multimodal, citational “American Lyric” reveals the ways in which the national security state has long treated people as bodies to be managed, with particularly chilling effects for people of color. From medical instructions to televised shows to airport inspections and news reports, Rankine interrupts the flow of mass-mediated security culture in order to ask how it proceeds to make us “lonely”—or, in other words, how it has limited our understanding of crisis as an occasion for relating to the lives of others. In challenging the normalizing infrastructure of homeland security, she also stages the lyric as a space for civic engagement, where close attention to long-standing crisis conditions re-orient the scope of expressing personal and collective vulnerability.

The fourth chapter, “Cheena Marie Lo’s *Orders of Disaster*,” addresses the state’s truncated handling of natural disaster in the shadow of the war on terror. As Hurricanes Sandy, Harvey, Irma, Maria, and Nate, among others, have shown, emergency

declarations of “natural” disasters are insufficiently acute responses to institutional and cultural neglect, where the accumulative perils of climate change and structural racism intersect. In *A Series of Un/Natural/Disasters*, Lo gathers and reorders various accounts of the number of lives lost, the property damage sustained, and the locations and patterns of Hurricane Katrina into a roughly abecedarian long poem. They interweave these accounts of the storm with a set of structural conditions revealed in its wake: the depths of mass incarceration and mass poverty (particularly for people of color), systemic failures in city planning and public infrastructure, the war on terror’s influence on the Bush administration, and the unmitigated encroachment of climate change. In their close-to-the-ground attention to the various orders and disorders of disaster, they open up spaces in which the reader may imagine collective survival by way of a horizontalized politics of mutual aid.

A coda briefly describes the resonance of this project’s subjects and methods of analysis in the current coronavirus crisis. As with the rest of this project, I call attention to the devastating cost of federal inattention to crisis conditions that have been slow moving, and long in the making—the privatization and expanding costs of a fragmented health care system, the massive growth of prison beds in contrast to the decline of hospital beds due to lack of profit, the underfunding of pandemic warning systems and medical stockpiles, and the vulnerability of workers, people of color, the sick and the elderly while the president claims it is time to simply “go back to work.”. The accelerating dynamics of this unfolding crisis, in turn, demand that we imagine our connection to others differently by observing the ways in which we are unevenly made vulnerable by the saturation of power, privilege, and social division.



### Denise Levertov's "Histrionics"

This chapter begins by refracting a Cold War public anxiety through a dispute between two poets, George Oppen and Denise Levertov. These poets faced a critical question that persisted in their lives and careers throughout the Cold War: how, in facing the constant possibility of total annihilation, can poets presume to represent anything at all? Oppen, sensing this dilemma acutely, stopped writing poetry for over twenty years between the Great Depression and the Vietnam War.<sup>1</sup> When he did begin writing again, in the late fifties, he did so right around the same time that Levertov, a younger poet, began writing her own poetry in response to various forms of collective violence. For Levertov, the Cold War was rife not only with tensions at home, but with a militarized sanctioning of violence abroad. Her imperative to speak to distant violence, which animates the concerns of this chapter, embodies a poetic ethic that privileges the writing of disaster as something more than a discrete, personally witnessed event.

Throughout the sixties, Levertov fought two battles with her fellow poets about the limits of bearing witness to violence. The first, which famously ended her friendship with Robert Duncan, has long overshadowed the second, which interrupted her otherwise mutually admiring relationship with Oppen. The latter conflict came to a head in Oppen's only published essay on poetics, "The Mind's Own Place." In this 1963 essay, he

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<sup>1</sup> See Lowney, *The American Avant-Garde Tradition and History, Memory, and the Literary Left*. After the publishing of *Discrete Series* (1934), Oppen organized for the Communist Party, served as a Soldier in World War II, and then spent political exile in Mexico during the McCarthy era. His next published poem was "Blood from the Stone," in 1958, and he would not publish another collection until 1962 (*The Materials*). He wrote several other poems in his initial return to writing poetry that addressed the problem of writing during the Cold War—including "Blood from the Stone," "Time of the Missile" and "The Crowded Countries of the Bomb."

describes his frustration with poetry that is “a performance, a speech by the poet,” that works toward “political generalization.” He writes: “there are situations which cannot be honorably met by art, and surely no one need fiddle precisely at the moment that the house next door is burning.”<sup>2</sup> Oppen never singles out Levertov directly, but in a subsequent letter to his sister, he later declared that the essay was “almost written at her, and at her latest poems, some of which are very bad.”<sup>3</sup> Though Oppen doesn’t elaborate on these “very bad” poems, he cites some of Levertov’s early political poems—which were focused on World War II and the Holocaust, a growing awareness of social movements and political unrest, and the increasing escalation of US involvement in Vietnam—as examples.<sup>4</sup>

In this same essay, Oppen moves on to praise an early Levertov poem, “Matins,” for offering “clear pictures of the world in verse,” and for imparting the poet’s feeling of

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<sup>2</sup> *Selected Prose, Daybooks and Letters* 36. Later in the essay, Oppen explains this comment further: “[i]t is possible that a world without art is simply and flatly uninhabitable, and the poet’s business is not to use verse as an advanced form of rhetoric, nor to seek to give to political statements the aura of eternal truth. It should not really be the ambition even of the most well-meaning of political and semipolitical gatherings to do so, and to use verse for the purpose, as everyone perfectly well knows, is merely excruciating (36-37).”

<sup>3</sup> *The Selected Letters of George Oppen* 57. Levertov was Oppen’s unspoken sparring partner in this essay, and she was the poetry editor for a publication—*The Nation*—from which it was summarily rejected, and the letter to his sister, June Oppen Degnan, seems to reference this directly, noting that “Denise says it was ‘extremely hard’ to follow. And must find it harder than that. Of course, she may just not be in a position to permit herself to follow it: she is very determined to be (or become?) a good mother, to enter political (anti-bomb, at least) activity, etc. etc.” (57-58).

<sup>4</sup> In the same letter to June Oppen Degnan, Oppen references one of Levertov’s early political poems responding to the Holocaust, “During the Eichmann Trial,” and letters between Oppen and Levertov debate the merits of several of her explicitly political poems throughout the sixties and seventies. See *The Selected Letters of George Oppen* 81. The result of such political writing, he suggests in “The Mind’s Own Place,” “give[s] to political statements the aura of eternal truth,” when, in an era featuring “a cynical and brutal division of the world between the great powers,” one either needs to exercise an exacting and careful formalism, or perhaps not write at all” (*Selected Prose, Daybooks and Letters* 37).

“the fresh authentic air in her face.”<sup>5</sup> “Matins,” Oppen writes, elevates the “events of a domestic morning: the steam rising in the radiation, herself ‘breaking the handle of my hairbrush,’ and the family breakfast, to the moment when ... the children [are] being sent to school.”<sup>6</sup> Oppen’s praise depends on his presumed equivalence between “authentic” expression and gendered household labor. The actual lines of the poem, however, undermine this reading. When Levertov’s speaker exclaims “The authentic! I said / Rising from the toilet seat,” she signals her exasperation with authenticity as a poetic ideal.<sup>7</sup> The lines that follow catalogue an array of domestic annoyances—a broken hairbrush, a noisy radiator, a child late to school—that trouble Oppen’s intimation of the domestic sphere as an ideal site of representation. “The authentic,” she writes later in the poem, “rolls / just out of reach” of our immediate recognition—especially when our powers of recognition are conditioned by an idyllic vision of domestic life.

While this relatively minor dispute over authentic representation appears to animate a self-enclosed literary concern, it notably unfolded almost contemporaneously with the rise of the postwar national security state. In the fifties, the architects of federal Cold War civil defense campaigns sought to ease public fears of unknown “foreign” threats through the image of a tidy and self-sustaining home. In this context, it is not surprising that women, the suburban providers of domestic labor, should become particularly potent emblems of national defense. Fortified with canned goods and basement bunkers, the single family home served, in the words of the Federal Civil

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<sup>5</sup>*Selected Prose, Daybooks and Letters* 32, 37.

<sup>6</sup>*Selected Prose, Daybooks and Letters* 32.

<sup>7</sup>*Poems 1960-1967* 59.

Defense Administration (FDCA), as a virtual “base of organized self-protection.”<sup>8</sup> In a campaign that included millions of civil defense bulletins and pamphlets, the FDCA declared that “the back yard may be the next front line” of battle.<sup>9</sup> The Office of Civil Defense widely distributed a “Handbook for Emergencies” that sought to reassure fearful families by touting the maintenance of a well-prepared home.<sup>10</sup> A popular “Grandma’s Pantry” civil defense advertisement, which featured a picture of an old-fashioned stove and well-stocked kitchen, read: “Is Your ‘Pantry’ Ready in Event of Emergency?”<sup>11</sup> And in a popular 1959 *Life* Magazine advertisement, a bomb shelter “honeymoon” portrayed the enjoyment of a newlywed couple, who found “unbroken togetherness” in their underground bunker.<sup>12</sup> In elevating American virtues of self-reliance and personal responsibility, these motifs represented a turn *away* from a collective reliance on the state in the event of national disaster. But in so doing, they also produced a newly moralized vision of private life, mediated through the normative image of the white, suburban, middle class home.

By the time Levertov wrote some of her most political poetry in the sixties and seventies, civil defense propaganda, at least in pamphlet form, had begun to wane. But its

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<sup>8</sup> Collier and Lakoff, “Distributed Preparedness: The Spatial Logic of Domestic Security in the United States” 23. See also Guy Oakes’ *The Imaginary War*, which details the ways in which the suburbs, which “accounted for 64 percent of American population growth,” remained the focus of American civil defense rhetoric (109).

<sup>9</sup> The Cold War Museum.

<sup>10</sup> See Davis, *Stages of Emergency* 27. These preparedness measures included first aid preparation, the stocking of bunkers, to include hygienic provisions, and ideas for shelter construction itself.

<sup>11</sup> See May, *Homeward Bound* 100-102. According to May, the lines just before the slogan read: “Grandma’s pantry was always ready. She was ready when the preacher came on Sunday or she was ready when the relatives arrived from Nebraska” (100-101).

<sup>12</sup> *Homeward Bound* ix-xi. The couple was featured in the *Miami Herald* and later *Time Magazine*, which in 1959 covered the story of “unbroken togetherness” complete with smiling photographs of the couple embracing in the bunker, while they displayed the canned goods collection that would sustain them for several weeks.

affective residue—which positioned the home as a *cordon sanitaire* against external threats—remained, as did the decentralized emergency management apparatuses that nuclear panic essentially built.<sup>13</sup> This residue provides historical context for Oppen’s insistence that Levertov should consign her poetry to the parameters of her own experience as a wife, mother, and woman poet. Ironically, Oppen’s position, which was fundamental to his sense of what poetry should represent in the midst of crisis, broadly mirrors the rhetoric of a security state that he personally disdained. Oppen wasn’t alone, either: contemporaneous critics praised what Kenneth Rexroth called an “alert domestic love”<sup>14</sup> in Levertov’s early poetry, but they largely treated her later political writing as “histrionic” (Oppen, by inference), “not very original” (Charles Altieri), and “painfully self-conscious” (Robert B. Shaw).<sup>15</sup> *To Stay Alive* (1971), Levertov’s most searching book about the Vietnam War, was nearly a career-ending collection. While she maintained many personal and professional alliances throughout this period, her critical reputation diminished during the war, and she became increasingly known as a poet of considerable excess compared to those, like Oppen, who were celebrated for their formal restraint.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See Collier and Lakoff, “Distributed Preparedness.”

<sup>14</sup> “Poets, Old and New” 235. In “Ecstasy of Attention,” Rachelle Lerner also notes that Rexroth assumed that he and Levertov were having a long-distance affair (they were not), and he had often referred to his own “highly sexed nature” in discussing his attitude toward her poetry.

<sup>15</sup> Oppen, *Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers* 32 (while not citing Levertov directly, Oppen’s comment, which reads as such, is well known to be in reference to her activist poetry: “[t]he distinction between a poem that shows confidence in itself and in its materials, and on the other hand a performance, a speech by the poet, is the distinction between poetry and histrionic”); Altieri, “Denise Levertov and the Limits of the Aesthetics of Presence” 226; Shaw, “The Poetry of Protest” 48.

<sup>16</sup> For the treatment of Levertov’s poetry and reputation during the war, see Philip Metres, *Behind the Lines*, and two recent biographies on Levertov, Diana Krolik Hollenberg’s *A Poet’s Revolution: The Life of Denise Levertov*, and Dana Greene’s *Denise Levertov: A Poet’s Life*. Recent writing on Levertov’s work is otherwise scarce, while Oppen enjoyed a wealth of

A crudely sexist satire of “Matins,” by poet Felix Pollak, provides further evidence for the way Levertov’s reception has suffered from her instinct to trouble the ideological boundaries of authenticity inscribed in Cold War domestic interiors.<sup>17</sup> Pollak’s poem, “Soirees,” begins this way: “Shit! I said / squatting on the toilet seat.”<sup>18</sup> He then proceeds to catalogue a range of unsavory bodily conditions: halitosis, menstruation, wet dreams and farts, all of which satirize Levertov’s original lines, at the end of “Matins,” about speaking to “our crowded hearts / Our steaming bathrooms.”<sup>19</sup> Later in the poem, Pollak claims that “the authentic” “spills / all over you, getting you all wet”—and a few lines later still, he focalizes an indignant Levertov by exclaiming, “Don’t fart through my window.” These lines were undoubtedly intended to discredit Levertov, but they also reinforced one of her chief concerns at the time: the body’s capacity to unmake illusions of domesticity. In this way, Pollak unwittingly highlights Levertov’s embodied resistance to narratives of domestic warmth that overwrite the conditions of escalating war.

Levertov’s Vietnam War poetry—particularly her 1971 collection, *To Stay Alive*—best encapsulates her efforts to examine the violent enclosures of the national security state. For Levertov, the Vietnam War required a poetics that exceeded what she called the “narrow and mistaken idea of the poem as always a private expression of

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scholarship just before and after the 2008 centennial of his birth, to include work by Rachel Blau du Plessis, Michael Davidson, Michael Heller, Oren Izenberg, and Peter Nicholls. To varying degrees, these scholars all cite Oppen’s stern condensation of social experience into “bare civic interiors” (Oppen’s term) as his most political and ethical act.

<sup>17</sup> Pollak published a footnote at the end of the poem, which suggested that he meant for Levertov to take the poem in “the spirit of good dirty fun.” But the footnote also suggested that the “dirty fun” was inspired, in part, by the fact that Levertov had previously rejected some of his poems for publication in *The Nation*.

<sup>18</sup> “Soirees” 52.

<sup>19</sup> *Poems 1960-1967* 62.

emotion.” Her war poetry positions the poet not as a gatekeeper of irreducible authenticity, but as a witness to being “straddled between *places*,” and “straddled across *time*,” where space and time are unevenly experienced between the subjects of distant violence and the civilian bystander at home.<sup>20</sup> In so doing, she transforms the core unit of lyric expression from the private and personal to a wide-ranging consideration of the ideological boundaries that constrained the valuation of human life during the war.

### Unmaking Domesticity

Leverlov grew up in England, where war was rarely far from her mind. As a teenager during World War I, she wrote one of her first poems contemplating war, “On Listening to Distant Guns,” and she later served as a World War II hospital nurse in London.<sup>21</sup> During the Vietnam War, she participated in war resistance activism for the New Left, the publication and distribution of informational pamphlets, and the organizing of several anti-war poetry anthologies.<sup>22</sup> In 1972, she visited North Vietnam with fellow poet Muriel Rukeyser. And in the “Author’s Preface” of *To Stay Alive* (1971), she cites a variety of experiences that shaped her writing: her move from England to America in the 1940s, the death of her sister, and her participation in “public occasions, demonstrations, that have become for many of us such familiar parts of our lives.”<sup>23</sup> These experiences belied critical assumptions that Leverlov wrote war poetry entirely outside her own

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<sup>20</sup> *To Stay Alive* viii. Leverlov writes these comments in the “Author’s Preface”—and while they initially refer to her own personal sense of having come from England to the United States, they clearly animate this collection’s larger poetic ethic as well.

<sup>21</sup> See Audrey Rodgers, *Denise Leverlov: The Poetry of Engagement* for a sustained assessment of Leverlov’s early wartime experience.

<sup>22</sup> Leverlov was an active member of the War Resisters League, and a founding member, along with her husband, of the anti-war collective RESIST.

<sup>23</sup> *To Stay Alive* viii.

personal sphere, and they undergirded her desire to treat the writing of such poetry as both a personal and political matter.

Leverlov is clearly invested in treating self-disclosure—what we might generally call lyric, but what is, in the postwar period, most closely associated with confessional poetry<sup>24</sup>—as a principal feature of her wartime writing. But unlike Robert Lowell’s confessionalist dictum, “why not say what happened?,”<sup>25</sup> Leverlov distinguishes herself from the postwar lyric by examining the limits of self-expressivity during the Vietnam War and the Cold War more generally. In so doing, she takes up poetic witnessing as both an experiential and imagined practice. In her own writing about witnessing, poet Carolyn Forché writes: “if we give up the dimension of the personal, we risk relinquishing one of the most powerful sites of resistance. The celebration of the personal, however, can indicate a myopia, an inability to see how larger structures of the economy and the state circumscribe, if not determine, the fragile realm of the individual.”<sup>26</sup> For her part, Leverlov treats witnessing as a personal expression of extremity that resists the “larger structures” that Forché addresses. She does this by turning to the security state’s treatment of homefront domesticity, which limited “the fragile realm of the individual” both at home, and in the more distant sphere of war.

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<sup>24</sup> As Deborah Nelson explains in *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America*, “at the time of their emergence” at the mid-century mark, “the confessional poets were taken to be an extreme instance of romantic lyric self-absorption” in its self-conscious performance of disclosing lyric privacy (xvii). She also observes that confessional poetry was “nearly exclusively a white, middle-class, and even predominantly heterosexual genre, perhaps because white middle class heterosexuals enjoyed the greatest expectation of privacy, and were therefore the most likely to experience its violation” (31).

<sup>25</sup> Lowell, *Day by Day* 127.

<sup>26</sup> *Against Forgetting* 31.



In the same *To Stay Alive* Author's Preface, Levertov clarifies her approach to witnessing as the act of mediating between the "inner" and "outer" experience of distant war. She defines her method as "having some value not as mere 'confessional' autobiography, but as a document of some historical value, a record of one person's inner/outer experience in America during the 60's and the beginning of the 70's, an experience which is shared by so many and transcends the peculiar details of each life, though it can only be expressed in and through such details."<sup>27</sup> This statement ties the collection's engagement with the war to a singular subject (the "inner" experience of "one person"), but it does so in opposition to the idea of "mere 'confessional' autobiography." Levertov instead represents the "historical value" of speaking both within and beyond the sphere of individual experience, particularly as it applies to the ideologically circumscribed field of the homefront. Conservative notions of collectivity, such as those implied by the rhetoric of civil defense, depend upon a self-reliant affirmation of white, middle class, suburban domesticity, which essentially either mutes or rationalizes the violence of the Vietnam War. Levertov's poetry, by contrast, unmakes the "inner" world of normative domesticity, and the self-preserving logic it supports, precisely by revealing their symbolic implication in an "outer" world of suffering.

This method is readily discernible in "Life at War," the most well-known poem from *To Stay Alive* (1971).<sup>28</sup> The poem's most famous line—"burned human flesh / is smelling in Vietnam as I write"—provides a clue to the aesthetic and political problem at the heart of Levertov's poetry about the Vietnam War.<sup>29</sup> In this line, Levertov establishes

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<sup>27</sup> *To Stay Alive* ix.

<sup>28</sup> An earlier (and nearly identical) version of the same poem appears in an earlier collection, *The Sorrow Dance* (1967).

<sup>29</sup> *To Stay Alive* 14.

the tension between the remoteness of the war and the immediacy of writing, which are broad analogues to the “inner/outer” distinction that is central to her poetic practice. Yet here, the distinction between inner and outer does not fully hold. The present tense suggests both simultaneity and ongoingness, aligning the unfolding war and the unfolding act of trying to write *about* that war. The insertion of the writing self (“as I write”) prevents us from being fully transported to some externalized wartime imaginary, even as it also rejects an account of fully interiorized domesticity. What is affirmed, ultimately, is the poet’s position as a remote and critical witness, where even from across the world, her everyday existence is already pierced.

In this way, Levertov situates civilian wartime witnessing as a reverberation of distant violence that cannot be contained.<sup>30</sup> “Life at War” begins by describing initially undefined disasters that befall a generic, American “us” as if through a mutually felt body:

The disasters numb within us  
caught in the chest, rolling  
in the brain like pebbles. The feeling  
resembles lumps of raw dough

weighing down a child’s stomach on baking day.<sup>31</sup>

Here, the afflicted body registers no specific understanding of “the disasters numb within us,” except to acknowledge their immediate embodied effects. The feeling of danger is “caught in the chest,” “rolling in the brain,” and “weighing down a child’s stomach,” thus complicating the idealization of gendered household labor that the “baking day” image

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<sup>30</sup> Mary Favret’s *War at a Distance* invokes this very concept of distant violence experienced at home. Written in the context of Romantic literature’s engagement with modern wartime, Favret contends that “war, even at a distance, works to dismantle the forms that prop up our sense of the world and our place in it” (15).

<sup>31</sup> *To Stay Alive* 13.

implies. Indeed, the fact that this context is only established after a break between stanzas, together with the unpleasantness of the “weighing down,” makes what might have been a domestic idyll become ominous. The “lump” image returns later in the stanza when the speaker quotes the wartime letters of poet Rainer Marie Rilke, who refers to the contents of his “heart” during the First World War as “balled into formless lumps, thus / do I carry it about.”<sup>32</sup> In each of these scenarios, the body is the primary site through which the difficulty, and even the pain, of having to imagine war comes to be understood. It is a feeling deep within the body, a shared but unknown physical blockage in which facile domestic motifs are all but impossible to hold on to. And in the quoted line from Rilke, “thus do I carry it about,” one gets the sense, again, of the conveyance of bodily disturbance as part of the poet’s distinct burden to witness distant violence.

In attempting to see war as a shared condition, Levertov continually depicts war as interminably present and yet partially obscured from the collective American imagination:

We have breathed the grits of it in, all our lives,  
 our lungs are pocked with it,  
 the mucous membrane of our dreams  
 coated with it, the imagination  
 filmed over with the gray filth of it<sup>33</sup>

As the emphasis is placed again on a collective “we,” Levertov insists that violence is ongoing in ways that implicate even those at home. “We have breathed the grits of it in,” she claims, “all our lives.” The “it,” presumably, is war and human suffering, and it alludes not only to the fact that the conflict in Vietnam began long before the first major

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<sup>32</sup> *To Stay Alive* 13. The original text of this line comes from a letter from Rilke to Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis-Hohenlohe, in August 1915 (*Wartime Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke* 42).

<sup>33</sup> *To Stay Alive* 13.

American escalation in 1965, but to ongoing warlike tensions between the US and the Soviet Union throughout the Cold War. In this context, war can hardly be limited to a single instance of violence or spectacle.<sup>34</sup> It is this pervasiveness, this ongoingness, that makes the effects of war so hard to imagine. Impossible to pinpoint with a single televised or photographed image of violence, and far removed from the relative mundanity of American everyday life, war registers here only as a collective impairment. There is no avoiding “the grits,” as Levertov puts it. Whether or not one notices them, they damage our very capacity to breathe, to dream, and to imagine.

The way in which these images forcibly collapse the distinction between the “here” of secure domesticity and the “there” of constant exposure to violence and contingency sets up an opportunity for Levertov to examine the limits of poetic witnessing more directly. This occurs chiefly in the rhetorical crescendo of “Life at War,” when the speaker eventually turns her gaze to a scene in an imagined warzone. This moment is importantly introduced through the idealization of “delicate Man,” surrounded by “the music of birds” and “the laughter of dogs,” a series of tropes that she assigns to a public—and a poetic cohort—that she contends are only too willing to overlook the political and embodied realities of wartime suffering. The romanticizing of daily life, she argues, renders both the public citizen and the poet unable to register violence waged outside one’s inner sphere. Surrounded by an untouched pastoral scene, “delicate Man” is able to “[turn] without surprise, with mere regret”:

to the scheduled breaking open of breasts whose milk  
runs out over the entrails of still-alive babies,

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<sup>34</sup> See Mary Dudziak, *War Time: An Idea, A History, Its Consequences*.

transformation of witnessing eyes to pulp-fragments,  
implosion of skinned penises into carcass-gulleys.<sup>35</sup>

For many fellow poets and critics, Levertov's graphic invocation of body parts put her poetry beyond the pale of proper expression. In response to her depiction of mutilated breasts and penises, for instance, Robert Duncan declared in a letter to Levertov that these motifs revealed the "deep underlying consciousness of the woman as a victim in war with the Man."<sup>36</sup> The irony in this statement is that in making this claim, Duncan himself becomes momentarily aligned with Levertov's vision of the "delicate Man," whose generic "regret" she treats as insufficient for the urgency of the moment. Unlike Duncan's sexist implication, however, Levertov invokes broken breasts, entrails of babies, and skinned penises not in the name of some instinctual feminine victimhood, but to represent a violently foreclosed futurity that exceeds the bounds of her personal experience. The images, by their very nature, demonstrate the callous violence waged against civilians in the present, while they also gesture toward an absent future through the destruction of reproductive parts and children themselves.

To say that Levertov's poetics is excessive or exaggerated, in other words, is to miss the ways in which her perceived excess alerts the reader to overwhelming violence without internalizing it as a source of personal catharsis or confessional self-exposure. This is an important distinction for her, as it extends the terms by which we may understand the poetic witness's role in the context of distant suffering. In an article titled "Against Witness," poet Cathy Park Hong contends that "images of suffering can arouse our horror, simulating an illusive identification between us and the victim or 'a fantasy of

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<sup>35</sup> *To Stay Alive* 14.

<sup>36</sup> *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov* 669, 667.

witness' before we are conveniently deposited back into our lives so that someone else's trauma becomes our personalized catharsis."<sup>37</sup> Levertov was undoubtedly aware of this very danger. Despite the wide availability of graphic photographs, video footage, and journalism depicting the atrocities committed against the Vietnamese people, she restricts her imagery to that of unspecified familial bodies (and body parts) being unmade by collective violence. The poem's invocation of the "transformation of witnessing eyes into pulp-fragments," furthermore, directly addresses the magnitude of war in Vietnam, where the wholesale destruction of entire villages makes it difficult to envision domestic life before bodies were literally torn apart. Witnessing eyes, she insists, can never see perfectly, nor should they, lest they run the risk of either colonizing the experience of others or missing the ethical magnitude of wartime destruction.

In fact, it is only by turning to a "rhetoric of exaggeration" that Levertov unmakes the normative "authenticity" of Cold War domesticity and thus attends to distant bodies equally unmade by the same ideology. In the next section, I turn to Levertov's examination of state-sponsored narratives that seek to redeem the waging of war, thus continuing to register the lives of the "enemy" as entirely expendable. As we shall see, the ideology of American exceptionalism during the Vietnam War drove both the desensitized rationality of a military calculus, and the redemptive rationale of a benevolent American superpower.

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<sup>37</sup> Hong makes this statement after reflecting on Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others*, in which Sontag famously writes: "The appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked" (33).

## Irredeemable Violence

Because the Cold War figured in the American political imaginary as a fight for global dominion between capitalism and communism, it provided the moral justification for open-ended military intervention. On this view, it was possible to imagine the United States not as a wartime aggressor, but as a benevolent agent acting in the defense of freedom.<sup>38</sup> The moral superiority of the American way of life, again encoded in the conflation of domesticity with national security, manifested by way of public faith in the American armed forces. Levertov was herself aware that the elevation of the American Soldier (often as a hero, but sometimes as a helpless victim) shaped the politics of the period, and thus it is no surprise that she refuses to give American Soldiers pride of place in her poetry. This refusal is part of her larger imperative to refuse the presence of any moralizing narrative that sanctions the suffering of others. In *To Stay Alive*, these narratives range from the sanitization of domestic life at home to the redemptive narratives of victory, freedom, and heroism that enshroud the waging of American contemporary warfare.

One notable exception to her refusal to narrate the experience of American Soldiers can be seen through the invocation of a news report in “An Interim,” the first part of a longer poem titled “Staying Alive.” In this poem, Levertov questions the military rhetoric makes violence against both combatants and civilians permissible. She does this by paraphrasing an excerpt from an Associated Press report, which details an

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<sup>38</sup> See Mary Dudziak’s *War Time*, which describes the Truman administration’s shift toward a national security state that defined its military actions as “a means of defending the American way of life” and, by extension, presuming to secure the freedom of those perceived to be threatened by communism (71).

unnamed officer's justification for attacking a Vietnamese town with overwhelming force. In this report, journalist Peter Arnett writes the following:

'It became necessary to destroy the town to save it,' a United States major said today. He was talking about the grim decision that allied commanders made when Viet Cong attackers overran most of this Mekong Delta city 45 miles southwest of Saigon. They decided that regardless of civilian casualties they must bomb and shell the once placid river city of 35,000 to rout the Viet Cong forces.<sup>39</sup>

In Levertov's poem, these sentences are then rendered, without attribution, as follows:

And,  
 'It became necessary  
 to destroy the town to save it,'  
 a United States major said today.  
 He was talking about the decision  
 by allied commanders to bomb and shell the town  
 regardless of casualties,  
 to rout the Vietcong.'<sup>40</sup>

At first, Levertov's version seems to track closely with Arnett's. In the original statement, the intended effect is to absolve the officer—and by extension, the military and the state—from personal and public responsibility. But in Levertov's versified ventriloquy, the grammatical and political passivity of the military decision is amplified. Rather than take on the editorializing force of Arnett's term "grim decision," she strips his language to "the decision / by allied commanders," "regardless of casualties." By shifting the original reference of "civilian casualties" to simply "casualties," she highlights the lack of distinction that the American military made between combatants and non-combatants. By this logic, all targets were enemy targets. Here, the instrumental calculus that sanctions this act of violence is on full display.

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<sup>39</sup> Arnett, "Major Describes Move."

<sup>40</sup> *To Stay Alive* 21.



Taken as a whole, the passage rhetorically performs an incapacity for moral reflection as long the state achieves its military and ideological objectives. But the officer's statement *is* clearly morally bankrupt, as congressman William F. Ryan notes in his remarks to the House of Representatives in the spring of 1968. "How can one rationalize a war," Ryan asks, "in which we must destroy the people we have proposed to protect in order to save them?"<sup>41</sup> The answer, it would appear, is that, under a national security state convinced of its rightness, it became all too easy to sanction the mass destruction of southeast Asians as a bloodless condition of victory.<sup>42</sup>

Leverlov's invocation of the officer's rhetoric appears after yet another scene of seemingly unspoiled domesticity in the previous stanza of this poem. This scene describes "Children in the laundromat / waiting while their mothers fold sheets," chewing gum and blowing bubbles."<sup>43</sup> The image of domestic order returns here: mothers and children at play serve as the central bearers of an American innocence that must be protected at any cost. As with any other scene of domesticity in Leverlov's war poetry, however, the idyllic image is quickly interrupted—first, by a disagreement between the children, then by the subsequent description of the shelled town. The conjunction ("And,") that connects the two stanzas does not suggest causation, but rather puts the two scenes on the same affective plane—and in so doing, it undermines them both. In this

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<sup>41</sup> Congressional Record 3645.

<sup>42</sup> Robert S. McNamara, the Secretary of Defense under both Johnson and Kennedy and a central architect of the war effort, wrote in his autobiography, *In Retrospect*, that those "who participated in the decisions on Vietnam acted according to what we thought were the principles and traditions of this nation. We made our decisions in light of those values. Yet we were wrong, terribly wrong" (xx).

<sup>43</sup> *To Stay Alive* 21.

way, Levertov shows that the tacit sanctioning of war, not just one's ignorance of it, continues to make idealized narratives of domesticity possible.

If the desensitized rationality of military calculus presents one logical extreme for justifying the American war machine, the other is the sanctimonious conviction that any action undertaken in the war is morally righteous. In fact, the American government frequently depicted the Cold War as a struggle between providential capitalism and irreligious communism that essentially translated to good versus evil. Levertov, steeped in both Jewish and Christian religious traditions, not only rejects this framework: she turns it against itself to further indict the American security state. Indeed, if the violence of the war cannot be redeemed, as her poetry suggests, then both the domestic imaginary, and the ahistorical veneer of American innocence that its safeguarding implies, are equally beyond redemption.

Levertov employs the language of religious redemption in “Advent 1966,” a *Staying Alive* poem that interrogates the security state's dual deployment of domestic motifs and narratives of religious providence.<sup>44</sup> The Christian concept of “advent” refers to the time of expectation and preparation preceding the celebration of Jesus's nativity—and, in some denominations, the Second Coming. What sign of redemption, Levertov's title seems to ask, are we waiting for in 1966? Over the course of this year, the number of American forces deployed to Vietnam doubled, and 382,010 men were drafted into service—the highest annual total during the war.<sup>45</sup> At this point, there was no end to this

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<sup>44</sup> According to Diana Krolik Hollenberg's biography, Levertov's father was a Russian Jew who converted to Christianity and became an Anglican priest—and Levertov herself conveyed a lifelong engagement with her faith, to varying degrees, throughout her life and poetic career. In her later years, she converted to Catholicism, which played a powerful role in her late poetry.

<sup>45</sup> “Induction Statistics,” United States Selective Service System.

war in sight, and the draft collapsed war and the homefront in more dramatic ways than before. This, combined with the continued escalation of combat and the subsequent uptick of anti-war dissent at home, made the state-sponsored rhetoric of a placid domestic sphere even more out of step with its own historical conditions.

“Advent 1966” compares the violence in Vietnam to the imagery of Robert Southwell’s “The Burning Babe,” an early modern poem about the redemptive power of Jesus Christ. In the Southwell poem, Christ suddenly appears in front of the speaker as a “pretty Babe all burning bright.”<sup>46</sup> This babe is peculiarly “scorched with excessive heat,” and “shed[s] floods of tears” for those who have not yet committed themselves to personal salvation. Through this poem, we learn that the babe’s “faultless breast” is signified as a furnace, fueled by “Justice” and “Mercy”—a fire, then, that is also a purifying force for sinning souls. As the poem closes and the baby disappears, the speaker realizes, with wonder, that it is Christmas Day.

While the affirmation of Jesus’s birth in “the Burning Babe” leads to the poetic speaker’s own sense of restored faith, no such moment of redemptive clarity exists for Levertov. In her hands, Southwell’s “vision” of scorching heat is “multiplied, multiplied” and “repeated, repeated.”<sup>47</sup> While this sense of multiplication and repetition refers to the scale of death and destruction *in* Vietnam, it might also be taken to reference the televisual mediation of that destruction in “visions” of Napalm bombing victims, their “flesh on fire.” In the rest of this poem, the gruesome images that follow this vision constitute now-familiar tropes in Levertov’s writing on the war. These include a preoccupation with infants (“infant after infant,”), their bodies deindividuated and

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<sup>46</sup> *The Complete Poems of Robert Southwell* 109.

<sup>47</sup> *To Stay Alive* 16.

anonymous (“their names forgotten, / their sex unknown in the ashes”) and either destroyed (“cinders upon the earth”) or else barely alive (“or living on / moaning and stinking in hospitals three abed”). The crucial point of contrast in this poem, though, is fact that Levertov renders the “unique Holy Infant” entirely ineffective. The vision of the Babe, robbed of its spiritual dimension and reduced to the materiality of “flaming but not vanishing” bodies, lingers. There is no teleology here, religious or otherwise.

The second half of the poem explores the consequences of this irredeemable violence on poetic subjectivity:

because of this my strong sight,  
my clear caressive sight, my poet’s sight I was given  
that it might stir me to song,  
is blurred.

There is a cataract filming over  
my inner eyes. Or else a monstrous insect  
has entered my head, and looked out  
from my sockets with multiple vision,

seeing not the unique Holy Infant  
burning sublimely, an imagination of redemption,  
but, as off a beltline, more, more, senseless figures aflame.<sup>48</sup>

The first few lines play with a version of the “authenticity” that Oppen and other critics sought to impose on Levertov. The “caressive sight,” which “might stir me to song,” for instance, is incongruous with the rest of the poem’s violent and depersonalized imagery. And just as quickly as Levertov addresses her “poet’s sight” in such romanticized (and, perhaps, gendered) terms, she revises that logic to offer two distinct possibilities for imagining a poet’s sight that is disfigured by the machinery of war. On the one hand, the speaker invokes the possibility of “a cataract filming over / my inner eyes.” Here, we

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<sup>48</sup> *To Stay Alive* 16.

would do well to remember Levertov's remarks on "inner/outer experience" from the "Author's Preface," which gestures toward the limitations of a first-hand perspective on distant war while also insisting that one must embrace the limits of lyric subjectivity in order to "see" its full historical consequences. On the other hand, there is the ominous-sounding possibility that "a monstrous insect / has entered my head, and looked out / from my sockets with multiple vision." Here, the speaker dramatizes a conflict between an "inner" subjectivity in decay (Cold War domesticity) and an external intruder (the Vietnam War) imposing itself upon the poet's vision. In either case, the result is the same: instead of "seeing ... the unique Holy Infant / burning sublimely," the poetic speaker sees only "as off a beltline, more, more senseless figures aflame." By these lights, the reader is again alerted to the uneven erosion of subjectivity, for both the poetic speaker and those rendered depersonalized and disfigured by war.

In resisting multiple ways of sanitizing war, then, Levertov enacts a destabilization of poetic subjectivity that is essential to imagining war's vast destruction. The final quatrain of this poem further complicates the basis of lyric utterance in this context:

And this insect (who is not there—  
it is my own eyes do the seeing, the insect  
is not there, what I see is there)  
will not permit me to look elsewhere,

or if I look, to see except dulled and unfocused  
the delicate, firm, whole flesh of the still unburned.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> *To Stay Alive* 16.

When the speaker claims that this insect “will not permit me to look elsewhere,” she does so in curious parenthetical comments that twice assert that the insect is not “there” while also affirming that “it is my own eyes doing my seeing,” that “what I see is there.” What the “there” refers to is unclear, aside from the sense that it is something outside the self. Or to be more specific, imagining what is “there” (and not there, at the same time) represents the involuntary act, as Levertov sees it, of bearing witness to violence that is not directly experienced, perhaps not even directly seen. What *is* there, however, is the possibility of untouched humanity in the absence of war, framed in the final couplet as “the delicate, firm, whole flesh of the still unburned.” In imagining the sheer magnitude and industrial inhumanity of air raids, Napalm, and bodies aflame, Levertov makes the concept of redemption, religious or otherwise, impossible. But as these final lines demonstrate, having to go through this tortuous imaginative process leads the poet back to those who are yet untouched by war. On the one hand, one could imagine the “still unburned” as Americans at home, enjoying their domestic comforts while others burn. But it is possible here to read it another way, too—as an incomplete vision of a future without war, in which those “still unburned” include those in Vietnam. In previous instances of imagined collectivity, Levertov sought to imagine war as an unevenly shared condition across space and time. Here, however, the “still unburned” in the absence of war gestures toward the incomplete possibility, “dull and unfocused,” of imagining collectivity outside the bounds of the national security state.

## The Precarity of Witnessing War

Leverlov saw her war poetry as a vehicle for resisting the moralizing forces that obscured historical violence in the making. This way of seeing war is perhaps so understudied because it is, by the poet's own declaration, precarious by design. In her 1975 lecture and essay, "On the Edge of Darkness: What is Political Poetry?," Leverlov called for "more immediacy"—of "less distance between event and poem"—in an era of "unremitting emergency" from which she felt no poet's voice could be exempt.<sup>50</sup> For her, poems written in a time of unfolding emergency—poems essentially written in the *present*—were personal and political at once, and they occupied both categories as a matter of public accountability. Poets who refuse to wrestle with this complicated condition, she contends, "[enshrine themselves] in temples of respectability"<sup>51</sup>—or what Oppen has essentially held up as a sphere of "authenticity" that refuses any treatment of the present in its full historical context.

Leverlov's call for a poetics of the present can also be seen in "Who Is at My Window" (1965), a short poem from *O Taste and See*. In this poem, the speaker contrasts her writing of "today" with a "blind cuckoo" singing an "old" song "about fear, about / tomorrow and next year."<sup>52</sup> Faced with having to narrate uncertainty in the face of peril, the cuckoo sings, "What's the use?" In response, the speaker says:

I want to move deeper into today;  
he keeps me from that work.  
Today and eternity are nothing to him.  
His wings spread at the window make it dark.

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<sup>50</sup> *Light Up the Cave* 122, 118.

<sup>51</sup> *Light Up the Cave* 117.

<sup>52</sup> *Poems 1960-1967* 122.

Go from my window, go, go!

Oppen suspected that the blind cuckoo in this poem referred to him, and several recent accounts of the story suggest the same.<sup>53</sup> But Levertov's target in "Who Is at My Window?" is more broadly construed. In rejecting and, indeed, caricaturing the expression of futility she attributes to Oppen, the poem's speaker treats the question of speaking to the present—to the unfolding of crisis—as a matter of historical urgency, and as a critical rejection of formal restraint more generally.

As we have seen, Levertov collapses distance between "event and poem" by unmaking the symbolic connection between domestic "authenticity" and national security. In the process, the idea of the present itself expands, thus widening the possibilities for witnessing historical violence. In her work on contemporary American military campaigns, historian Mary Dudziak has shown that the development of the security state during the Cold War authorized unremitting war and conflict that continues to the present day.<sup>54</sup> To understand the Vietnam War, which itself lasted close to a quarter of a decade, we must see it as part of a continuum of perpetual war, which undermines the notion that war's presumed exceptionality may suspend the rule of law both at home and abroad. As Dudziak reminds us, "[t]he assumption of temporariness becomes an argument for exceptional policies" in a time of war.<sup>55</sup> In this context, acts of war are rationalized under uncritical assumptions that they are necessary, and that a state of normalcy will soon be restored. Yet as the logic of the security state clearly shows, the

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<sup>53</sup> See Hatlen, "Feminine Technologies" and Rifkin, "That We Can Somehow Add Each to Each Other?"

<sup>54</sup> By Dudziak's reckoning, "[t]he only war after World War II, other than a period of seven months in 1990, was from October 15, 1976, to November 4, 1979" (30-31).

<sup>55</sup> *War Time: An Idea, A History, Its Consequences* 4.



state of exception is itself normalized in a time of perpetual war. That normalization has had far-reaching effects for the way we come to understand both war and the domestic conditions that limit political conceptions of the human. To clearly see the effects of normalization, Levertov suggests, is to hold in suspense, and thereby question, the very crisis conditions that keep the suffering of others far from reach.

Oppen, by contrast, found that even in his own attempts to write “a decisive expression of a period” in which war was a clear, if mostly unspoken, backdrop, his proposed ethic of minimal unity gave way to a deeply personal, mainly firsthand reckoning with war. Oppen, himself a veteran of World War II, turns after the first third of his masterwork, *Of Being Numerous*, to his own experiences of combat in the Battle of the Bulge. “How talk /Distantly of ‘The People’,”<sup>56</sup> the poem’s speaker asks, when such a visceral personal memory of the war dead exists? At the heart of the poem’s conflict between “the shipwreck of the singular” and “the meaning of being numerous,”<sup>57</sup> it becomes apparent that any reckoning with the civic experience of violence cannot help but involve one’s most immediate and often painful frames of reference. In this way, parts of this poem, which has long been considered a model for political poetry guided by formal restraint, begin to model the *impossibility* of taking a restrained position in response to ongoing public crisis.

Over the course of the rest of this poem, the poet increasingly worries over his own capacity to maintain an impersonal ethos in the face of ongoing violence. Toward end of *Of Being Numerous*, Oppen increasingly turns toward autobiographical references to women and domestic life; the later sections are populated with daughters, lovers, and a

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<sup>56</sup> *New Collected Poems* 171.

<sup>57</sup> *New Collected Poems* 166.

nurse caring for a man at the end of his life. To some extent, these autobiographical details are in keeping with the anxieties of a poet caught up between the expression of formal precision and the familiarity of expressing only the most “authentic” details of everyday life. For Oppen, gazing into an unknown world of others is an irresponsible aspiration at best, or a dangerous form of melodrama at worst. But in resting the burden of imagining unknown violence and conflict on the reproductive “courage of women,”<sup>58</sup> the end of the poem centers on reassuring promises of untroubled paternal longevity. Even the poet’s final sections, in which a speaker calls out to a nurse, who is presumably a woman—“You are the last / Who will see him / Or touch him, / Nurse”<sup>59</sup>—belies Oppen’s staunchly minimalist reckoning with overheard voices and materials to take stock of collective crisis. Lines like these track with another Oppen poem, “Time of the Missile,” in which the speaker again seems to address a domestic feminine presence: “My love, my love, / We are endangered / Totally at last.”<sup>60</sup> In privileging these figures of feminine care, Oppen’s ethic of poetic restraint becomes saturated with the same domestic motifs that were central to managing Cold War anxieties. In the face of endangerment—not just of one’s own individual mortality, but of the possibility of collective, total domestic annihilation—the poet turns inward, toward the self-protective space of the home.

In “The Mind’s Own Place,” Oppen continues to position his poetics of minimalism as a necessary ethic: he draws a firm distinction between poetry, which “shows confidence in itself and in its materials,” and “histrionics,” which he defines as “a

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<sup>58</sup> *New Collected Poems* 184.

<sup>59</sup> *New Collected Poems* 187.

<sup>60</sup> *New Collected Poems* 70. The poem originally comes from Oppen’s 1962 collection, *The Materials*.

performance, a speech by the poet.” Poetry, he insists, is careful and calculated and precise. Levertov’s “histrionics,” by contrast, constitute in Oppen’s mind an emotional and physical outpouring that verges on hysteria. Yet that very outpouring formally interrupts the idea that internalized fictions of security at home can redeem any military action taken in the name of American exceptionalism.

This is not to say, of course, that a poetic ethic of restraint is insufficient in speaking to these same concerns—as I have just suggested, Oppen’s own reticence to write about war conveyed his genuine fear of drawing false equivalences between his experiences and those of others. In his adjudication of Levertov’s protest poetry, however, Oppen reifies the very structures of exclusion that limit our understanding of the subjects of public crisis. Levertov’s distillation of the personal, or the “inner,” into the “outer” world of war, crucially contests a poetic treatment of crisis as an act of formal precision. Her unmaking of domesticity in the witnessing of war draws us toward a contingent view of historical crisis that is separate from the discrete analysis of single crisis events and wartime spectacle. Her poetry instead demands close attention to the ways in which seemingly distant violence both pierces and distorts our view of who and what counts most when “the house next door is burning.”

### **Essex Hemphill's Evidence of Being**

While Denise Levertov troubled the representational boundaries of state-sponsored violence to which she had little personal access, this chapter examines the violence experienced by those most vulnerable to an epidemic that went unrecognized by the state. As public fears of nuclear attack subsided and the US ended its involvement in Vietnam, civil defense resources were reoriented toward a general, “all-hazards approach” to disaster under FEMA in 1979. Despite civil defense planners’ efforts to expand the role of national emergency preparedness throughout the seventies, FEMA inherited civil defense’s decentralized posture, with coordination largely still falling to state officials and local municipalities.<sup>1</sup> Public health emergencies, meanwhile, were not part of the all-hazards framework unless they involved potential weapons of war.<sup>2</sup> Combined with a poorly funded public health system and the contraction of social welfare programs under the Reagan administration, this emergency framework created the ideal conditions for the mismanagement of the AIDS pandemic in the US.

The federal government’s belated and disorganized AIDS response was permissible, in part, because it was not perceived to disrupt the sanctity of a nuclear family that was presumably white, middle class, and unaffected by drugs or non-normative sexual practices that were associated with the early years of AIDS. The epidemic’s origins in the US can be traced to 1981, when the Center for Disease Control

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<sup>1</sup> See Andrew Lakoff, “The Generic Biothreat.”

<sup>2</sup> Lakoff points out that infectious disease did not come to be considered a wide-ranging issue for emergency planners until it emerged as a potential form of bioterrorism. Military planners began to train for public health crises as early as 1989, but the threat of Ebola, not AIDS, remained their primary focus, and public health would not be incorporated into federal disaster planning models until well after September 11.

(CDC) investigated outbreaks of rare and rapidly spreading variations of pneumonia and cancer. By the mid-eighties, over fifty thousand Americans were infected with what would come to be known as HIV/AIDS.<sup>3</sup> Yet President Ronald Reagan did not attend a single meeting on AIDS until 1983, he made no mention of the disease until 1985, and he did not publicly address the rapidly growing epidemic until 1987—two years after Reagan’s friend and fellow actor, Rock Hudson, died of AIDS-related complications, and after over forty thousand people had already died nationwide.<sup>4</sup> Even after Surgeon General C. Edward Koop wrote and distributed a 1987 report that advocated safe sex practices, demystified false information and stereotypes, and urged Americans not to demonize those who were afflicted with AIDS, the Reagan administration remained relatively silent.<sup>5</sup> In his report, Koop diagnosed a central component of the problem: “AIDS has brought fear to the hearts of most Americans—fear of disease and fear of the unknown.”<sup>6</sup> This fear persisted throughout the epidemic, and it guided much of the government’s refusal to treat it as an urgent public emergency.

This public fear surrounding AIDS was undergirded by the state-sanctioned demonization of non-normative sexual practices. Senator Jesse Helms helped curb funding for AIDS treatment and education out of disgust for “a disease transmitted by people deliberately engaging in unnatural acts,”<sup>7</sup> while evangelical leader Patrick Buchanan insisted that “homosexuals . . . have declared war upon nature, and now nature

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<sup>3</sup> Center for Disease Control, “HIV and AIDS—United States, 1981-2000.”

<sup>4</sup> See Ronald Bayer, *Private Acts, Social Consequences*, Jennifer Brier, *Infectious Ideas*, and amFAR, “Thirty Years of HIV/AIDS: Snapshots of an Epidemic.”

<sup>5</sup> According to Hartman in *The War for the Soul of America*, the Surgeon General sent an eight-page condensed version of his full report “to every household in America, 107 million in total, the largest single mailing in American history” (160).

<sup>6</sup> Koop, C. Everett, *Surgeon General’s Report on Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome* 3.

<sup>7</sup> Seelye, “Helms Puts the Brakes to a Bill Financing AIDS Treatment.”

is exacting an awful retribution” upon them.<sup>8</sup> National security officials and medical professionals, meanwhile, regularly applied the term “containment” to the virus, as if AIDS was a threat to be policed from within.<sup>9</sup> Steeped in a punitive narrative of punishment for the lives of those persisting outside the state-sanctioned vision of the heteronormative nuclear family, these attitudes effectively sentenced thousands of people to death. And without adequate federal intervention, the epidemic grew. By the time the Federal Drug Administration (FDA) expedited the release of antiretroviral drugs in 1997, which significantly reduced some AIDS-related deaths, 792,000 people were already living with the disease, and the death count had risen to 390,692.<sup>10</sup>

The failures of the early AIDS years are now well-documented, but they are usually framed as a battle between predominantly white AIDS activists and the Reagan administration. Even within queer communities and communities of color, the disease was largely assumed to be the concern of white gay men and drug users.<sup>11</sup> These assumptions presume the rise and fall of an emergency event with a discrete beginning and end, involving a limited set of culpable victims. This narrowly victim-blaming view of the epidemic is not surprising, considering that it was handled by an administration that advocated a more self-reliant and decentralized approach to government in general, and did not give any sustained attention to systemic public health issues. Even the

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Hartman 156.

<sup>9</sup> As Jennifer Brier observes, the Reagan administration’s actions amounted to saying that “AIDS, like communism, needed to be physically prevented from entering the country” (*Infectious Ideas* 82). Paula Treichler notes in “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse” several instances in which medical officials categorized AIDS treatment plans as forms of “containment” to be managed by maintaining the general population’s distance from “the original high risk groups,” gay men and drug users (66).

<sup>10</sup> See CDC, “HIV and AIDS Timeline,” and amFAR, “Thirty Years of HIV/AIDS: Snapshots of an Epidemic.”

<sup>11</sup> See Bost, *Evidence of Being*.

Surgeon General's Report on AIDS, which has otherwise been historically praised for its elevation of concerns that the Reagan administration otherwise ignored, places the onus of responsibility on "state and local task forces," as well as on "family, social and psychological support mechanisms in the community."<sup>12</sup> A narrative of personal responsibility and self-reliance (but what essentially amounted to an anti-government narrative, except when it came to war) overrode the possibility of any sustained national attention to public health and social welfare. In so doing, it helped sanction the idea that individuals and communities should be responsible for their own actions, their recovery, and their treatment.

Under this narrative (and the conditions of social decline surrounding it), queer people of color were disproportionately vulnerable to AIDS. In the early nineties, black people made up less than twelve percent of the population, but they comprised 25 percent of diagnosed AIDS cases. The average survival time for black people with AIDS was eight months, compared to eighteen to 24 months among white people. Not only were black urban communities less likely to have the same public health resources for AIDS as those of white communities in the same metropolitan area, but many black people, most of whom had long been wary of doctors' historical mishandling, misdiagnosis, and outright abuse of black bodies, refused to acknowledge AIDS as anything other than a white disease.<sup>13</sup> By 1994, AIDS was the number one killer of African-Americans aged 18

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<sup>12</sup> Koop 32.

<sup>13</sup> See Martin Duberman, *Hold Tight Gently*, Cathy Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness*, and Benoit Denizet-Lewis, "Double Lives on the Down Low."

to 44. Yet black people were seldom the focus of AIDS education, outreach, and funding, and their death rate remained high even as the epidemic was otherwise on the decline.<sup>14</sup>

The disproportionate precarity of people of color to AIDS can be traced to a range of systemic inequities. From public education, to housing, health care, policing, imprisonment, and employment opportunities, communities of color have long been subject to increasing measures of collective inequality. These ongoing disaster conditions go hand in hand with the onset of respectability politics, in which black communities have sought relief from a history of white supremacy by enforcing heteronormative, patriarchal, and middle-class norms of stability within their own ranks.<sup>15</sup> As Cathy Cohen observes, “there was a real sense within black communities that you had to put your best face forward in order to prove that you deserve equal rights and equal status, and that face didn't include gays and IV drug users with AIDS.”<sup>16</sup> Bolstered by respectability politics, the AIDS epidemic's most sluggish forms of crisis response did not just emerge as a single public health failure: in fact, the very systems that created its failures were foundational to the maintenance of antigay and antiblack state power.

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<sup>14</sup> See Marlon Riggs, “The Inescapable Wages of Silence” and Cathy Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness*. While activist communities eventually won broad support for expedited research, funding, and treatment in the mid- to late- nineties, these actions primarily benefited members of white communities with greater access to and willingness to use local public health resources. The most powerful engine of AIDS activism, The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT/UP), was most active in white gay communities, and their efforts mainly benefited white gay men despite their increasing efforts to direct national attention toward communities of color. AIDS advocacy groups formed by and for communities of color, meanwhile, remained relatively invisible to public concern.

<sup>15</sup> In *The Boundaries of Blackness*, Cathy Cohen notes that queer black people have historically “been seen in black communities as mitigating one's racial identity and deflating one's community standing.” (14). Candice Jenkins further explains in *Private Lives, Proper Relations* that the suppression of non-normative sexuality within the black community constituted a “deliberate attempt, however misguided, to gain access to the respectability of ‘civilized’ status . . . because blacks’ alleged sexual and familial pathology has historically been one major justification for our exclusion from the privileges of ‘civilization’ by whites” (3).

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Benoit Denizet-Lewis, “Double Lives on the Down Low.”



To mourn AIDS fully, then, is to mourn enduring losses that began long before the epidemic's worst years, and which continue to present day. If, as Christina Sharpe notes in *In the Wake*, to be black is to constantly live "in the push toward [one's] death," to be black *and* gay in the age of AIDS is to be doubly aware of the complicated collective histories of dispossession that keep one's embodied peril so powerfully in play.<sup>17</sup> In a speech given not long before his own death to AIDS, poet and critic Melvin Dixon called this phenomenon "double cremation."<sup>18</sup> "We must," Dixon insisted, "guard against the erasure of our experiences and our lives." Dixon was a key contributor to an outpouring of black gay poetry, short stories, films, workshops and performances that emerged in the seventies, and hit its stride throughout the eighties and nineties. A multitude of anthologies, journals, performance groups, and small presses emerged alongside black gay activist organizations in order to demand the visibility and livability of black gay social life.<sup>19</sup> Their work was not just attentive to the loss of single lives or even entire communities to AIDS—instead, it took on what Sharpe has called "wake work," or the keen recognition of the historical and social formations that undergird the normalized disposability of black queer people.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *In the Wake* 10.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Bost, *Evidence of Being* 2. See also Kathryn Bond Stockton, who observed, "AIDS is the most intense and sorrowful place where the signs 'black' and 'queer' consistently meet" (179).

<sup>19</sup> In *Boundaries of Blackness*, Cathy Cohen identifies "the emergence of an outspoken and brave black lesbian and gay leadership" (93) led by poets of color, and joined by political and social organizations such as the Bay Area Black Lesbians and Gays, the DC Coalition of Black Gays, and the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays.

<sup>20</sup> "Put another way," Sharpe writes, "living in the wake means living in and with terror in that much of what passes for public discourse *about* terror we, Black people, become the *carriers* of terror, terror's embodiment, and not the primary objects of terror's multiple enactments; the ground of terror's possibility globally" (15).

Despite their prolific writing and the popularity of their work within black gay artistic communities, these poets have been relatively unknown in both queer and mainstream publishing circles, and they are understudied in literary criticism compared to a substantial body of work examining poetry, prose, performance, and art by mainly white gay writers and artists. All but excluded from predominantly white publishing industries, many black gay poets self-published, or they developed their own small presses and writing collectives. Writers and artists such as Melvin Dixon, Essex Hemphill, Marlon Riggs, Assotto Saint, and Donald Woods established forms of self-fashioning that departed from both AIDS elegies by white poets, and from the emphasis on black masculinity drawn from Black Arts Movement poets as well. In this way, they protested the terms of their exclusion from both black and gay forms of expression, poetic and otherwise, that operated at the exclusion of black queer identity.

This chapter focuses on Hemphill, whose poetry, performances, and publishing efforts exposed the overlapping networks of power that rendered black gay men subject to social and corporeal death. He did this by establishing continuities between the past and ongoing present of anti-black and anti-gay violence, and by uncovering the embeddedness of state power throughout. His methodology was indebted to black feminist thought represented by the Combahee River Collective, whose members wrote in their “Collective Statement” that “homophobia arises from the nature and construction of the political, legal, economic, sexual, racial and family systems within which we live.”<sup>21</sup> Hemphill examined the effects of these multiple systems through their manifestations in state-sponsored violence and neglect, in addition to generalized

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<sup>21</sup> “The Combahee River Collective Statement” 283.

“American Dream” narratives that operated at the expense of black and gay flourishing, to include from within black families, communities, and white gay public spaces. By unveiling the conditions under which black gay life and collective loss have always been synonymous, his poetics resist the white heteropatriarchal violence built into institutions of state-sponsored protection. In so doing, he also made room for a speculative imaginary that privileged the possibility of solidarity and survival outside the bounds of state-sponsored neglect.

### **At the Limits of the AIDS Elegy**

Despite their prolific writing and performances, black queer writers in the age of AIDS have long been overshadowed by the AIDS elegy. Beginning in the eighties and through the nineties, AIDS elegies bore witness to the pervasive sense of loss, fear, alienation, and outrage experienced by queer writers and artists. Poets such as Mark Doty, Thom Gunn, and Paul Monette, who were elevated by both publishing industries and literary and cultural critics, bore witness to the personal and collective losses of AIDS through various forms of versified mourning. These poets merged mourning with activism as they protested the demonization of non-normative sex and love by a nation that left them for dead. Paul Monette’s celebrated *Love Alone: 18 Elegies for Rog*, for instance, merges expressions of grief and monogamous love with military metaphors and dramatic scenes in hospital beds. His poems expand the sphere of elegiac thinking in an era suffused by ongoing emergency, while also retaining familiar elegiac devices that

appealed to sympathetic readers and critics—some of whom were learning about AIDS for the first time.<sup>22</sup>

Monette's elegies also resonated with audiences otherwise insulated from AIDS because their themes reflected the concerns of a privileged social class. As Jennifer Brier explains, early AIDS outreach in the US was predominantly associated with gay-identified men who were white, highly educated, and wealthy, and whose relative visibility reified "the equation in popular culture between whiteness and gay identity. This meant that the desires of 'out' white gay men came to represent most gay men, regardless of race."<sup>23</sup> We can see echoes of a privileged gay identity in Monette's war metaphors, in which life "before the war" is expressed in terms of the poet's having "once had it all." By having it all, Monette refers not only to the loss of sex-positive public spaces for queer people, but also to the loss of spaces of wealthy enjoyment: "our BMWs our zest for / winning and half-acre closets."<sup>24</sup> In its language of loss—or, metaphorically, a sudden entrance into an unending war—Monette voices the end of a world of opportunity. This point of view, of course, was unevenly shared by queer people in the age of AIDS, often along racialized lines—and unsurprisingly, its outlook resonated with mainstream, mainly heterosexual middle-class audiences.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> In her *Pursuing Privacy* chapter on Monette's writing, Deborah Nelson writes: "his image of the devoted—and monogamous—gay couple reassured a wary but increasingly concerned straight readership, many of whom were learning about AIDS for the first time. Monette's 'human face' transformed body counts and dollar figures in all their staggering immensity into a drama of ordinary individuals. The shock of recognition produced in his readers catapulted him to national prominence" (141).

<sup>23</sup> *Infectious Ideas* 6.

<sup>24</sup> *Love Alone* 20. See also John M. Clum, "'And I Once Had It All': AIDS Narratives and memories of an American Dream."

<sup>25</sup> See Nelson, *Pursuing Privacy*, which describes "Monette's seemingly inexhaustible surprise at the vulnerability of his rights" in his poetry (146).

Other AIDS elegies, meanwhile, took more detached positions on mourning in a familiar lyric register that was, again, praised for its accessibility. While Mark Doty's 1990 poem, "Tiara," for instance, forcefully responds to AIDS-related homophobia, the work for which he is most well-known is more indirect: it positions many of its speakers in or around museums, monuments, and street corners in wealthy metropolitan enclaves such as Boston, Cambridge, San Francisco, and midtown Manhattan. In her praise of Doty's award-winning *My Alexandria*, the critic Deborah Landau describes "humane and comforting narratives," his poetry's reach to "a wider audience," and the poet's engagement with "a transformed space beyond brutality."<sup>26</sup> Poet Carl Phillips echoes Landau's statements, emphasizing that in the context of AIDS, the "poems that have greater values . . . are going to be the ones that see AIDS as mere context within which to see something more timelessly true about the human condition."<sup>27</sup> These expressed desires for the "timelessly true" are reflective of a poetic culture influenced by New Criticism, to be sure, but they also reflect the desires of a reading public determined to see AIDS only as a "mere context" for universally expressed values. In this way, AIDS elegies developed a literary reputation for seeking consolation not only for the victims of AIDS, but for a readership focused on the accessibility of a monolithic (white) gay culture.

Literary criticism has historically followed a similar pattern of identifying primarily with queer culture as a white culture. As José Esteban Muñoz argues in *Disidentifications* in 1999, "[a] survey of the vast majority of gay and lesbian studies and

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<sup>26</sup> "'How to Live. What to Do'" 206, 194. Landau goes on in this essay to express the need for "a broad spectrum of poetic strategies"—presumably, strategies that are tailored to both gay and straight middle class audiences—"in writing about this epidemic" (205).

<sup>27</sup> "Boon and Burden: Identity in Contemporary Poetry" 165.

queer theory in print shows” an “absence of colored images” that is reflective of “queer culture’s whiteness.”<sup>28</sup> By theorizing queer culture as a monolithic force, this body of scholarship has operated mainly at the exclusion of those most vulnerable to the early AIDS years, thus reifying the conditions under which black gay bodies have long remained invisible, even disposable. This dynamic, of course, is changing—beginning with Munoz’s *Disidentifications* and Roderick Ferguson’s *Aberrations in Black*, queer of color critique has taken on a sharpened focus in recent years.<sup>29</sup> The ensuing critical body of work on queer black poets, likewise, (especially on those writing at the height of the epidemic) is small, but it is growing.<sup>30</sup>

Contrary to this literary and critical history of whiteness and the corresponding treatment of AIDS as a delimited period of sudden loss, queer black poets writing in this same period drew attention to the *longue durée* of black disposability, the traces of which cannot be distilled to a single event or set of easily recognizable disaster conditions. Their poetry shared none of the universalizing tendencies of AIDS elegies (and their reception histories) because they were writing as racialized and hypersexualized bodies, whose dispossession existed in longer and less visible terms than the parameters of the early AIDS years. Beginning in the late seventies and continuing throughout the eighties and

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<sup>28</sup> *Disidentifications* 10. For examinations of AIDS elegies and art, see Deborah Nelson, *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America*, Deborah Landau, “How to Live, What To Do: The Poetics and Politics of AIDS,” Diana Fuss’s *Dying Modern*, Melissa Zeiger’s *Beyond Consolation*, Laura Tanner’s *Lost Bodies*, and Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism*. Excepting some portions of Zeiger’s book and one portion of Landau’s article, these articles and book chapters mainly concern the work of white gay poets.

<sup>29</sup> More recent volumes of queer of color critique include Kathryn Bond Stockton’s *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame* (2006), Darieck Scott’s *Extravagant Abjection* (2010), and GerShun Avilez’ forthcoming *Black Queer Freedom* (2020). It also includes the critical anthology *Black Queer Studies* (2005), and its follow-up anthology, *No Tea, No Shade* (2016).

<sup>30</sup> See Dagmawi Woubshet’s *The Calendar of Loss*, Darius Bost’s *Evidence of Being*, and the anthology edited by Tiffany Austin et. al, *Revisiting the Elegy in the Black Lives Matter Era*.

nineties, poetry, performance, film, music, and art flourished in queer communities of color based in Washington, DC and New York, but also in cities as diverse as Philadelphia, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and London.<sup>31</sup> Black gay artists, poets performers and filmmakers not only bore witness to antiblack and antigay dispossession, but they also provided vital sites and sources for imagining the survival of queer people of color.

Among these artists, Hemphill was a prolific writer, editor and performance collaborator. Before his death to AIDS in 1995, at the age of 38, he wrote several chapbooks before publishing two books, a collection of poems, and editing the anthology *Brother to Brother*. Like many black gay writers, he resisted conventional tropes of mourning, which he found inadequate for representing the ongoing double cremation of black gay life. His poem “When My Brother Fell,” for instance, mourns the death of black gay writer and editor Joe Beam in 1988. If this is an elegy, it lacks some of its signature devices: there is no formal address to an absent other, and there are no clear declarations of mourning or melancholia. Instead, the poet positions himself as someone who must pick up where his friend left off: as an activist, and as a writer. The tone is brisk and resolute:

When my brother fell  
 I picked up his weapons  
 and never once questioned  
 whether I could carry  
 the weight and grief,  
 the responsibility he shouldered.  
 I never questioned  
 whether I could aim  
 or be as precise as he.  
 he had fallen,  
 and the passing ceremonies

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<sup>31</sup> See Bost, *Evidence of Being*.

marking his death  
did not stop the war.<sup>32</sup>

Like Paul Monette in *Love Alone*, Hemphill attributes his grief to a losing “war” in which funerary ceremonies have no actionable effect. Unlike Monette, however, whose military metaphors focused on the ravages of AIDS (and made comparisons to World Wars I and II, as well), Hemphill sees the war as a sustained fight against black queer invisibility, in which “passing ceremonies” are inadequate for the task of remembrance. “Our loss,” he writes later in this poem, “is greater / than all the space / we fill with prayers / and praise.” This loss includes the mourning of Beam, but it also represents a sense of ongoing, collective and overwhelming loss, which can’t be allayed by church services and funerals and memorials.

Instead, Hemphill uses this elegy to issue a call to action in Beam’s honor: as Beam “burned out / his pure life force,” he brought black queer men “a chance / to love ourselves / with commitment.”<sup>33</sup> This is what Hemphill means by picking up Beam’s “weapons”—namely, the poems in the unfinished manuscript to *Brother to Brother*, Beam’s second anthology—to fight for the chance for black gay men to love one another openly. He contrasts the writing of these poems with more readily visible forms of public mourning such as the AIDS quilt, which “will not bring you back / nor save us.”<sup>34</sup> While funerals, memorials, and elegies to the dead are undoubtedly important, they do not necessarily disrupt the normalized sites, bodies, and behaviors that keep black gay life invisible, and in peril. And by tying Beam’s death (“will not bring you back”) to the collective disenfranchisement of black gay men (“nor save us,”), Hemphill emphasizes

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<sup>32</sup> *Ceremonies* 31.

<sup>33</sup> *Ceremonies* 32.

<sup>34</sup> *Ceremonies* 33.



the power of poetry to mourn while also opening up the scenes, sites, and embodied possibilities for flourishing.

In this way, mourning becomes a necessity that troubles the limits of black gay visibility across multiple horizons of being. In the introduction to *Brother to Brother*, Hemphill reflects on the many “strong durable masks” that queers of color create to protect themselves from marginalization by their families and their communities, which is powerfully undergirded by the disciplinary mechanisms of the state.<sup>35</sup> But to create a mask (or, at least, to keep it in tact) is to perpetuate rather than counter the double cremation of black gay men. As a way of removing these masks, of “destroying them whenever possible,” Hemphill cites black gay poetry’s “evidence of being:” “the revelation of “things not seen, evidence of black gay experiences on record, evidence of ‘being’ to contradict the pervasive invisibility of black gay men,” and to thus “transform the very nature of our existence.”<sup>36</sup> He treats the “evidence of being” in complex ways: as the countering of historical invisibility, as the act of putting one’s present-day experiences on record, and as the speculative desire to “transform the very nature of our existence” into something more visible and durable. In this way, he brings temporal and

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<sup>35</sup> In the introduction, Hemphill writes: “had there been the option of reading *In the Life* when I was a pubescent homosexual, I might have found time to dream of becoming a damn good carpenter, a piano players, a gardener, or a brain surgeon, but instead, a part of my life has been spent making strong durable masks, and another part has been spent removing them, destroying them whenever possible” (xvi).

<sup>36</sup> *Brother to Brother* xxi, xxviii. “Evidence of Being” was also the title of an unfinished project Hemphill envisioned toward the end of his life, which focused on autobiographical accounts of the lives of older black gay men whose stories remained untold. See Duberman, *Hold Tight Gently*. See also Darius Bost’s *Evidence of Being*, which asks the important question: “[i]f our critical stance toward black/queer archives is that of the bereaved and our imagined black/queer subject is always dead or death-bound, what does this mean for our future horizon?” (19).

experiential texture to the witnessing of black gay life—to the imagined “evidence” made possible in poetic form.

### **Sexual Solidarity**

In the same introduction to *Brother to Brother*, Hemphill privileges the making of “overt homoerotic poetry,” which, in countering the marginalization and demonization of black gay sexuality, would call into being “honest pictures of ourselves.”<sup>37</sup> In this way, he links sexuality and sexual enjoyment to the necessity of providing “evidence of being.” Black bodies, of course, have a long history of being both hypersexualized and treated as objects of revulsion.<sup>38</sup> This was a history of which he was well aware, and whose limits he and his fellow writers and artists aggressively sought to reclaim.

We can see the testing of these limits in Marlon Riggs’ 1989 autobiographical performance piece, *Tongues Untied*, which featured poetry and performances by (among others) Hemphill, Larry Duckette, and Wayson Jones, all of whom were frequent collaborators in poetry performances in DC, New York, and Philadelphia. In this film, the men dance, shirtless, to the sound of recited poetry and the rhythm of snapping. They kiss one another, and they exchange embraces that are both sensual and brotherly, serious and joyful. In the film’s opening passage, they chant the words “brother to brother” together over and over again, until the words seem to run together in a near-incomprehensible series of sounds. In the words of culture critic Wesley Morris, the men, but also the

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<sup>37</sup> *Brother to Brother* xxii, xxvii.

<sup>38</sup> Perhaps the most prominent historical example of the exploitation of black bodies in America can be seen through the history of black minstrelsy, which Eric Lott details in *Love and Theft*. But there are also numerous resonances of this phenomenon that are contemporaneous with the AIDS epidemic, to include Pat Buchanan’s sensationalizing of Willie Horton as part of his political campaign against Michael Dukakis. See Riggs, “Meet the New Willie Horton.”

words themselves, “become a wall of erotic self-protection.”<sup>39</sup> The men in this film capaciously interpret the film’s tag line, “black men loving black men is *the* revolutionary act,” as an expression of erotic love, survival, and solidarity.<sup>40</sup> There is a strange, rhythmic pulse running throughout the film: it is inviting, but certainly not accommodating.

The nationwide airing of this film on PBS was met with no shortage of resistance. Some public television stations refused to air *Tongues Untied*, and some newspaper coverage expressed revulsion with the film’s depictions of intimacy, and its reported “failure” to reach heterosexual audiences.<sup>41</sup> In response, Riggs wrote in an op-ed: “who has the authority to draw the thin line between innocuous ‘diversity’ and unacceptable ‘deviance’?”<sup>42</sup> As Riggs points out, black queer expression cannot be limited to a politics of suitability for a white audience, or to a politics of respectability for a black audience. Both measures reinforce the invisibility—the “strong durable masks,” as Hemphill put it—that rendered the lives of black gay men so precarious. Black gay poets, by contrast, sought to disrupt the systems of authority that censored their lives and their poetic

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<sup>39</sup> “Blackness, Gayness, Representation.” As Morris observes, the words begin to sound more like “brothertobrotherbrothertobrotherbrothertobrotherbrothertobrotherbrothertobrotherbrothertobrother.”

<sup>40</sup> The phrase originally came from an essay by anthologist Joseph Beam, with the original phrasing: “[b]lack men loving black men is a call to action, an acknowledgment of responsibility. We take care of our own kind when the night grows cold and silent” (*Brother to Brother* v).

<sup>41</sup> 20 of 50 PBS stations refused to air *Tongues Untied*—and while most newspaper coverage of the documentary was positive, Courtland Milloy, a *Washington Post* reporter, wrote several articles claiming that *Tongues Untied* failed to capture the “bigger picture” by not catering to heterosexual audiences. See Sullivan, “PBS stations refuse to air documentary on black Gays,” and Milloy, “Black Gays Evade Reality” and “Film on Black Gays is Bold, But Ignores the Bigger Picture.” See also Hemphill’s introduction to *Brother to Brother*, where he describes the refusal of the Langston Hughes estate to acknowledge Isaac Julien’s homoerotic film, *Looking for Langston*, which resulted in the film being banned from the US.

<sup>42</sup> Riggs, “Tongues re-tied? Filmmaker Marlon Riggs speaks for a group mainstream America would prefer to ‘erase’.”

imaginations. In so doing, they modeled a complex solidarity that not only countered their erasure, but also refused abstractions of diversity, or multiculturalism, that serve to assimilate queer people as a monolithic and sexless bloc of people.

The imagination that black queer artists developed during the AIDS epidemic was shady, irreverent, dissident, and (at least to some) unfamiliar. It rejected dominant cultural expectations of “black” and “queer,” in order to make room for more nuanced collective sensibilities of black gay life. As Hemphill writes in the introduction to *Brother to Brother*, “our most significant coalitions have been created in the realm of sex.”<sup>43</sup> To embrace queer sex—especially queer black sex, which had been all but excluded from the “back rooms, tea rooms, movie houses, and baths; the trucks, the piers, the ramble, the dunes” mourned by queer theorists (here, expressed by Douglas Crimp) and white gay writers—was to express shared intimacy, sex positivity, and solidarity.<sup>44</sup> In so doing, one may “nourish,” as José Muñoz declared, “the possibility of [a] current, actually existing gay lifeworld.”<sup>45</sup>

This is why much of Hemphill’s poetry, which is largely written in the present tense, projected his unapologetic sexual and political triumph over state-sponsored discipline and structural inequity. The poem “American Wedding,” for example, begins by countering the state’s enforcement of the heteronormative marital union:

In america,  
I place my ring  
on your cock  
where it belongs.  
No horsemen bearing terror,  
no soldiers of doom

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<sup>43</sup> *Brother to Brother* xx.

<sup>44</sup> “Mourning and Militancy” 140.

<sup>45</sup> *Cruising Utopia* 34.

will swoop in  
 and sweep us apart.  
 They're too busy  
 looting the land  
 to watch us.  
 They don't know  
 we need each other  
 critically.  
 They expect us to call in sick,  
 watch television all night, die by our own hands.  
 they don't know we are becoming powerful.  
 every time we kiss  
 we confirm the new world coming.<sup>46</sup>

The opening line of this poem is relatively well known for its sexualized subversion of American marital customs. Here, the poet claims agency in placing his ring “on your cock / where it belongs,” thus prioritizing queer sex and love over generalized visions of “america” and the monolithic marriage plot narrative that sustains it. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the celebration of a particularized vision of a nuclear family privileges a zone of protection from perceived threats—to include, in this case, the dual stigmas of queer contagion and black criminality. But the marriage ritual also has deeper roots in white supremacist ideologies, which have long regulated sexual norms among black people, between white and black people, and between queer and straight people.<sup>47</sup> The history of marriage in “america” that Hemphill invokes, then, constitutes the lasting suppression of legal, social, and physical relationships that do not fit the picture of heteronormative whiteness. In claiming the marriage ritual for himself (and for queer sexuality writ large), he seeks to make room for new rituals, affiliations, and forms of belonging.

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<sup>46</sup> *Ceremonies* 170.

<sup>47</sup> See Cathy Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens.”

With the locus of sexual and collective agency placed firmly in the hands of the poet, the marital ritual now has a canceling effect on apocalyptic visions of “horsemen / bearing terror,” and “soldiers of doom.” These images draw an implicit connection between the state’s involvement in regulating intimacy and the structure of the family with its equally long history of surveilling nonnormative bodies into submission. By invoking militarized representatives of the state, the poem recalls the Reagan era War on Drugs and the rise of mass incarceration and policing, which exacerbated the deadliness of everyday life for people of color—especially for queer people of color in Washington DC, who had been targets of numerous murders in the early eighties.<sup>48</sup>

In this poem, however, the soldiers are too intent on “looting the land” to maintain their surveillance of the lovers. The image of looting transfers the narrative of criminality and negligent behavior, which has historically been grafted onto people of color, to negligent representatives of state power. The soldiers “expect us to call in sick”—in other words, they assume that the lovers will resign themselves to solitary deaths in the face of state violence. But “they don’t know,” Hemphill writes, that “we are becoming powerful. Every time we kiss / we confirm the new world coming.” Here, embodied queer intimacy becomes a source of special knowledge to wield *against* the state’s security apparatus. By subverting the expectation that queer people will resign themselves to social and corporeal death, intimacy becomes not just a stay against ignorance, but a form of world-making. In this way, Hemphill harnesses an imagination that functions as a source of empowered knowledge, an anticipation of “becoming powerful,” that writes black gay solidarity into being. In transitioning from “I” and “you” to “we,” the poem depends upon

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<sup>48</sup> See Cohen, *Boundaries of Blackness* and Bost, *Evidence of Being*.

the accumulation of embodied knowledge and collective empowerment over structural violence rather than an effusion of unmediated self-expression.

The focus remains here on undoing the structural conditions that make black queer life unrepresentable. In contrast to the apocalyptic language of the first stanza, the second one begins with a pastoral scene:

What the rose whispers  
before blooming  
I vow to you.  
I give you my heart,  
A safe house.  
I give you promises other than  
Milk, honey, liberty.<sup>49</sup>

Here, the speaker and the addressee momentarily return to what seems, at first glance, to be a pastoral address to an absent lover—a form more traditionally associated with elegies, and with lyric forms more generally. But the focus is not on a rose blooming in the present, but on what it “whispers / before blooming”—its speculative personification. This is the promise that Hemphill gives to his lover—an aspirational pose, held in suspense, in contrast to the empty promises of “Milk, honey, liberty” that he associates with the cruel optimism of the state. “Long may we live,” he writes at the end of the poem, “to free this dream.”<sup>50</sup> This line suggests that the burden of living in a closeted culture of silence and death can only be freed outside the bounds of the American Dream narrative. In this way, he writes black gay being as a source of valuable self-knowledge and resistance to the state, which then opens up the possibilities for imagining a future for collective life in its wake.

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<sup>49</sup> *Ceremonies* 170, 171.

<sup>50</sup> *Ceremonies* 171.

## On Becoming a Queen

As Hemphill suggests at the end of “American Wedding,” state-sponsored violence has long been sanctioned by the protection of a white heterosexual public under the guise of universalizing fictions like “liberty.” These fictions have had powerful influence on the normalized regulation—even the self-regulation—of black and gay communities. The ubiquity of antiblack and antigay violence from within families, among friendships and acquaintances, within churches and community organizations, and throughout various public spaces remains one of Hemphill’s primary concerns. It is not just the overt violence of state, but its saturation in everyday life that has made black gay dispossession so ordinary, and so deadly. Under these conditions, to be black and gay constitutes an almost impossible mode of being. That impossibility permeates every site and scene from within one’s own communities of belonging.

One of Hemphill’s longest poems, “Heavy Breathing,” begins with the poet’s observations of the way antiblack and antigay violence doubly render him invisible and disposable. As with the start of “American Wedding,” he begins this poem by imagining his own sexualized presence against the limits of social and ideological spaces of belonging:

At the end of heavy breathing,  
 very little of my focus intentional,  
 I cross against the light of Mecca.  
 I recall few instances of piety  
 and strict obedience.  
 Nationalism disillusioned me.  
 My reflections can be traced



to protest slogans  
and enchanted graffiti.<sup>51</sup>

This intersection of the sexualized body, the expression of faith, and nationalistic fervor marks something of an impasse. We are here at the *end* of heavy breathing, the *end* of the light of Mecca, and at a moment in which nationalism no longer enchants (if it ever did). In making the fictions of nationalism synonymous with a failed religious pilgrimage and the end of a sexual encounter, Hemphill observes the limitations of finding solidity and a sense of belonging in a nation whose promised lands are defined by visions of heterosexual chastity and whiteness. At the same time, he also sees it as an occasion for thinking against their exclusions: “I allow myself to dream of roses,” he writes toward the end of this first section, “though I know / the bloody war continues.”

It’s this sense of knowing—the knowledge that one must imagine the impossible in order to survive—that is central to the poet’s work of self-fashioning in this poem. In a subsequent stanza, Hemphill reflects upon the sources of his erasure:

I am only sure of this:  
I continue to awaken  
in a rumpled black suit.  
Pockets bulging with tools  
and ancestral fossils.  
A crusty wool suit  
with salt on its collar.  
I continue to awaken  
shell-shocked, wondering  
where I come from  
beyond mother’s womb,  
father’s sperm.  
My past may be lost  
beyond the Carolinas  
North and South.

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<sup>51</sup> *Ceremonies* 4.

I may not recognize  
 the authenticity  
 of my Negritude,  
 so slowly I awaken.<sup>52</sup>

Here, Hemphill queries the status of his non-identity in a world that does not validate his race, his sexuality, or even his ancestral history. “I continue to awaken,” he repeats, in a state of simultaneous and repetitive disorientation and discovery. As part of a desire to know “where I come from / beyond mother’s womb, father’s sperm,” he acknowledges a past lost “beyond the Carolinas,” referring to legacies of enslavement and plantation labor that haunt contemporary black life. The erasure of these histories harkens back to a narrative of American exceptionalism, which depends upon the erasure of the nation’s violent history of slavery, racism, and patriarchy in order to function in an optimistic and universalized register despite ongoing evidence to the contrary. And in so doing, it leaves the poet with little room to understand of his own personal history, let alone room to imagine a place for his future.

In tying this continuum of historical dispossession to his own disorientation in the present—to the unrecognized “authenticity / of my Negritude”—Hemphill channels Aimé Césaire in asking, “Who am I? Who are we? What are we in this white world?”<sup>53</sup> In a revision of Descartes’ universalizing version of the same question (Who am I?), Hemphill’s reference to Césaire rejects the narratives of unmediated opportunity and the individuated pursuit of one’s desires, both of which foreclose the possibility of acknowledging ongoing collective racial disparity. Under this context, the question “Who am I?” is a collective one (“Who are we?”), thus again making the lyric subject of

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<sup>52</sup> *Ceremonies* 5.

<sup>53</sup> “Négritude,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

Hemphill's verse a collective one, whose self-determination can be imagined by troubling the sources of powerlessness and dehumanization. Hemphill refuses abjection as an end in itself in the service of Negritude,<sup>54</sup> opting instead for Césaire's original gloss on the term as "a voice . . . raising up" in "the darkness of the great silence."<sup>55</sup> In this way, he adopts a curious optimism through the poet's ability to look unflinchingly at disaster in order to ask, "Who are we?"

As Hemphill points out, no one is both more powerless *and* more desiring of self-determination than the queer black subject. In the opening sections of this poem, he continually depicts himself as a spectral presence without a face or fully formed body. But in calling out the pervasiveness of his dispossession, he "slowly awaken[s]" to imagine himself as something other than an invisible man, a rumpled black suit. As he does so, he calls out to an unnamed audience:

*Do you think I could walk pleasantly  
and well-suited toward annihilation?  
With a scrotal sack full  
Of primordial loneliness  
Swinging between my legs  
Like solid bells?*

I am eager to burn  
his threadbare masculinity,  
This perpetual black suit  
I have outgrown<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> See Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, which defines abjection in terms of both Fanon's work and the Black Power/Black Arts movement in the U.S.: "[i]n this context, the abject describes a kind of lowering historical cloud, a judgment animating arguments and rhetoric in both currents in which the history of peoples in the African diaspora . . . is a history of humiliating defeats, a useless history which must be in some way overturned or overcome" (4).

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Hobbs, "At the Living Heart."

<sup>56</sup> *Ceremonies* 5-6.

In examining his “primordial loneliness,” the speaker implicates an audience that presumes his annihilation: “*Do you think I could walk pleasantly / and well-suited toward annihilation?*”. The line is borrowed (but with different lineation) from Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, where the poet reflects on the passage of time and the swiftness of death.<sup>57</sup> While Whitman, certainly an important poet for the expression of queer sexuality, asks this question in a tone of wonder,<sup>58</sup> Hemphill repurposes the line in more apocalyptic and historically situated terms. For him, annihilation is both an impending physical reality and a symbolization of his marginal position as a sexed and raced being. In the images that follow, he counters the idea of walking “pleasantly” into one’s own annihilation by emphasizing not just his invisibility, but his embodied loneliness—his desire to appear as more than a sanitized object—in the face of double cremation.

In this way, we come to see the loneliness as the expression of the limits of one’s own desiring position for personal and collective recognition. his own analysis of “Heavy Breathing,” Darius Bost reads Hemphill’s loneliness as “a form of bodily desire, a yearning for an attachment to the social and for a future beyond the forces that create someone’s alienation and isolation.”<sup>59</sup> This interpretation highlights the strong connection Hemphill establishes between his embodied censorship and his desire for recognition outside the conditions of his exclusion. By invoking the image of a scrotal sack, Hemphill’s positions his loneliness as a metaphorical castration from social recognition; the scrotal sack, typically a symbol of male virility, is reduced to an image of swinging

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<sup>57</sup> *Ceremonies* 175. Hemphill identifies the source in the notes section of the book.

<sup>58</sup> In *Leaves of Grass*, after the line “Do you think I could walk pleasantly and well-suited toward / annihilation?”, Whitman answers in the affirmative: “Pleasantly and well-suited I walk, / Whither I walk I cannot define, but I know it is good, / The whole universe indicates that it is good, / The past and present indicate that it is good.” (337)

<sup>59</sup> *Evidence of Being* 49.

bells that is reminiscent of a marital motif. Like the swinging bells, the reference to a black suit, which contextualizes Whitman's originally cheerful "well-suited remark," is reminiscent of wedding attire, but it also refers to funerary attire, a motif that Hemphill himself addresses later in the poem as he attends "the funerals of my brothers," which "force me to wear / this scratchy black suit."<sup>60</sup> In both cases—at the beginning of a heteronormative union, or at the very end of life—the close proximity of black gay men to social and corporeal death are put on full display.

The scrotal sack and the black suit also recall Hemphill's disgust with the dehumanizing implications of white queer artistic representations of black bodies. The images are central to Robert Mapplethorpe's famous photograph, "Man in Polyester Suit," which depicts a black man in a three-piece suit, visible only from the neck down, with his penis exposed. This image was one of many by Mapplethorpe that incensed Hemphill for their portrayal of "parts of the [black] anatomy—genitals, chest, buttocks—close up and cropped to elicit desire."<sup>61</sup> For Hemphill, these photographs (particularly "Man in a Polyester Suit") "strikingly revealed" the way in which "[t]he post-Stonewall white gay community of the 1980s was not seriously concerned with the existence of black gay men except as sexual objects. In media and in art the black male was given little representation except as a big, black dick." Hemphill continues in this essay to mourn the absence of "the faces, the heads, and by extension, the minds and experiences" of black subjects presented by dominant forms of queer art and culture. With a single set of images, he illuminates and counters the exclusions delimited by default whiteness—as

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<sup>60</sup> *Ceremonies* 8.

<sup>61</sup> *Brother to Brother* xviii.

they are manifested within black families, churches, and communities, but also in the white queer reception of black bodies in art, and in gay public spaces more generally.

As the rest of the poem shows, the whiteness that structures everyday life has made the suffering of black queer people ordinary, simply part of everyday scenes of violence that are often witnessed, without comment, from within their own neighborhoods and places of gathering. The rest of “Heavy Breathing” begins with the X2 bus in Washington, D.C., whose occupants are subjected to the dailiness of ongoing poverty and violence:

At the end of heavy breathing,  
at the beginning of grief and terror,  
on the X2, the bus I call a slave ship.  
The majority of its riders Black.  
Pressed to journey to Northeast,  
into voodoo ghettos  
festering on the knuckles  
of the ‘Negro Dream.’<sup>62</sup>

The slave ship, of course, signifies the violent legacy of slavery. As Kathrine McKittrick explains, the slave ship “contains and regulates; it hides black humanity because it ‘just is,’ and because those inside, bound to the walls, are neither seeable nor liberated subjects.”<sup>63</sup> The women and men on this bus, likewise, are collectively silenced subjects, “pressed to journey to Northeast.” As Hemphill notes in a subsequent stanza, the occupants of this bus—“a cargo of block boys, urban pirates”—are stuck along with him: they “are all part of this voyage, / like me, rooted to something here.” There’s no indication of what that “something” is, but in being synonymous with being “voodoo

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<sup>62</sup> *Ceremonies* 6.

<sup>63</sup> *Demonic Grounds* xi.

ghettos,” “festering on the knuckles / of the ‘Negro Dream’,” the “cargo of block boys” present both a more textured and more tortured opposite of the American Dream. Unlike the white suburban backdrop that structures postwar American life, the ‘Negro dream’ references the unfulfilled desires of black people living in underdeveloped parts of cities—particularly in parts of Hemphill’s own place of residence in for much of his life, Washington, D.C.—leaving them disproportionately subject to violence both from within and without. In his prose writing and his poetry, Hemphill routinely describes having regularly witnessed violence against women and queer people in his neighborhood—on the bus, on street corners, with little to no intervention from bystanders. Poor black neighborhoods like the one he represents here are hampered by a long history of economic precarity, a history of disproportionate criminalization and imprisonment, and declining systems of public care. This dream does not console; it festers. It refuses to look away.

But in forcing the reader’s gaze toward these scenes of unfulfilled desire for visibility, safety, intimacy, and community, Hemphill also continually pushes against the conditions of his exclusion. We can see this resistance more fully as he applies this same unflinching gaze to the poem’s next scene, a white gay bar, in which he offers his most sustained examination of black persistence in a world shaped by whiteness. Here, the low-rent bar’s atmosphere makes him ill, “splattering my insides / in a stinking, shit-stained bowl”:

I reduce loneliness to cheap green rum,  
 spicy chicken, glittering vomit.  
*I go to the place*  
*where danger awaits me,*  
 cake-walking  
 a precarious curb

on a corner  
 where the absence of doo wop  
 is frightening.<sup>64</sup>

Unlike the spoiled paradise of Monette's poetry, this scene associates a white queer bar with filth and cheapness. It also represents a site of unevenly experienced queer desire, where the speaker is subject to an unnamed "danger" in "the absence of doo wop." The italicized line about danger (in addition to the doo wop reference) is borrowed from Marvin Gaye's "Flying High (in the Friendly Skies)," in which Gaye's likely references to heroin are repurposed as an expression of black vulnerability in a white landscape.

In writing Gaye's lyrics into the poem, Hemphill seeks to rewrite the abject whiteness of the bar. He repopulates this scene with references to black culture, from music to "spicy chicken" and to cake-walking, a plantation era performance of whiteness. As ex-ragtime entertainer Shephard Edmonds recounts, the cake walk "was generally on Sundays, when there was little work, that the slaves both young and old would dress up in hand-me-down-finery to do a high-kicking, prancing walk-around. They did a take-off on the manners of the white folks in the 'big house,' but their masters, who gathered around to watch the fun, missed the point."<sup>65</sup> The fact that Hemphill is now the cake-walker provides both a historical context and a subversive thrust for the scene that is about to unfold. He wants to "play to the mischief," where, in dancing among "cheap shots and catcalls," he can weave among the white men in the bar to be, even if only momentarily, a part of their fantasy in gazing upon the "low-rent light" of a drag queen performance.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> *Ceremonies* 8.

<sup>65</sup> Quoted in Baldwin, "The Cake Walk" 208.

<sup>66</sup> *Ceremonies* 8.



Like the cake-walkers before him, Hemphill's speaker finds a subversive, perhaps even secret, joy in taking narrative control of the scene. Cake-walking, by Edmonds' account, is irreverent, a sleight of hand in which white spectators miss the point of a black body's presence in the room. The fact that Hemphill describes his presence in the bar as cake-walking is particularly significant in the context of a drag queen performance, which momentarily transfixes the audience—not with her beauty, but with the cheapness and artificiality of her performance:

We are here  
witnessing the popular one  
in every boy's town.  
a diva by design.  
giving us silicone titties  
and dramatic lip synch.  
We're crotch to ass,  
shoulder to shoulder,  
buddy to buddy,  
squeezed in sleaze.  
We want her to work us.  
We throw money  
at her feet.  
We want her  
to work us,  
Let us see  
the naked ass of truth.<sup>67</sup>

No longer an alienated or objectified presence in this scene, the speaker moves from a subjectively lonely "I" to a "we," a collectively improvised group. The drag queen herself seems to have elicited this moment, in which she stands as "the popular one / in every boy's town." And yet, the description that follows hardly sounds like popularity: Hemphill describes her artificiality, the cheapness of her illusion. This moment of shared,

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<sup>67</sup> *Ceremonies* 9.

precarious intimacy between the queen and her spectators works precisely because the queen steers clear of crafting a believable fiction. This is what many would call realness: the embodiment of “sexual, gendered, classed, and racial forms of capital,” according to Matthew Goldmark, “that may not map onto a performer’s lived experience.”<sup>68</sup> Hemphill, a black man “playing to the mischief” in a white bar, is an active participant in this performance of realness, where his momentary sense of belonging with the rest of the room is contingent upon the drag performer’s sleight of hand—her awareness, like that of the cake-walker, of her own artificiality.

When Hemphill repeats the line “we want her to work us,” then, he underscores the importance of embodying speculative forms of being, even speculative forms of collective belonging, in the transitory space of the drag queen performance. He also rejects the idea of “work” as normalized labor, instead turning our attention to a kind of ecstatic energy coming from the queen herself. As the enjambment of this phrase now suggests, the focus is on the queen, on *her*: “we want her / to work us”—as in work the runway, or work the room—not just for her, but for *them*, the audience of queer men unified in desire. In this fleeting moment of artificiality, the unevenness of queer experience in a white gay public space fades from view. In this moment, Hemphill exists in a space he otherwise detests as part of an intimately formed group: “crotch to ass, / shoulder to shoulder, / buddy to buddy.”

But at the same time, these men are also mutually “squeezed in sleaze” in a historical moment in which all queer lives are in danger. The “naked ass of truth” they demand from the drag queen is not simply an illusion that understands itself as such—it

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<sup>68</sup> “National Drag” 501.

is an illusion functions precisely because it is grounded in the shared pain of powerlessness that has marked the majority of this poem's writing. In a prose essay, "To Be Real," Hemphill describes drag as a "pose": "To pose," he writes, "is to reach for power while simultaneously holding a real powerlessness at bay."<sup>69</sup> A pose, both in drag and in poetry, is precarious by nature. It is aspirational *because* it is abject. Hemphill's own reach for power here illuminates his simultaneous precarity and aspiration to power, where one's sense of belonging in a sea of whiteness, can, for a moment, become thinkable. To be real, to pose, to joyfully work (or, to willingly *be* worked into a scene of belonging)—these fictions can expand the sphere of thinkable queer consciousness, while also demanding an awareness of their fleeting nature, their artificiality, and their impossibility in the present. Thought in this way, a poetic pose holds open the possibility of new forms of solidarity without resorting to an uncritical scene of assimilation, or a fantasy of universalized being.

Hemphill illustrates his critical consciousness toward imagined solidarity most powerfully through his own shifting positionality throughout the poem. He directs the angle of vision, the scenes being described, and their limitations, and he moves in and out of each scene at will. He also controls the terms of address, where the "we" of this poem quickly dissolves back into an "I":

I'm an oversexed  
well-hung  
Black Queen  
influenced  
by phrases like

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<sup>69</sup> *Ceremonies* 113.

“the repetition  
Of beauty.”<sup>70</sup>

These refrains continue over the next few pages, invoking the same opening lines with variations on the “phrase” of influence. These phrases go from empty aestheticization, like “the repetition of beauty,” to “I am the love that dare not speak its name”—a euphemism for homosexuality coined by Oscar Wilde’s lover, Lord Alfred Douglas—to ACT/UP’s famous activist cry, “Silence = Death.”<sup>71</sup> As Hemphill shares these sentiments against silence with the white men who uttered them, he makes clear that for as long as he is visible only as “an oversexed well-hung Black Queen,” he has no purchase on phrases that are essentially by and for white people, from celebrated poets to prominent AIDS activists. Yet, these phrases still have influence over him, as they are perhaps the only models he has for the expression of solidarity among men who understand what it means to suffer muted lives and silent deaths—who understand the precarious poses and unfulfilled desires of a Queen—in the ongoing crisis of AIDS.

Later in the poem, Hemphill declares this form of collective desiring a way of “[s]earching for evidence / of things not seen”<sup>72</sup>—the same definition he issued in his prose writing on “evidence of being.” As we have already discussed, to search for evidence of being is to look for that which is invisible in order to make one’s desires for a durable future thinkable. In “Heavy Breathing,” Hemphill’s evidence of being takes shape through the countering of multiple exclusions that structure both his historical awareness of and everyday lived conditions of invisibility. In looking so unflinchingly at

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<sup>70</sup> *Ceremonies* 10.

<sup>71</sup> The phrase “I am the love that dare not speak its name” is from a poem, “Two Loves,” by Douglas—which, according to Hemphill in his notes, can be found in *The Penguin Book of Homosexual Verse* (see *Ceremonies* 175)

<sup>72</sup> *Ceremonies* 12.

the conditions of his dispossession, the poet momentarily takes control of the scene of abjection in order to imagine himself, and others, otherwise. In so doing, he imagines his own self-determination pried apart from the forces of antiblack and antigay violence that all but guarantee his death, and the death of thousands of black gay men that continue to present day.

### **Hemphill's Poetic Legacy**

By the time of Hemphill's death in 1995, the outpouring of black gay poetry in the age of AIDS was on the wane—mainly because many of these men, who had long anticipated their own deaths, were already dead. Joe Beam, editor of the anthology *In the Life* and the originator of *Brother to Brother*, died in 1988; Donald Woods (collaborator on *Tongues Untied*), Craig G. Harris (contributor to numerous black gay anthologies), and Melvin Dixon (the poet and scholar who coined the term “double cremation”) died in 1992; and Marlon Riggs (creator of numerous performance-based documentaries, to include *Tongues Untied*) and Assotto Saint (poet and major collaborator for the Other Countries Collective) died in 1994. This is just a short listing of the many contributors and collaborators in what Darius Bost has called a “black gay cultural renaissance,”<sup>73</sup> especially for poetry—some of whom survived the early years of the epidemic, but the vast majority of whom did not.

Like many of the black gay men before him, Hemphill's own funerary rites were muted, shrouded in the language of respectability politics and the heteronormativity of

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<sup>73</sup> See *Evidence of Being*, which provides an appendix of “Notable Individual, Organizations, and Publications.”

the church. At his funeral, his mother testified that he had given himself to Christ before his death—and a minister, after remembering him as a good son and family member, warned the congregation against “the dangers of alternative lifestyles.” As Robert Reid-Pharr put it, he was “buried by the very silence that he struggled against so fiercely.”<sup>74</sup> As writer and activist Barbara Smith observes, the funeral of James Baldwin, a famous queer writer and major inspiration for Hemphill who died in 1987, made no mention of his sexuality, either.<sup>75</sup> These frequent omissions at the funerals of black queer people (which Hemphill himself anticipated in “Heavy Breathing”) perpetuated their invisibility, negating the very possibility for “evidence of being” that Hemphill worked so hard to advocate.

These ceremonial displays of silence, of course, did not diminish the lives that these artists embodied, the formal possibilities they imagined, or the poetic legacies that they left behind. In closing his reflections on “evidence of being” in *Brother to Brother*, Hemphill, after providing a long list of self-published work and the production of writing collectives and literary magazines by black queer people, writes: “if there is to be evidence of our experience, we learned by the close of 1980s that our own self-sufficiency must ensure it, so that future generations of black gay men will have references for their desires.”<sup>76</sup> And indeed, fellow writers from *Brother to Brother* such as Reginald Harris and John R. Keene cite Hemphill’s example as an inspiration for imagining the possibilities for their own writing careers.<sup>77</sup> A culture of writing by and for

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<sup>74</sup> *Black Gay Man* 178.

<sup>75</sup> “We Must Always Bury Our Dead Twice.”

<sup>76</sup> *Brother to Brother* xxv.

<sup>77</sup> See Hemphill and Jones Papers, particularly “a random sample of tributes to Essex Hemphill” posted to the Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual People of Color listserv after Hemphill’s death;

black queer writers, furthermore has continued to grow after the publication of Hemphill's and Riggs' anthologies.<sup>78</sup> Most recently, writing by black queer poets Jericho Brown (who just won the 2020 Pulitzer Prize), Saeed Jones, and Danez Smith have drawn fresh attention to the ongoing realities of black mourning that are disproportionately experienced by black queer people, who continue to be vulnerable to the ongoing effects of AIDS *and* the ongoing contours of anti-black violence.

These poets have drawn frank and necessary connections between black and gay dispossession as AIDS continues to wreak silent havoc on black populations already imperiled by police violence and mass incarceration. While the white experience of AIDS has essentially become either elegiac or triumphant (or a mix of both) after the advent of antiretroviral drugs, the black experience of AIDS is an ongoing emergency not only made ordinary, but all but invisible except to poor black communities in the South that have been most affected. According to the CDC, half of black men who have sex with men will be diagnosed with HIV in their lifetimes. In the poem "1 in 2," Smith references this statistic in its title and prologue, and writes:

if you trace the word *diagnosis* back enough  
you'll find *destiny*

trace it forward, find *diaspora*

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Reginald Harris and John R. Keene describe Hemphill's influence on their life and writing in it, to include their observations of his performances and publications.

<sup>78</sup> The editors of *Fingernails Across the Chalkboard* (2007), a retrospective AIDS anthology of the black diaspora, cite Hemphill as a primary inspiration for their work. The Other Countries Collective, meanwhile, published two anthologies after the deaths of many black gay writers: *Sojourner: Black Gay Voices in the Age of AIDS* (1993), and *Voices Rising: Celebrating 20 Years of Black Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Writing* (2007) that are in conversation with the early anthology work done by Hemphill and Beam.

is there a word for the feeling prey  
 feel when the teeth finally sink  
 after years of waiting?

*plague & genocide* meet on a line in my body

i cut open my leg & it screamed<sup>79</sup>

In these lines, Smith traces diagnosis back to “destiny,” making AIDS a foregone conclusion for a generation of young people still plagued by the legacy of slavery. Like Hemphill, he makes this connection through its manifestation in their body—“*plague & genocide meet on a line in my body*”—and ongoing, unending pain. But the historical stakes, for Smith, call out with perhaps even greater urgency: having witnessed the ravages of AIDS taken out on an entire generation of black gay writers, Smith’s sense of genocide evokes a long trail of existential dread at the intersection of carceral and viral vulnerability. Written in the age of both AIDS and Black Lives Matter, Smith’s poetry voices the current emergency with embodied dread, fear, and pain, which feels less like the work of undoing normalized invisibility that Hemphill routinely invoked, and more like the loud sounding of a long overdue emergency alarm.

But as Smith acknowledges in an *New York Times* essay, titled “Reimagining Ourselves in an Increasingly Queer World,” they are, at the same time, giving flesh to an emergency poetics that Hemphill, among others of his generation, “made possible for a

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<sup>79</sup> *Don’t Call Us Dead* 62-63.



little somebody like me.”<sup>80</sup> In the essay, which take the form of a notional letter written to Hemphill, Smith asks: “What brightness do we walk toward when many feel they’ve made it to the light they were seeking? What does safety look like for us anywhere? What are we fighting for and who the hell are *we*?” In asking this series of questions, Smith demands that the time is now for queer black people to sharply define themselves against the multiple conditions not only of their exclusion, but of their ongoing vulnerability to premature death.

Such a stance against the fictions of optimism and their inherent cultures of exclusion inherits from Hemphill the need to create “evidence of being” to counter the conditions of one’s historical vulnerability to ongoing death. As we have seen, Hemphill’s poetics deliberately rewrote the racist and heteronormative exclusions of the state, the fictions of respectability politics and white queer objectification. His work served not only as a poetics of witness, but as a way of wielding powerful forms of self-knowledge over the terms of one’s vulnerability. By declaring evidence of being—by putting “evidence of black gay experiences on record,” Hemphill sought what he called “the *necessary* historical references for [his] desires”<sup>81</sup>—which, in turn, have served as necessary poetic and political models for the desires of the black gay writers to follow him.

The idea of poetically bearing witness as a “historical reference,” rather than the expression of personal extremity, is a curious one that, again, speaks to Hemphill’s

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<sup>80</sup> The full quote reads: “I mourn you actively, Essex. I feel the hole you and Assotto Saint and Melvin Dixon left in the air. I breathe in that strange space, trying to summon you long enough for tea and a few questions, long enough to tell you what you made possible for a little somebody like me.”

<sup>81</sup> *Brother to Brother* xxi.

awareness of the importance of his positionality to queer audiences. In his poetry, he stakes out his positionality as a subject of violence whose normalized dispossession has deep historical roots, but also as a writer, whose place in a community of marginalized writers stands on an important historical continuum. To function on these multiple registers of historical positioning departs from Levertov's own position on witnessing, which operates largely within the unfolding present of unevenly experienced wartime. For Hemphill, his precarious position as a black queer man writing in the age of AIDS served as a necessary historical marker, a bold line in the sand for others to follow. In this way, he served as his own "historical reference"—which included, of course, his understanding of his own place within a longer continuum of antiblack and antigay violence. In the chapters to follow, the poets of this study further complicate the historical witnessing of disaster (and, the concept of "historical reference" in poetic form) by literally extending their temporal, subjective, and conceptual reach. In so doing, the remainder of this dissertation turns more seriously toward an analysis not just of what constitutes a "real" state of emergency, but what kinds of politics can be made available in their wake.

### Claudia Rankine's Loneliness

Unlike the undeclared emergency of AIDS that silently revealed the long-standing inadequacies of a public health emergency apparatus, 9/11 saw the rapid consolidation of executive and federal powers under a bolstered national security state. As we have seen in previous chapters, early federal emergency models, which were inspired by decades-old civil defense paradigms, depended on ad-hoc coordination between citizens, their cities and municipalities, and state agencies, and were buttressed by limited forms of federal support.<sup>1</sup> Even after the development of FEMA, waning public fears of nuclear attack led to the underfunding of many federal emergency functions because they had a seemingly minimal impact on daily domestic affairs.<sup>2</sup> After the twin tower attacks, however, the rise of homeland defense changed the nature of disaster response into a massive federal expansion concentrated in the executive branch.

The level of federal involvement in public disasters has historically waxed and waned through various presidential administrations, with slow but steady increases in federal funding throughout most of the Cold War. After 9/11, however, federal

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<sup>1</sup> See Collier and Lakoff, "Distributed preparedness: the spatial logic of domestic security in the United States" and the White House's *Federal Response to Hurricane Katrina: Lessons Learned*, which cites this form of distributed preparedness for emergency as "deeply rooted in American tradition."

<sup>2</sup> From an executive power standpoint, this has not always been the case; see Edelson, *Emergency Presidential Power*. However, the executive branch granted FEMA limited capacities to influence and bring aid to public disasters, preferring instead to leave emergency response to the states leading up to September 11. See also Collier and Anderson, "Distributed Preparedness," and Deepa Kumar's "National Security Culture: Gender, Race and Class," which details the underfunded "self-help" model for civil defense that was in place for most of the late twentieth century.

emergency funding increased dramatically, specifically in response to terror.<sup>3</sup> In its own words, the Bush administration “transformed [its] government architecture, policies, and strategies in a comprehensive effort to defeat terrorism and better protect and defend the homeland.”<sup>4</sup> Even in the White House’s 2006 *The Federal Response to Hurricane Katrina: Lessons Learned* report, five years after 9/11, the word “terror” appears nearly as frequently as the term “natural disaster.”

The rapid expansion and centralization of homeland security fundamentally altered the way citizens move and behave in public space. Guided by the idea that terror can occur, in the words of the Department of Homeland Security’s 2002 founding document, “at any place, at any time, and with virtually any weapon,”<sup>5</sup> the war on terror escalated the already routinized regulation of bodies at airports, border checkpoints, traffic stops, and in electronic communications. By positioning terror as an unknown, violent future requiring immediate response, the Bush administration sustained an open-ended and ill-defined pursuit of terror that was deeply embedded in norms of everyday life.<sup>6</sup> Under the guise of protecting American freedom, the mere suggestion of a terrorist

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<sup>3</sup> See Bea, “The Formative Years: 1950-1978” in Rubin, *Emergency Management: The American Experience 1900-2010*.

<sup>4</sup> See *The Federal Response to Hurricane Katrina: Lessons Learned* by The White House. The rest of the quotation in this section reads: “With the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, the post of Director of National Intelligence, the passage of the USA PATRIOT Act, and the codification of both the National Counterterrorism Center and the National Counterproliferation Center, we have undertaken the most extensive reorganization of the Federal government since 1947.”

<sup>5</sup> See Anderson, “Preemption, precaution, preparedness.” Anderson cites the US 2002 National Security Strategy, which “explicitly and infamously articulated a shift from a posture of mutual deterrence to ‘anticipatory action’ against ‘[e]merging threats before they are fully formed’ (790).

<sup>6</sup> See Browne, *Dark Matters*. Browne’s concern is primarily with the technologizing of security apparatuses, through remote surveillance by way of remote monitoring, wearable computers, fitness trackers, and electronic leashes. These practices, among others, change “how people, objects, and things come to be monitored in remote, routinized, and continuous ways” (16). Browne continues by explaining that “[p]eople who are subject to such monitoring are also tasked

attack had the potential to inspire unbounded state-sanctioned violence both at home and abroad, and it shifted the federal emergency posture (at least with regard to homeland defense) from a reactionary one to an anticipatory, even paranoid one.<sup>7</sup>

The elevation of post 9/11 homeland security also motivated the equally paranoid curtailment of civil liberties at home, with particularly chilling effects for people of color. While the disproportionate policing of black Americans was well established long before 2001, the war on terror gave administrative and emotional heft to the act of surveilling “suspicious” bodies. Prior to 9/11, black people were already more likely to be stopped and strip-searched in airports, but new security technologies and practices after 9/11 amplified transportation hubs as sites of racialized exclusion.<sup>8</sup> As Erica Edwards has observed, the TSA’s post 9/11 security measures “collapsed together” brown and black bodies, “marking everything from the Afro to the hijab the potential dwelling of a box cutter or explosive.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the profiling and policing of black and brown people, particularly in New York City, rose in the aftermath of the twin tower attacks.<sup>10</sup> In these ways, the allegedly patriotic regulation of difference became an unspoken imperative in

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with actively participating in their own confinement by partnering, in a way, with the overseeing body or agency in the check for violations and infractions.”

<sup>7</sup> See Brian Massumi, “Fear (The Spectrum Said).” Massumi explains that after 9/11, “governmentality . . . molded itself to *threat*,” which he defines as “the future cause of a change in the present,” even when there is no clear change in the present to be found (35).

<sup>8</sup> In *Dark Matters*. Browne pays particular attention to a 2000 U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) report, which observes that black women were “9 times more likely than White women . . . to be x-rayed after being frisked or patted down,” and then notes the many ways in which this behavior is further authorized and escalated with the advent of new screening practices and technologies.

<sup>9</sup> “The New Black Novel and the Long War on Terror” 664. Edwards asserts that “9/11 ruptures the space-time continuum and calls forth in the name of safety racialized modes of surveillance, capture, and pain that *transpose* the history of domestic racial terror—the racial terror of slavery and Jim Crow, of lynching and the War on Drugs—onto the imperatives of counterterrorism in order to resecure and reorder the space of the homeland” (665).

<sup>10</sup> See Bornstein, “Antiterrorist Policing in New York City after 9/11: Comparing Perspectives on a Complex Process.”

the war on terror<sup>11</sup>—which, in turn, magnified the precarity of those who were already vulnerable to the state’s disciplinary mechanisms.

This correlation between the regulation of difference and the rise of homeland security reveals how some of the longer, less visible genealogies of state power have been further normalized by a national dependence on defining emergencies in terms of public spectacle. Naomi Klein, among others, has traced this problem to the state’s radical restructuring of public services after the twin tower attacks. In what is now commonly known as disaster capitalism, Klein describes the way that 9/11’s aftermath made way for the expansion of lucrative private industries, which buttressed security operations at home while escalating the pursuit of American power abroad.<sup>12</sup> These industries, many of which were affiliated with key members of the Bush administration, treated the twin tower attacks as an impetus for privatizing overseas military action while militarizing security and police organizations at home.

As private industries with zero public interests dominated the nation’s security capabilities (not to mention related fields of medical research and vaccine production), they brought capitalism’s ideology of risk firmly into the sphere of emergency management. As Christopher Nealon has observed, disaster capitalism is a major feature of “the successful capitalization of everyday life” in the twenty-first century, where “risk needs to be not only embraced . . . but made into a universal causal principle of the

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<sup>11</sup> See Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*: “the aftermath of September 11 entailed the daily bombardment of reactivated and reverberating white (*and multicultural*, in cases where people of color and certain immigrant groups are properly patriotic, or serve symbolic or material needs, for example, Condoleezza Rice, the U.S. military) heteronormative imagery, expectations, and hegemonies” (40).

<sup>12</sup> See Klein’s *The Shock Doctrine* for an overview of Donald Rumsfeld’s role in private medical industries, along with his and Dick Cheney’s role in privatizing military logistics and security industries at the height of the war on terror and the occupation of Iraq.

unforeseeable.”<sup>13</sup> By this logic, seemingly “unforeseeable catastrophes” are “perpetually imminent,” just a minor casualty of a truly “free” market. As a result, the possibilities for expressing one’s subject position in a sea of inevitability are limited to resigned acceptance, pre-traumatic dread, or a combination of the two.

The intersection of long-standing, relatively invisible, and deadening crisis conditions leading up to, during, and after 9/11 is the focus of Claudia Rankine’s *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*, a book-length poem that reads racialization through the state’s vast influence on everyday life. Rankine, who is best known for her commentary on black life after Trayvon Martin in her 2014 book, *Citizen*, had already begun conceptualizing the racialized effects of bodily regulation with the 2004 publication of *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*. But unlike *Citizen*, which references Martin on its cover, *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* is not explicitly about race, or at least not all the time. Instead, racism is one of several interrelated histories of violence that animate her focus on public life leading up to, during, and in the aftermath of September 11. The central imperative in this text is to recognize the way boundaries of identity—to include race, class, gender, age, and health—are casually built into the American security state. These boundaries pre-date the war on terror, but 9/11 becomes a particularly vital touchstone for making their histories perceptually visible.

Rather than depicting the twin tower attacks as a spectacular event, Rankine wonders what the event made us understand about ourselves—specifically, about our capacity to embody a livable life in the midst of normalized violence and accepted risk. In interviews, Rankine has described her poems as lyrics that are “collective and

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<sup>13</sup> *The Matter of Capital* 145.

researchable”—intimately engaged in the lives of individual persons, while also being rooted in matters of definition and redefinition, supplying historical details, to include citations, alongside images, overheard dialogue, and brief monologues.<sup>14</sup> *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, subtitled “An American Lyric,” invites us to revisit the question of “what is a lyric?” through a reckoning with histories of normalized violence that have been blunted by what Rankine calls “the throes of our American optimism.”<sup>15</sup> In voluminous endnotes, which range from reflections on art to annotations on public health and antiblack violence, Rankine uncovers violent histories of racialized erasure that inform her pervasive sense of loneliness. In this way, she leaves the typically first-person, expressive form of the lyric open to the offstage cataloging of difference, alienation, and dispossession that has been central to the smooth functioning of the national security state.

Rankine’s capacious interpretation of lyric form resists the default whiteness that frames a long history of lyric expression—but in making 9/11 a major structuring device of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, she also implicitly rejects iterations of lyric expression that treat spectacularly violent catastrophes as exemplary and isolated emergency events.<sup>16</sup> The immediate aftermath of September 11 occasioned a renewed public interest in poetry—which, by Philip Metres’ telling, was mainly confined to “elegiac effusions” of a unified patriotic “we.”<sup>17</sup> And as some recent collections, anthologies, and criticism

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<sup>14</sup> “The Art of Poetry No. 102.”

<sup>15</sup> *DLMBL* 21.

<sup>16</sup> See Jeffrey Gray and Ann Keniston, *The New American Poetry of Engagement: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Anthology*—and its 2016 companion collection of essays, *The News from Poems*. This is not, however, to be confused, however, with Cathy Park Hong’s separate declaration of a “poetry of social engagement,” mainly by contemporary poets of color who are opposed to the apolitical presumptions of conceptual poets such as Kenneth Goldsmith.

<sup>17</sup> *Behind the Lines* 220.



dedicated to a “new American poetry of engagement” also show, the cultural vacancy of “American optimism” that Rankine opposes in her poetry is embedded in a wide range of post 9/11 poems (and poetic criticism) whose indebtedness to the late twentieth-century lyric merges powerfully with a sense of similarly ruptured national innocence. In their anthology, *The New American Poetry of Engagement*, editors Ann Keniston and Jeffrey Gray cite Robert Lowell’s famous query, “why not say what happened?” as their model for “the need both to keep faith in what has occurred and to transform and transcend it.”<sup>18</sup> Keniston and Gray, who treat Lowell’s query as “universal,” privilege the work of poets and critics who invoke a generalized and abstract “we” in response to major crisis events. In this way, they reinforce the fiction of a universally shattered public (“United We Stand”) that figured heavily in post 9/11 national security discourse. By declaring a newly engaged (and therefore newly political) poetics in the twenty-first century, these poets also ignore a long and varied history of socially engaged American poetry. Particularly in the postwar period, socially and politically engaged forms of poetry written by immigrant poets, language poets, documentary poets, and poets of color has troubled the terms of both lyric address and official historical accounts of crisis—and it is this history, of course, in which Rankine is participating even as she defines her poetry as decidedly lyric.<sup>19</sup>

By calling her poem an “American Lyric,” then, Rankine troubles the universalized hierarchies that are embedded in both politics and poetry. *Don’t Let Me Be*

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<sup>18</sup> *The New American Poetry of Engagement* 2.

<sup>19</sup> See Timothy Yu, “Engagement, race, and public poetry in America,” for an extended critique of Gray and Keniston’s claims. As Yu points out, forty-five of fifty poets in their anthology are white, and “it becomes difficult,” if not impossible, to make the claims that they do about a presumably disengaged poetic history of the twentieth-century once one pays closer attention to issues of race and poets of color.

*Lonely* expands the sphere of documentarian witnessing, from an eye-witness perspective to a wide-ranging accumulation of individual personas, historical details, and images that put pressure on the normalized exclusions of state-sponsored violence. In so doing, it offers a form of social accounting that makes ongoing loss thinkable outside the colorblind, risk-based, and security-laden logics that govern the present. Her method, in turn, stages the lyric as a form that is both personal and collective, intimate and diagnostic, and it does so specifically in order to imagine new ways of being in the world—new modes of non-normative kinship, and collective flourishing—that demand closer attention to what it means to care for one another.

### **Thinking as if Trying to Grieve**

*Don't Let Me Be Lonely* opens with the image of a staticky television—the big, boxy kind, which you'd more likely find in a nineties-era household than in a household of 2004. This image appears frequently throughout the text, usually as a placeholder in between sections, and it is the lone image on the page before a new section begins. It also frequently serves as the frame around many of Rankine's images within the text. The television reflects the beginning of the poem's historical arc, which centers not only on the advent of the homeland security state, but on the events that helped shape it: namely, the dot-com boom in the nineties, and the continued rise of mass incarceration and violent policing. Through television shows, commercials, and news reports, Rankine uncovers various fictions that muddle her own connection with her feelings, her health, even histories of experienced violence.

Under this system, the speaker is particularly unable to fully express her growing awareness of and vulnerability to pervasive death, which she loosely calls loneliness. Where in Hemphill's text, loneliness figured as an urgent desire for sexual fulfillment, the exchange of intimacy, and collective solidarity, Rankine reads loneliness directly through one's inability to grieve the lives of others under the powerfully intersecting sites of public health, racialized violence, and surveillance culture in the twenty-first century US. This problem animates the key question of Rankine's book: how to mourn with recognizably personal intensity amid so many historical misunderstandings about whose lives and deaths matter more than others, and why.

Rankine's meditation on loneliness begins with grief as a personally felt phenomenon. Its opening page focuses on the internalized grief of a family—but unlike the self-disclosing conception of family life inherent to confessional poetry, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* rejects the presumed availability of intimacy and self-disclosure for families beset by death's regularity.<sup>20</sup> As the speaker describes her mother's seemingly ambivalent reaction to a miscarriage, and her father's grieved silence toward his own mother's death, she gestures toward the difficulty of mourning others in the face of ongoing trauma. While her mother bears an "everlasting shrug" in response to her miscarriage, her father looks like "someone understanding his aloneness. Loneliness."<sup>21</sup> The mourning of death through an "everlasting shrug" suggests that it is ongoing, intergenerational: that this is one of many losses in a sea of loneliness, to include one's own suspended vulnerability among the living.

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<sup>20</sup> See Javadizadeh's "The Atlantic Ocean Breaking On Our Heads," which, in its examination of Rankine's *Citizen*, recalls the way Rankine's invocation of familial structures "records precisely the kinds of social arrangements that threaten to flicker from view" (484).

<sup>21</sup> *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (hereafter referred to as *DLMBL*) 5.

In the opening sections of the poem, this sense of embodied and intimate vulnerability is framed by a vast and impersonal network of devaluation under the American public health care system. The speaker highlights her own vulnerability to this system by examining her interactions with a healthcare helpline. “[T]he suicide hotline is called,” she intones passively after encountering the number 1-800-SUICIDE on a commercial break during “the eight-o-clock movie.”<sup>22</sup> Rankine narrates this encounter in the second person, as if to place an imagined collective audience directly into this disembodied and routinized scene. When “you dial the number,” she writes, the volunteer struggles to react to the speaker’s declaration, “I am in death’s position.” Describing one’s vulnerability in this way—somewhere between “I” and you”—constitutes both a personal declaration of harm and a representation of one’s own wobbly formal positioning in the world. As the speaker contemplates her own mental health, what stands out most to her in this scene is the precarious positionality of a person in crisis, whose health is mediated by televised hotlines and privatized networks of care.

This incongruity is exacerbated by being “in death’s position” while watching TV, where the characters “live against all odds.”<sup>23</sup> Unlike TV and movie characters, who continually find new ways to survive, even flourish, Rankine’s speaker has no choice but to blankly accept both the deaths of others and the possibility of her own death. “Don’t believe what you are thinking and feeling,” instructs the respondent on the other end of the phone line. With this rhetoric of denial, the respondent suggests that the patient’s only acceptable reaction to her pain is to stop feeling, stop thinking—essentially, to become an object. In this scene, the normalized mechanisms of market-based risk become visible

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<sup>22</sup> *DLMBL* 7.

<sup>23</sup> *DLMBL* 6.

through the speaker's resignation to her inevitable death. In the absence of an "against all odds" narrative unless it is delivered in fictional form, one becomes just another disposable object disciplined into submission.

Throughout this text, the making of disposable subjects is sanctioned and sustained by public fictions—which sometimes resemble a story of "against all odds," but which are just as often suffused by narratives of personal responsibility and blame. When the ambulance attendant arrives to pick her up, the speaker explains that she "had a momentary lapse of happily," or a personal failure to achieve a prescribed state of being.<sup>24</sup> In the endnote to this passage, Rankine defines happily as something occurring "by chance or accident"—something "favored by circumstances; lucky; fortunate."<sup>25</sup> To exist "happily," one must assume a default mood of optimism despite any circumstances to the contrary. In her "failure" to achieve this mood, however, the speaker is disciplined as a matter of practice, not by "chance or accident." In a language resembling that of law enforcement, the attendant shrugs and says that "you need to come quietly or he will have to restrain you." In this instance, the speaker's attempts to understand her own vulnerability results in programmatic apprehension by the very authorities who claim to be sustaining her mental health. Like her mother's "everlasting shrug," the attendant himself adopts the resigned attitude of a shrug in response to a person's surprise, even disbelief, that she may be apprehended as a direct result of voicing her own vulnerability. "Resistance," Rankine's speaker observes, "will only make matters more difficult. Any resistance will only make matters worse."

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<sup>24</sup> *DLMBL* 7.

<sup>25</sup> *DLMBL* 133.

Resistance does, however, routinely take shape over the course of the poem's various scenes, in which the speaker (and the poet) consciously register dissonance with the prescribed mood or mode of being. Rankine's endnotes, for instance, reveal that the term "happily" also refers to Lyn Hejinian's *Happily*, a longform experimental poem that explored the unavailability of a single, stable self through variations on the word "happy." "Is happiness," Hejinian asks in a particular line, "the name for our (involuntary) complicity with chance?"<sup>26</sup> By invoking multiple definitions of "happily" as an empty descriptive term for accepting chance (or to put it more darkly, accepting risk), Rankine peels back the uncritical and unfeeling nature of having to adopt a default mood or form of representation. By toggling back and forth between verse and endnote, and back again, she thus begins a citational practice that, in concert with the poem's speakers and personas, revises the smooth temporal and affective functioning of the state's powerful dual mechanisms of optimism (existing "happily," according to "chance," and "against all odds") and austerity ("you need to come quietly").

In this way, the various personas of the poem serve as representatives of interruptive self-fashioning, both from within and beyond various systems of exclusion. In evoking tones of detachment, disbelief, or stasis, the speaker and the subjects of Rankine's meditations routinely mark their own sense of affective dislocation. When a friend calls to discuss her terminal cancer diagnosis, for instance, the friend uses "the incredulous tone she uses to refer to strange behavior by boyfriends and coworkers" to ask whether one can believe that such a diagnosis has occurred.<sup>27</sup> In expressing disbelief, the friend is searching for a way to contextualize her impending death beyond mere

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<sup>26</sup> *Happily* 5.

<sup>27</sup> *DLMBL* 8.

resignation. She explains that only a year earlier, a doctor misdiagnosed the lump in her breast. If the doctor had diagnosed her properly at that time, perhaps her life would have gone on for longer. For this sick friend and for many others under costly and unwieldy networks of privatized care, citizens are increasingly misdiagnosed, overmedicated, and essentially treated as objects to be handled. As Rankine explains in an endnote, women with missed mammogram diagnoses have “little recourse under the law” despite the “remarkable physical, emotional, and financial difficulties” that such catastrophic medical mistakes produce for its patients.<sup>28</sup> Under this medical system, contemplating death can become a matter of determining *when* it occurs rather than *if*, or even how. Occupying a position of grief (either as the sick friend, or as a friend bearing witness to the sickness of others) feels impossible under the weight of these conditions. But in bearing witness to the gendered, economic, and legal stakes of this friend’s condition, Rankine makes the stakes of grieving visible, and thus calls into question untroubled narratives of elegizing, on the one hand, or lyric wonder, on the other. Whose lives are grieveable, and thus given to “recourse under the law,” and whose are not? Where may forms of resistance reside within a system that privileges resignation over care?

The speakers and subjects of this text model small measures of resistance, then, as a way of putting pressure on both the systems and the categories of feeling that have sanctioned their premature deaths. On the subsequent page, Rankine’s depiction of her friend’s reaction to her impending death—“[s]he becomes angry. She grows tired. She is accepting. She grows tired”<sup>29</sup>—registers physical and psychic resignation, death as a form of wearing down. But the friend focuses on a “Do-not-resuscitate (DNR) sign,”

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<sup>28</sup> *DLMBL* 133-134.

<sup>29</sup> *DLMBL* 9.

which validates her choice not to be resuscitated in the event of cardiopulmonary failure. “No. No. No. No. No. No. She has decided.” “No matter whose will to life remains at her bedside,” the speaker explains, “her death is safe.” The endnote to this passage cites a case in which a retired nurse in England paid “for a ‘Do Not Resuscitate’ tattoo to be placed on her chest,” out of fear that her DNR wishes would not be honored. DNR wishes are frequently “not honored or not properly expressed to those resuscitating,” a statement that underscores the limited control that patients have over even the terms of their deaths. By calling her death “safe,” the friend—and, by way of extension, the nurse in England—interrupt scenes of resignation and devaluation in order to declare momentary control of their bodies.

In interrupting the accumulative drip of normalized violence—from within systems of health, but also within ongoing histories of racialized, gendered, and socioeconomic dispossession—Rankine bears witness to multiple subjects, scenes, genres and temporalities of disaster. In his own analysis of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, Christopher Nealon suggests that the “textually networked character” of Rankine’s poetry serves “as a defense against capitalist spectacle.”<sup>30</sup> In my own analysis, I treat the spectacle of capital as one of several interlocking systems of devaluation that are amplified during crisis, at the expense of one’s very ability to grieve its unfolding. As Jasbir Puar observes, “the market” is in many ways “a foil for the state, producing consumer subjects . . . that simulate (and experience simulated) affective modes of belonging to the state.”<sup>31</sup> Rankine, likewise, dilates the intersecting realms of capitalist spectacle, perceived

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<sup>30</sup> *The Matter of Capital* 151, 34.

<sup>31</sup> *Terrorist Assemblages* 26.



security threats, and nationalist illusions of flourishing that limit what she sees as a collective imperative to recognize and, indeed, care for one another.

In the sections that follow, Rankine moves from the more intimately embodied spaces of public health toward the vast forms of institutional forgetting and cultural exclusion that sustain anti-black dispossession. How does one imagine a world of public care in which racialized violence is so deeply embedded in multiple systems of state power? Later in the poem, she observes that while those in positions of power and privilege, like George W. Bush, “forget” to acknowledge the precarity of black life, she has no choice but to bear the consequences of their forgetting. Reflecting on her subsequent “sadness . . . in the recognition that a life can not matter,” Rankine quotes Cornel West, who declares that this sadness (or what the poet calls “The Inability to Maintain Hope”) “is what is wrong with black people today—too nihilistic.”<sup>32</sup> While she does not disagree with West, she more fully contextualizes his victim-blaming turn toward “what is wrong with black people.” In response, the speaker writes, “[t]oo scarred by hope to hope, too experienced to experience, too close to dead is what I think.” Here, Rankine shows that the loneliness of her subjects stems from an intergenerational experience of hopelessness, a deep cultural scarring. As loneliness exceeds the speaker’s professed inability to mourn individual lives *In Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*, it also includes evidence of her historical positioning—as one mourner among many, as an embodied witness to entire histories of systemic violence which, once made fully visible, preclude the possibility of applying narratives of optimism and blame to the uneven valuation of human subjects.

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<sup>32</sup> *DLMBL* 23.

## The Fictions of American Optimism

Rankine routinely perceives racialized mourning through the speaker's ailments: sometimes a stomachache, itching eyes, or even the anticipation of a future blow. Her most sustained explanation of this phenomenon is represented by her discussion of hepatotoxicity, or liver failure. In two separate conversations, the speaker tells her publisher and a cab driver that she is writing about the liver, a cleansing organ whose failure "is associated with alcoholism, but the truth is 55 percent of the time liver failure is drug-induced."<sup>33</sup> Liver failure, she explains, is more often the result of overmedication rather than alcoholism, an addictive condition (usually with underlying health factors) that is commonly misrepresented as personal excess or pleasure-seeking. In this way, we come to understand liver failure as representative of a system in which systemic misdiagnoses and mistreatment can be all too easily reframed under the discourse of individual fault.

By reading aloud to her editor the following article excerpt, the speaker also explains liver failure as a condition of embodied vulnerability:

*The liver is particularly vulnerable to drugs because one of its functions is to break down or metabolize chemicals that are not water-soluble . . . But sometimes the breakdown products are toxic to liver cells. Indeed it is surprising, given the noxious chemicals that the liver is exposed to, that more drugs do not damage it.*<sup>34</sup>

Rankine's speaker treats this passage as self-evident. While it does little to convince the editor of its relevance, this literalist interpretation of vulnerability positions the liver as an

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<sup>33</sup> *DLMBL* 53.

<sup>34</sup> *DLMBL* 54.

unwitting casualty of external toxicity. In this passage, a barrage of medical drugs turns the liver from a cleansing organ to a target that is rendered vulnerable to its own cleansing functions. The body part continues to sustain damage to chemicals and impurities that, contrary to their advertised benefits, are slowly and invisibly poisoning the body. And for as long as pharmaceutical companies and insurance providers continue to build lucrative industries for their products, there is unlikely to be any sustained consideration of their side effects. As the article's author asserts, "it is surprising, given the noxious chemicals that the liver is exposed to, that more drugs do not damage it."

Rankine's thoughts about the liver are connected not just to the literal body and to systems of medical functioning, but to the body's larger relationship to a national body politic for which, as she has routinely made clear, mourning has been all but impossible. After reflecting in scenes with both the editor and the cab driver that she is "thinking as if trying to weep,"<sup>35</sup> Rankine includes the same crude anatomical diagram at the end of each encounter.

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<sup>35</sup> *DLMBL* 89.

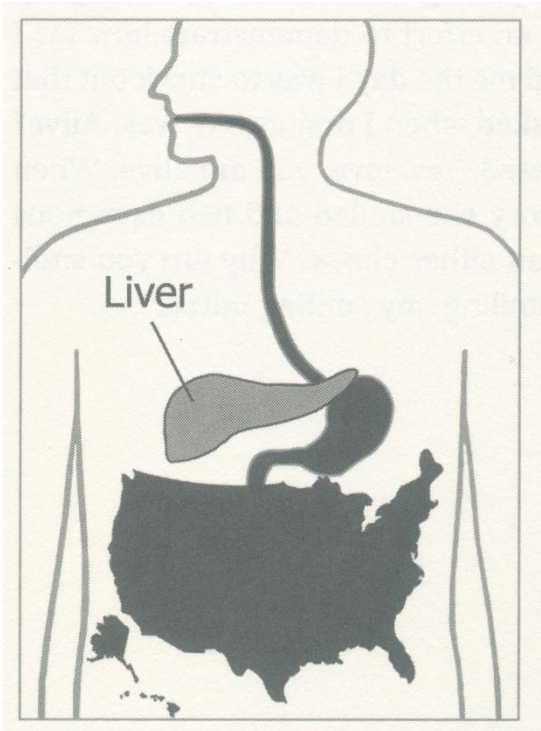


Figure 2: Anatomical drawing of the liver. Reprinted with permission from John Lucas<sup>36</sup>

In this rendering of the liver, the United States takes the place of the body's intestine as the receiver of filtered nutrients (or, in this case, the receiver of toxins). Here, the liver does not "clean out the country of toxins," as Lisa Siraganian has argued, but instead shows a country poisoning itself from within.<sup>37</sup> If thinking with the liver is "thinking as if trying to weep," this diagram hints at the collective depths and difficulties of doing so.

One might relate this formulation of the liver, in fact, to the many ways in which black and brown bodies have been demonized by the fiction of an "enemy within."<sup>38</sup> The

<sup>36</sup> *DLMBL* 54.

<sup>37</sup> Siraganian's "Don't Let Me Be Universal" treats the same anatomical diagram as evidence that "Rankine's liver-writing aims to clean out the country of toxins by analyzing them and transforming them into benign substances" (4). See also Leveling's "Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, Infographic Maps, and Subject-system Identity," which treats the image as symbolic of a merging of subject and system into the same sphere of poetic inquiry about the pervasiveness of suffering.

<sup>38</sup> The phrase "enemy within" has had many pejorative uses, but it especially stands out in its use, verbatim, in the War on Drugs by the U.S. House of Representatives Ways and Means

“enemy within” has been broadly applied to queer people and drug users during the AIDS epidemic, crack-cocaine (and disproportionately black crack-cocaine users) during the War on Drugs, and now, to the fear of “homegrown terrorists” after the war on terror. In writing about the liver, Rankine joins medical discourses of the body with intersecting systems of toxicity (medical, racialized, sexualized, and carceral) that poison the national body politic by finding a scapegoat, an individual or set of individuals to blame. Alongside the first appearance of this diagram, the speaker (who is presumably also Rankine, in the process of writing this book) writes: “the liver is the largest single internal organ next to the soul, which looms large though it is hidden.”<sup>39</sup> Under this context, thinking as if trying to weep is perhaps impossible, but it becomes *thinkable*—it becomes possible, in other words, to dwell on and reimagine that which has been hidden—by identifying the conditions of its foreclosures.

The salience of the war on terror’s implications for liver-writing become clearer in the more intimate space of the taxicab, where Rankine reflects on loneliness, mourning, and their racialized implications in contemporary life. Rankine’s speaker and the Pakistani cab driver are both evaluating life after 9/11, “from that space of loneliness,” when their conversation begins. After hearing Rankine explain that she is writing about the liver, the cab driver, a Pakistani man, asks: “have you / noticed, these white people, they think / they are better than everyone else?”<sup>40</sup> While she doesn’t respond directly, this rare moment of mutual identification and exchange on whiteness in the text relates the anatomical drawing of the liver and the United States (which appears

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Committee. Their report on crack cocaine, which disproportionately targeted poor communities of color, was titled *The Enemy Within: Crack-Cocaine and America’s Families*.

<sup>39</sup> *DLMBL* 54.

<sup>40</sup> *DLMBL* 89.

here, again) directly to the racialization of post 9/11 public life. If liver-writing, mourning, and loneliness are essentially synonymous terms, then “thinking as if trying to weep” can also be read as a diagnosis of internally poisoning fictions on the status of mourning itself—especially as it relates to the mourning of black life.

In this way, Rankine grounds one of her many counters to loneliness in the deliberate recognition of racialized harm. As the speaker puts it, citizens have long been too stuck “in the throes of our American optimism”<sup>41</sup> to separate actual violence from spectacle, or even to recognize instances of racialized violence at all. Her first concrete example of optimism comes from George W. Bush, who, as Governor of Texas in 1998, “can’t remember if two or three people were convicted for dragging a black man to his death.” “*You don’t remember,*” the speaker tells Bush through the television (which displays a pool of blood surrounded by onlooking feet), “*because you don’t care.*” The episode she describes is one that readers may not themselves recall—and the image, while ominous, does not communicate what happened, either. An endnote details the narrative that the television did not show, and which Bush did not fully remember: the three men in question beat James Byrd, Jr after offering him a ride home. They then chained him, still alive, to the back of their truck until he was decapitated by the impact. A “trail of blood, body parts, and personal effects stretched for 2 miles” afterward.<sup>42</sup> In this incomplete narrative, followed by its citational context, Rankine reflects on the stakes of Bush’s inadequate recall. If a governor cannot remember the details of a black man violently drug through the streets in his state, then what evidence of public violence *will* be remembered? By filtering in the images, narratives of forgetting, and then filling

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<sup>41</sup> *DLMBL* 21.

<sup>42</sup> *DLMBL* 135.

in the missing details, Rankine makes the troublesome exclusions of American exceptionalism visible. And by calling it “optimism,” she reveals the ways in which these exclusions are undergirded by a privileging of whiteness over expendable black bodies.

The presumption of whiteness, wealth, and good health behind this optimism perpetuates the illusion of free choice, which Rankine troubles by turning again to the television. Channel-flipping presents as many choices as one wants: “[d]on’t like the world you live in, choose one closer to the world you live in.”<sup>43</sup> The speaker ultimately sticks to HBO and the independent film channel, where spaghetti westerns and *The Sopranos* serve as cinematic foils to many dramatic promises of pharmaceutical commercials. When she observes that the cowboys in a spaghetti western are “older and don’t have to make it anywhere,” it is their immobility—their *lack* of optimism, really—that stands out from “the cinematic, or, more accurately, the American fantasy that we will survive no matter what.”<sup>44</sup> In identifying this break in optimism, Rankine finds a small but significant departure from otherwise smoothly functioning aspirations to a better life. And in viewing this episode right before viewing an advertisement for the antidepressant PAXIL, which claims “YOUR LIFE IS WAITING” before listing its many side effects, she makes an apt comparison between the cowboys and her suddenly forced attention to a miracle drug’s side effects. Where cowboys cease to journey to a promised land, and where commercialized medicine visibly offers more contaminants than cure, the collective conditions of loneliness are laid bare. And when such conditions are made readily visible and thinkable, as something we can actively mourn—then perhaps the veil of American optimism can also be momentarily lifted, as well.

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<sup>43</sup> *DLMBL* 24.

<sup>44</sup> *DLMBL* 25.

Rankine's speaker observes the potential for similar diagnostic interruptions in her own encounters with state-sponsored racialized surveillance. On the way to visit her grandmother after 9/11, she is stopped in a series of familiar airport procedures, lasting only four to five lines each, on separate consecutive pages. In this series, she is first asked to drink from her water bottle. Then, she is asked to take off her shoes—and finally, she is asked if she has a fever. Each episode repeats the first line, in a terse pattern of questioning that looks like this:

At the airport-security checkpoint on the way to visit  
my grandmother, I am asked if I have a fever.

A fever? Really?

Yes. Really.<sup>45</sup>

Written with deliberate pauses, repetitions, and a call and response, these episodes turn an ordinary series of actions into scenes of suspense, where the TSA turns travel into a lesson in cultural gatekeeping. Taken individually, these encounters appear to be minor, even mundane. But their repetition, along with the white space surrounding each encounter, and the space between each call and response, reveals the tensions in this line of questioning. In the first encounter, she is asked to drink from the water bottle rather than simply throwing it away. The difference between standard operating procedure and paranoia is obvious here, but it becomes more pronounced in the fever example, which prompts the speaker to exclaim, "Really?" What would prompt a TSA agent to ask her to validate the health of her body in this way? Rankine doesn't ask that question explicitly,

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<sup>45</sup> *DLMBL* 107.



nor does she offer answers except to expose the incongruity of these moments—to hold them open and reveal the way, as Simone Browne observes, “certain acts and certain looks at the airport weigh down some travelers, while others travel lightly.”<sup>46</sup>

As Rankine implies in an endnote, the TSA agent’s question about the fever had something to do with public fears of a SARS outbreak, which was first reported in Asia in 2003—and while the disease did spread to North America and Europe, it was largely restricted to Asia and should not have caused a shift in stateside security procedure. By implying that the speaker may have had a fever, the agent pre-emptively extended fears of contagion into the open-ended permissibility of post 9/11 security surveillance. As this example shows, the gatekeepers of the national security state are trained to traffic in the illusion of public threat, even when a material one has not yet emerged. This is especially true, of course, when a finger can be pointed at a potential carrier: a source of contagion, or poison, from within the body politic, who is all too often manifested in a body of color. And as the endnote also points out, these reactionary measures have dramatic material costs: post 9/11 security measures have required an additional \$1 to \$2 million per month in security per airport, thus bringing the workings of racialized capitalism and disaster capitalism to a powerful intersection.<sup>47</sup>

Airport incidents like these are part and parcel to the lucrative expansion and militarization of police and prison systems during this period, despite the fact that nationwide crime had already long been on the decline.<sup>48</sup> Just as the logic of post 9/11

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<sup>46</sup> *Dark Matters* 132.

<sup>47</sup> *DLMBL* 142.

<sup>48</sup> According to Matt Ford’s “What Caused the Great Crime Decline in the US?”, “the homicide rate plunged 42 percent nationwide” at the turn of the twentieth century, “violent crime decreased by one-third,” and these trends have largely continued to present day. For more on the rapid

terror relies on the anticipation of racialized threat, the escalation of policing in the United States depends upon public fears of racialized violence (and false assumptions that militarizing the police will quell the “threat”). As Micol Seigel puts it, “police are the human-scale expression of the state;” “police legitimacy fortifies and rests upon state legitimacy because the two are rough expressions of each other.”<sup>49</sup> Thus it is not surprising that policing patterns follow those of the post-9/11 security state. It is also not surprising that the history of racialized police brutality in the US continues to escape lasting public scrutiny, even when the irrefutable details and patterns of individual events are clearly brought to light. Here, the national security state does not just forget, but rewrites and sanitizes incidents of police violence as either isolated, provoked by the victims, or both.

As Rankine shows throughout the text, these incidents began long before 9/11—but the legal settlement of Abner Louima’s police beating throws an earlier incident back into view, just before the start of the war on terror. The speaker reflects on an image of Louima’s July 2001 news conference, in which she thinks Louima “looks okay.”<sup>50</sup> The televised image she includes in the text, however, does not look okay—Louima is standing stiffly in front of a handful of microphones, eyes skyward, next to his smiling celebrity lawyer, Johnnie Cochran, and some uncomfortable-looking white men, who are presumably members of Cochran’s legal team. While Louima is clearly uncomfortable, his physical appearance does not convey the extent of his injuries. This appearance comes

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expansion of US prison systems and policing, see Ruth Gilmore’s *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* and Micol Seigel’s *Violence Work: State Power and the Limits of Police*.

<sup>49</sup> *Violence Work* 9.

<sup>50</sup> *DLMBL* 56.

four years after he was beaten and sexually abused in 1997 by New York City police officers, who quickly attempted to cover up the crime. He spent two months in the hospital and underwent three surgeries for internal injuries, and he suffered numerous injuries to his face and teeth. At this news conference, a reporter, seizing upon Louima's \$8.7 million settlement, asks "how it feels to be a rich man."<sup>51</sup> Louima's response—"Not rich . . . Lucky, lucky to be alive"—situates the remarkability of his aliveness amid the ongoing murders of people of color, many of which are never fully prosecuted. The statement also rejects the overlay of a profitable court victory that the reporter seeks to apply, and which is also enforced by Cochran's relaxed posture. And as with previous accounts of pain, loneliness, and mourning, the poet connects the pain of recalling the full scale of these details back to her body: "Instinctively my hand braces my abdomen."

In the subsequent page, Rankine examines a smiling image of Amadou Diallo, who, after being mistaken for a rape suspect, was shot nineteen times (with forty-one shots in total) by the NYPD in 1999. The officers involved were acquitted—and as Rankine recounts in an endnote, a protest song by Bruce Springsteen in Diallo's memory was vigorously protested by NYPD police organizations.<sup>52</sup> In an endnote, Rankine observes that, perhaps in response to the protests, Springsteen did not include the song,

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<sup>51</sup>*DLMBL* 56. For a lengthier analysis of the way Cochran's influence on Louima's case shifted the focus of the investigation more toward the amount of the settlement (and Cochran's fame) and away from larger issues of police brutality directed at minority suspects, see Fried, "In Louima Case, Dream Team and Perhaps Overkill."

<sup>52</sup> Rankine quotes Bob Lucente, the president of the state chapter of the Fraternal Order of Police, by way of example: "[Springsteen's] turned into some type of fucking dirtbag. He goes on the boycott list. He has all these good songs and everything, American-flag songs and all that stuff, and now he's a floating fag, and you can quote me on that" (142). Lucente lost his job over those comments, but the substance of their meaning—and the fact that Rankine quotes him in full in this endnote—serves again to illustrate the violence of a particular version of American optimism, where to sing "American-flag songs and all of that stuff" requires unquestioning complicity with all forms of state-sponsored violence in the name of safety and security.

“American Skin (41 Shots),” on his next album. The album was released just after September 11, Rankine notes, an event in which “many New York City police officers lost their lives.”<sup>53</sup> This last comment suggests that 9/11, in its focus on security, law enforcement, and patriotic unity, is powerful enough to overwrite the indisputable details and injustices of Diallo’s brutal death. In assembling the images of Louima and Diallo together, alongside both the undisputed facts of their cases and the conditions of their forgetting, Rankine elevates their memory over the mechanisms of capital, state-sponsored violence, and patriotic narratives that surround the twin tower attacks.

Rankine’s embodied registering of pain in these moments also registers a sense of foreboding—an anticipation of more violence to come. She recalls that instead of tears, “the ones that express emotions,” she is accosted by watery eyes from allergies, and from a larger pain that she “has had all [her] life”: “a feeling of bits of my inside twisting away from my flesh in the form of a blow to the body.”<sup>54</sup> As usual, the endnote to this passage is instructive: allergies, she remarks, “are the human body’s overreaction to things that it thinks will cause it harm.”<sup>55</sup> Her body, then, bears the evidence of systemic violence while it also anticipates future violence, what she also calls “the blow on its way.” She cannot cry because her body is overcome by both the violence of the past and the future violence to come. As the speaker explains flatly, it feels too “sentimental, or excessive, certainly not intellectual, or perhaps naïve, too self-wounded to value each life like that, to feel loss to the point of being bent over each time.”<sup>56</sup> Instead, what she has left is a responsibility to write as if embracing bodily pain—“to cramp, to clog, to fold over at the

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<sup>53</sup> *DLMBL* 142.

<sup>54</sup> *DLMBL* 56.

<sup>55</sup> *DLMBL* 142.

<sup>56</sup> *DLMBL* 57.

gut, to have to put hand to flesh, to have to hold the pain, and then to translate it here”—as the only formal response available when systemic violence fades into the white noise of everyday life.

In this way, Rankine’s embodied translation of loss includes both the personal experience of violence and the shared experience of having witnessed its normalization. In moving between the speaker’s recollection of pain, the images of black men whose lives have been erased or fundamentally altered, and citations that write the violence done to them back over narratives of American exceptionalism, the reader moves back and forth between an awareness of the past, present, and anticipated future of antiblack violence. In an article for the *New York Times*, “The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning,” Rankine describes the recognition of black precarity as the sense that “mourning is lived in real time” in “the daily strain of knowing that as a black person you can be killed for simply being black.”<sup>57</sup> In this description of mourning we can hear the constant awareness of one’s own proximity to death—a proximity that makes mourning the past, while also living in fear of the future, a commonplace state of being. “Americans assimilate corpses,” Rankine writes, “in their daily comings and goings.” “There is no quotidian,” in fact, “without the enslaved, chained, or dead black body to gaze upon or to hear about or to position a self against.” In exposing and resisting the a version of the quotidian that refuses to see dispossessed bodies as anything other than as a spectacle (and, by her analysis, a foil), Rankine insists upon a way of “making mourning enter our day-to-day world” as a real, embodied phenomenon with social, emotional, and historical stakes.

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<sup>57</sup> “The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning.”

## Pronouns in the War on Terror

Naomi Klein's well-known term, disaster capitalism, helps further contextualize Rankine's relationship with 9/11, a highly mediated public spectacle that has now become synonymous with American flags and the rhetoric of "United We Stand." As we have seen, the normalization of police violence under disaster capitalism is simpatico with the state's radical restructuring of public life after the twin tower attacks. The story of disaster capitalism begins with the progress narrative of neoliberalism, a story that is closely akin to the American exceptionalism to which Rankine's speaker is continually opposed. Under neoliberalism, the free market is pitched as a site of unlimited growth when it is more accurately a site of unlimited risk, and where citizens are thus resigned to a sea of economic and environmental shocks. In the process, those who require the most care are reduced to surplus, objects to be set aside in the interest of further growth. And as we have seen throughout *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, the most expendable human surplus in this system is all too often a racialized other.<sup>58</sup>

In the latter sections of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, Rankine's turn toward capitalism's influence on daily life revisits the possibilities—or lack thereof—for invoking personal pronouns that reject the very terms by which empty optimism is reinforced. Here, she sees the myth of capitalist individuation and the jingoistic unity narrative of 9/11 as part of the same continuum:

To roll over or not to roll over that IRA? To have a new iMac or not to have it?  
To eTrade or not to eTrade? Again and again these were Kodak moments, full of

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<sup>58</sup> See Angela Hume's "Toward an Antiracist Ecopoetics," which references Foucault's biopower in the context of Rankine's poetry and poetic philosophy (89-91). Hume cites Foucault (*The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, in addition to "*Society Must Be Defended*"), who has argued that while biopower is designed to "make live"—to maintain the health of a general population—its success depends upon the racialization of a marginalized other.

individuation; we were all on our way to our personal best. America was seemingly a meritocracy. I, I, I am Tiger Woods. It was the nineties. Now it is the twenty-first century and you are either with us or you are against us. Where is your flag?<sup>59</sup>

As Rankine translates the ideology of progress and personal choice through the language of the market, personal pronouns are completely emptied of meaning. Christopher Nealon observes the latent reworking of the Hamlet to-be-or-not-to-be soliloquy in these questions, where an existential set of questions about selfhood is transformed into navel-gazing queries about whether to participate in capitalism's illusory marrying of risk with potential profit. The particular commodities in this passage—IRAs, computer technologies, eTrade—reference a short history from the 90s dot-com boom to the pre-9/11 Bush administration, where Nealon notes that “existentially thin questions of ‘individuation’ on offer in the 1990s congeal into a different kind of question, the glowering post 9/11 interrogation, ‘Where is your flag?’ for which there is only one correct answer.”<sup>60</sup> This history of individuated risk paved the way for disaster capitalism and an accompanying opportunity for the Bush administration to merge capitalism with patriotic rhetoric, thus bringing empty individuation and divisive tribalism powerfully together in the arena of post-9/11 public services. And when Rankine assembles this history, she shows us that capitalistic questions of individuation and the accusing tone of “Where is your flag?” are not so different. Their questions are not of a “different kind,” but rather of varying degrees.

There are several ways in which Rankine traces this history of subjective evacuation to the present day. The first is by linking capitalism's “individuation” to the

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<sup>59</sup> *DLMBL* 91.

<sup>60</sup> *The Matter of Capital* 147.

illusion of meritocracy, where “I, I, I” crowds the postracial image of Tiger Woods, a sports figure held up for mass-marketed profit rather than as a mixed-race figure with his own personal and cultural history. In the endnote to this passage, Rankine references Woods’ 1997 “I am Tiger Woods” campaign, in which Nike entreated consumers to imagine themselves in the image of Woods’ athletic success.<sup>61</sup> By aligning first-person address with a cultural naiveté toward success, Rankine observes the power of an ideology fueled by profit that can effectively erase identity, not to mention the growing gap in racial and economic equality that widened under the elevation of privatized profit. As campaigns like “I am Tiger Woods” enforce the idea that racism is effectively over thanks to capitalism’s “meritocracy,” it serves to make risk—and therefore, crisis—not just ordinary, but seemingly harmless, and universally applied.

Combined with the aggressive patriotism of the line “where is your flag?” the market-based logic of these lines mimics a powerful affective cocktail that was readily supplied by the Bush administration throughout the war on terror. When Bush urged American families to “get down to Disney World in Florida,” and “take your families and enjoy life, the way we want it to be enjoyed” after 9/11, he captured the essence of a capitalist narrative that has now become a normalizing pillar of national security.<sup>62</sup> In this statement, capital becomes the balm for a nation in need of repair, and Bush himself turns to a slippery collective pronoun—“the way we want it to be enjoyed”—as if to suggest that the “we” of a now unified American public is synonymous with the “we” of the federal government’s exhortation to spend, spend, spend.

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<sup>61</sup> *DLMBL* 148.

<sup>62</sup> Fox, “Bush’s Economic Mistakes: Telling Us to Go Shopping.” See Also Andrew Bacevich, “He Told Us to Go Shopping. Now it’s Time to Pay the Bill.”



By rehearsing this history of pronominal devaluation, Rankine points out the parallels between the dehumanizing pronouns of the state and conventionally lyric utterance and address. In a single passage, a span of a decade rushes from “I, I, I” to a strangely monolithic version of “us,” culminating in the now-infamous phrase “you are either with us or you are with the terrorists.” Here, Rankine simplifies Bush’s 2001 address to Congress into a more generic statement (which he also said himself, in a separate news conference): “you are either with us or you are against us.”<sup>63</sup> The statement’s simplicity exposes the false dichotomy it presents, and it also underscores the emptiness of the pronoun “us” in this claim. Who is “us” in this scenario, other than a presumably white specter of cultural belonging that serves little purpose but to incite division? From visions of “our personal best” to “where is your flag?”, Rankine rehearses an illusion of meritocratic life that, threatened by the twin tower attacks, has now buttressed by state-sponsored aggression. In observing and exposing the pronouns that sustain this illusion, she reveals the distinctly textual co-opting of aspirational neoliberal subjects into a vague collective mass of model citizens.

### **Reimagining Hope**

But what, if not pronouns, is sufficient for the expression of lonely subjects—for the ability to mourn and make visible the deaths of the dispossessed? And how does one reimagine possibilities for social repair amid the mass systemic failures that make

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<sup>63</sup> Bush originally made the simplified version of this statement in a joint news conference with French President Jacques Chirac on November 6, 2001. See CNN, “Bush says it’s time for action.” He later modified the statement into “you are either with us or you are with the terrorists” in his September 20, 2001 address to Congress. See “Transcript of President Bush’s address,” CNN.

dispossession so ordinary? These questions animate the end of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, where Rankine raises the possibility of intimately addressing others whose historical silence has been upheld by the national security state. Earlier in the text, Rankine reflected on “a deepening personality flaw: IMH, the Inability to Maintain Hope, which translates into no innate trust in the supreme laws that govern us.”<sup>64</sup> Indeed, hopelessness—where one is “[t]oo scarred by hope to hope, too experienced to experience, too close to dead”—has been the central emotion undergirding large portions of this text, where both the physical body and moments of subjective interruption have made ongoing pain evidentiary. In her account of IMH, one’s mental health resides squarely within a sphere of historical hopelessness, of ongoing proximity to social and physical death. But in accumulatively bearing witness to that proximity (and, by turns, routinely troubling its conditions), Rankine replaces untroubled visions of American optimism with the potential for forming bonds of non-normative kinship.

In what follows, I suggest that Rankine’s text registers a poetic counterhistory to the deliberately vague, ahistorical and divisive forms of address that she has so far uncovered. In so doing, she revisits the possibility of hope as a central emotion for imagining the future for a collective body of mourners. She begins by reflecting on Mahalia Jackson’s “Let There Be Peace on Earth,” a song that “crosses thirty years to address intimately each of us.”<sup>65</sup> The speaker is in a theater watching a 1971 documentary, where a crowd full of strangers gives Jackson’s thirty-year-old performance a standing ovation because “her voice has always been dormant within us, waiting to be awakened, even though ‘it had to go through its own lack of answers,

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<sup>64</sup> *DLMBL* 23.

<sup>65</sup> *DLMBL* 97.

through terrifying silence, and through the thousand darknessess of murderous speech’.”

The quotation at the end of that line is from Paul Celan, whom Rankine compares to Jackson because, like her, he “has already lived all our lives for us.” Rankine writes in the endnote that Celan was awarded the Bremen Prize for German Literature after devoting his poetic career to bearing witness to Jewish public extermination—and that Jackson faced numerous health concerns, the stress of a bitter divorce, and the assassinations of fellow civil rights activists before dying in 1972, just after she performed this song. In comparing these artists, Rankine presents her own idea of collective address—an “us” full of strangers, rather an undifferentiated mass, whose coming into being depends upon having first withstood “the thousand darknesses of murderous speech.”

Like her dying friend who said “no, no, no, no,” Rankine now suggests that it is possible to hope by recognizing and revealing the precarity of one’s position, and then by seeking to think independently from it. One crucial difference, here, however, is that Rankine does not seek to develop new, potentially equally divisive forms of hailed address, nor does she simply adopt a position of utter resignation. She wants to critically dwell within the historical trajectory of systemic violence as the starting point for imagining a space of collective hope. This is why when Rankine reflects on the line in “Let There Be Peace on Earth” that goes, “let it begin with me,” she revises it to say “*Let it begin in me.*”<sup>66</sup> Like Mahalia Jackson, whom she imagines has crossed “thirty years to intimately address each of us,” Rankine crosses the universalizing vacuum of seemingly

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<sup>66</sup> *DLMBL* 97.

undifferentiated subjects by building a historically attentive awareness of both the limits and the possibilities of subjective recognition.

How, though, does such a shift in thinking come about, from a poem that has so far dwelled on evaluating hopeless silence to one that now seeks to outmaneuver it? In what follows, I suggest that it comes about by way of making space for, and anticipating, non-normative collective encounters to come. There is a line in *Citizen* that anticipates the connection between *Don't Let Me Be Lonely's* catalogue of hopeless violence and its eventual aspiration to future collectivity. The speaker writes: "Drag that first person out of the social death of history, then we're kin."<sup>67</sup> The implied action in having drug someone—specifically someone attempting to occupy the role of a first-person speaker—"out of the social death of history" is that such a history needs to be made visible, available for play. This, in its moving back and forth between violent histories and terms of intimate address, is what *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* has afforded for the imagining of future subjects: it has laid bare the many social (and physical) deaths of the national security state, and in turn has made room for the imagining of non-normative kinships.

As we have observed, Rankine's endnotes bring social legibility to episodes in which the stakes for silenced and socially invisible subjects of violence are not immediately clear. The cumulative nature of Rankine's longform, collage-like poem invites the reader to take part in a critical undertaking that is at once microscopic and collective, embodied and historical.<sup>68</sup> This kind of critical work is essential in recontextualizing forms of subjectivity and address that have been either discarded or

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<sup>67</sup> *Citizen* 72.

<sup>68</sup> For more on modes of reading and interpretation implied by combining microscopic and macroscopic forms of analysis to document and "protest the status quo" (424), see Love, "Small Change: Realism, Immanence, and the Politics of the Micro."

repackaged as innocent, decontextualized, and centered in immediacy rather than grounded in complicated histories of power and division. My own analysis of this poem has worked in this fashion, as the many citations demand the reader's labor in contextualizing often incomplete or erased personal details of historical othering. The graphic details of Byrd's and Diallo's deaths, or Louima's beating, stand in contrast with the worn-down way in which Rankine—and, often, her subjects themselves—struggle to find the space to account for their suffering. Since the endnotes are at the end of the book (and while there are endnotes for just over half of the pages, there is no indication in the main text about which pages have endnotes, and which do not) the reader has to flip back and forth between personal incidents of interrupted subjectivity, and the explanatory endnotes that allude to the structural conditions behind their silencing. In a counter to the act of channel-flipping that Rankine describes earlier in the text, the labor of flipping through the episodes and citations presents an active mode of witnessing the historical violence of dispossession. In this way, the sheer magnitude of hopelessness can be translated into a “tremendously exhausted hope.”<sup>69</sup>

Earlier in the text, Rankine's speaker had already begun to reconsider the poet's responsibility in imagining subject positions unmoored from their institutional constraints:

If I am present in the subject position what responsibility do I have to the content, to the truth value, of the words themselves? Is 'I' even me or am 'I' a gear-shift to get from one sentence to the next? Should I say we? Is the voice not various if I take responsibility for it? What does my subject mean to me?<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> *DLMBL* 118.

<sup>70</sup> *DLMBL* 54.

She makes this statement after her editor questions what, exactly, writing with the liver means to her. This meditation on the value of personal pronouns is also a meditation on writing itself, where the poet assesses the difficulty of imagining subject positions that have been emptied of their content: “Is ‘I’ even me or am ‘I’ a gear-shift to get from one sentence to the next?” In this sentence, Rankine exposes the textual materiality of these terms of address—their potential for fluidity (or as she puts it, for gear-shifting) once they are decoupled from their default attachments. For that reason, she settles on collective address, “we,” which joins questions of social responsibility with the potential to see variance and mobility in encounters among collective subjects. Here, she observes that if one is going to reconsider the representation of subjectivity in a socially responsible way, then shouldn’t the lyric voice be “various”—or, in other words, be representative of a multitude?

In a curious passage about the relationship between pronouns and death, Rankine reflects further on the potential to imagine “various” voices beyond the scope of their fixed terms of reference, even beyond the social terms of accountability with which they are encoded:

In college, when I studied Hegel, I was struck by his explanation of the use of death by the state. The minute you stop fearing death you are no longer controlled by governments and councils. In a sense you are no longer accountable to life. The relationships embedded between the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ unhinge and lose all sense of responsibility. That ‘you,’ functioning as other, now exists beyond our notions of civil and social space.<sup>71</sup>

Rankine’s speaker makes these claims as she reflects on Osama Bin Laden, whose power derives from his “commitment to his interests beyond his need to be alive.” Rankine

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<sup>71</sup> *DLMBL* 84.

doesn't invoke his name to suggest a direct comparison between his "state of beyond" and her larger meditation on black life, but she does imagine his take on death in order to rethink the way she is writing about death herself. To meditate on not just any death but "the use of death by the state" mobilizes certain forms of knowledge about the way it keeps death both in play and carefully out of sight. This is a version of a statement that is implicit throughout the text, but here she is more explicit that this knowledge may help both poet and reader decouple the potent myths attached to notions of selfhood and belonging in an era in which "you are either with us or you are against us." In the history Rankine has told, the established use of personal pronouns is synonymous with well-established state-sponsored fictions and false dichotomies. Perhaps, then, the critical objective in writing about the liver is to offer—or, at least, gesture toward—more mobile, ad-hoc arrangements for imagining both intimate connections and the history of social dispossession from "beyond our notions of civil and social space."

This is not to say that Rankine's imaginary moves toward a concept of subjective identity that operates outside civil and social space tout court, but rather that she opens up a space in which they can be made more "democratically available,"<sup>72</sup> as Kamran Javadizadeh has put it, and thus more available for rethinking the terms of social responsibility. As Javadizadeh observes, Rankine's poetics enacts an "open lyric," where the act of addressing others is focused on "who wants to be included" in a system of mutual care.<sup>73</sup> In *Citizen*, this inviting form of address is epitomized by the shape-shifting nature of second person address, "you," but in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, Rankine returns to the body as a way of testifying to embodied pain while also reimagining the stakes of

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<sup>72</sup> "The Atlantic Ocean Breaking on Our Heads" 482.

<sup>73</sup> "The Atlantic Ocean Breaking on Our Heads" 487, 485.

shared experience and mutual recognition. At the end of the poem, the speaker introduces the term “here,” a curiously nonspecific statement of mutual presence that she associates with Paul Celan’s assertion that “the poem was no different from a handshake”:

Or Paul Celan said that the poem was no different from a handshake. I cannot see any basic difference between a handshake and a poem—is how Rosemary Waldrop translated his German. The handshake is our decided ritual of both asserting (I am here) and handing over (here) a self to another. Hence the poem is that—Here. I am here. This conflation of solidity of presence with the offering of this same presence perhaps has everything to do with being alive.<sup>74</sup>

Rankine suggests that, like the immediately physical gesture of a handshake, a poem may convey a sense of mutual being in the world—a sense of being alive—without announcing predetermined boundaries of social or personal affiliation. It reconfigures personal connection as a way of offering one’s presence to one another, and that form of ground-level offering gestures to the possibility of mutual survival without declaring it outright. Here, Rankine emphasizes the “conflation of solidity of presence with the offering of this same presence” as a life-affirming, non-hierarchical alternative to the terms of state-sponsored exclusion.

The vagueness of the term “here” also refuses any affiliation with spectacle, thus rejecting the racial, socioeconomic, and pronominal divisions exacerbated by the state’s propulsion of market-based logic over questions of public care. In the final page of the poem, “HERE” is now in capital letters, on an image of an otherwise blank billboard next to an open field. Andrew Gorin contends that the generic immediacy of “HERE” in this commercialized image refuses the “reduction of the lyric subject to a thing of the market place,” and thus seeks to rewrite the “default whiteness” of not just the lyric subject, but

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<sup>74</sup> *DLMBL* 130.



of the highly mediated presence of “mass subjectivity.”<sup>75</sup> The idea of rejecting the exclusions of mass subjectivity here recalls the ubiquitous presence of the nineties-era television throughout Rankine’s text—the television delivers medical information, it conveys a variety of fictions about living “against all odds,” and it frames the many images of violent death that Rankine brings to life. To declare oneself “HERE,” by these lights, is to demand a rethinking of the politics and the economics of subjective devaluation—and through the space of poetic imagining, it is routed back through both the immediacy of the body and the materiality of language itself. In the endnote to this passage, Rankine explains that “the pronouns ‘he,’ ‘him,’ ‘his,’ and ‘her’ also come from the word “here,” as well as the pronouns ‘hither’ and ‘hence.’ From this source the feminine ‘she,’ plural ‘they,’ and neuter ‘it’ all eventually evolved.”<sup>76</sup> Thus “here” represents a pre-history for a multiplicity of pronouns, which contextualize “here” as more representative of a multitude than the universalizing terms of “we,” or “us” that have been co-opted by the state.

We don’t exactly get a sense of what a lyric invoking “here” would look like, although that doesn’t seem to be the point, either. Rankine suggests that “here” represents an aspirational mode of address that is paradoxically grounded in one’s full awareness of the conditions of one’s dispossession. In a separate interview, she asks, “at what point can I just be?”<sup>77</sup> To declare “I am here” is itself an act of resistance that breaks open the boundaries of an already existing time and place that has rendered a human subject dispossessed. The comparison of a poem to a handshake, furthermore, depends upon the

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<sup>75</sup> *Lyric Noise* 124, 97.

<sup>76</sup> *DLMBL* 154.

<sup>77</sup> Burke, “Claudia Rankine and Will Rawls.”

act of recognizing the presence of another. “Here,” she observes on the following page,” both recognizes and demands recognition.”<sup>78</sup> Under these conditions—where what counts as a lyric poem and who counts as an American citizen are essentially synonymous concerns—the micro- and macro-aggressions of the state are never far from view.

In this way, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* treats poetry as a site of inhabited social knowledge from within the depths of experienced crisis. Rankine takes her cue in this regard from Myung Mi Kim, whose 2002 *Commons* is similarly invested in registering histories of social dispossession—for which, like *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, forms of lyric address are interrupted and unavailable—as a matter of poetic and political importance. About halfway through the poem, Rankine cites Kim as a direct influence in the way she conceives of poetic making. As the speaker meditates on whether or not it is too “sentimental, or excessive, certainly not intellectual, or perhaps too naïve, to self-wounded to value each life, like that, to feel loss to the point of being bent over each time,” she invokes *Commons* as a way of resolving this concern: “[t]hough Myung Mi Kim did say that the poem is really a responsibility to everyone in a social space. She did say it was okay to cramp, to clog, to fold over at the gut, to have to hold the pain, and then to translate it here. She did say, in so many words, that what alerts, alters.”<sup>79</sup> The endnote quotes *Commons* directly: “[Kim’s] final words are the suggestion to ‘mobilize our notion of the responsibility to one another in social space’.”<sup>80</sup> Kim, a Korean American poet who immigrated to the US as a child, is invested in the act of translation, where language must be unmoored from histories of colonial oppression in order to speak

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<sup>78</sup> *DLMBL* 131.

<sup>79</sup> *DLMBL* 57.

<sup>80</sup> *DLMBL* 143.

to the experience of the culturally silenced. In *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, Rankine interprets translation as the work of making suffering visible, and *felt*, where accumulatively representing the physical pain of being immobilized is enough to alert, and then alter.

Thus the search for thinking as if “trying to weep” in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* has served multiple purposes—to register the magnitude of normalized state-sponsored violence, to resist the co-opting of private subjects into the commodified web of the national security state, and to imagine a place for subjectivity outside the boundaries of state-sponsored violence through the emergence of a lyric whose own cultural history is no longer predetermined.<sup>81</sup> In this way, Rankine bears witness to ongoing forms of hopelessness, or loneliness, while also deriving hope from the way private subjects continually resist the institutions that demand their resignation. The poet’s task, she suggests, is to mark those sites of resistance, to make visible the overlapping systems of oppression that make actual resistance futile, and to reimagine that futile state as one in which citizens can “just be.” As we have seen, though, this poem does not stop at protecting private interiority from public concerns. Rather than suggesting that there is a way to reimagine the public experience of private lives entirely, Rankine keeps open a complicated tension between the two—where private lives refuse to be co-opted into the public life of the state, and where an imagination of public life can be more attentive to the valuing of *all* private life.

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<sup>81</sup> See Gorin’s “Lyric Noise,” which contends that the white noise in Rankine’s poem offers “utopian potential . . . in the form of a virtually impossible to imagine future, one that will have arrived with the pronouns of . . . Rankine’s poetry can no longer be raced or gendered or classed by their readers, not because these categories won’t exist or have meaning, but because their meanings won’t be overdetermined by associations with neutrality or conflict” (126).

### **Cheena Marie Lo's Orders of Disaster**

When the Department of Homeland Security made the pre-emptive fight against “terror” an aggressive priority for emergency management after the 9/11 attacks, it did so at the peril of populations that were most vulnerable to environmental degradation and major climate events. As we now know, DHS’s emphasis on terror—and corresponding neglect of FEMA—exacerbated the natural and social disaster that unfolded in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast when Hurricane Katrina made landfall in 2005. Indeed, even the spectacularly visible devastation that followed in the trail of this storm was not enough to change what was already an entrenched government priority. The opening chapter of the White House’s *Hurricane Katrina: Lessons Learned* document, for instance, begins with the following statement:

Terrorists still plot their evil deeds, and nature’s unyielding power will continue. We know with certainty that there will be tragedies in our future. Our obligation is to work to prevent the acts of evil men; reduce America’s vulnerability to both the acts of terrorists and the wrath of nature; and prepare ourselves to respond to and recover from the man-made and natural catastrophes that do occur.<sup>1</sup>

This opening rhetoric prioritizes “the acts of evil men,” which personifies and deflects from any meaningful engagement with the grammatically subordinated (and again, personified) “wrath of nature.” In keeping with this opening rhetoric, the remainder of the document goes on to treat the lessons learned from the storm in reactionary terms that depend on militarized terms such as “command and control,” and bureaucratic terms such as “unified management.” Little attention, however, is offered to the environmental and

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<sup>1</sup> Townsend, *The Federal Response to Hurricane Katrina*.

human catastrophes that began long before and persisted long after initial recovery efforts.

These rhetorical flourishes and corresponding policy initiatives are symptomatic of a longer and less visible history of public neglect, which allowed a relatively small storm (Katrina was downgraded to a tropical storm by the time it hit New Orleans) to catalyze a catastrophic social disaster. While the storm's most immediately visible consequences can be traced to the city's precarious storm infrastructure—poorly constructed and badly funded levees, combined with the development of a major shipping channel that funneled storm surge into many parts of the city<sup>2</sup>—these failures were compounded by a decentralized and reactionary system of emergency response. Prior FEMA planning scenarios predicted that only a third of city residents would make it out of New Orleans before a Katrina-like storm, and yet minimal resources were committed to transporting and housing those who did not have the resources to evacuate.<sup>3</sup> Bracing for unimaginable disaster consequences, both federal and state emergency planners anticipated the possibility of twenty-five thousand deaths as a disaster waiting to happen

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<sup>2</sup>See Giroux, "Reading Hurricane Katrina," Giroux observes that a long-standing trend in underfunded levee construction and maintenance requests (in addition to reports of multiple FEMA warnings prior to the storm that the levees could burst) undercuts President George W. Bush's now famous statement on Good Morning America that he didn't "think anyone anticipated the breach of the levees."

<sup>3</sup> See Woods, *Development Drowned and Reborn*, which details the FEMA-led planning scenario for a Category 3 hurricane named Pam. This exercise concluded with the prediction that between twenty-five thousand and one hundred thousand people in New Orleans could be left dead by a major weather event (266). See also Giroux, "Reading Hurricane Katrina" for the limitations of actual evacuation efforts in New Orleans. While FEMA contracted a firm to organize transportation for those who could not make it out of the city on their own, a transportation network never emerged, and even those who made it to evacuation sites like the New Orleans Superdome and the Houston Astrodome were met with unlivable conditions. And in response to dire conditions for hundreds of thousands of stranded civilians, nearly 65,000 active duty and National Guard troops descended upon New Orleans—to provide aid, but also to impose militarized law and order on the government and media-propagated myth of widespread looting.

(particularly for those who were poor, sick, elderly, or incarcerated) rather than a humanitarian crisis to be averted.<sup>4</sup>

It is impossible, of course, to extricate these failures in disaster preparedness from the city's long history of poverty, low wages, declining social and infrastructural investment, and history of police corruption and mass incarceration. Long before the hurricane made landfall, the overlapping conditions of disrepair in New Orleans compelled cultural geographer Clyde Woods to call it "one of the greatest urban social disasters in the United States."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the devastation of Hurricane Katrina put the social disaster of New Orleans on full display, and it accelerated an ongoing social catastrophe in the muddled recovery and restoration efforts to follow. Two million people were displaced, tens of thousands of residents were stranded, likely over 1800 people died, and the cost of physical damage rose to \$135 billion.<sup>6</sup> The majority of those affected came from New Orleans' poor black neighborhoods, which most embodied the city's uneven and sometimes corrupt history of providing public care.

In the months and years after the storm, it became clear that even a dramatic public airing of Katrina's devastation would not be enough to shift the national

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<sup>4</sup> See Lakoff, "Preparing for the Next Emergency." The government's rise in reactionary emergency planning logic is described as a preparedness paradigm, a term that cultural geographers use to describe a contemporary ideology of bracing for disasters of enormous and often unknown magnitude Lakoff goes on to describe preparedness as a paradigm that "enacts a vision of a dystopian future in order to develop a set of operational criteria for response. Preparedness does not seek to prevent the occurrence of a disastrous event but rather assumes that the event will happen" (253).

<sup>5</sup> *Development Drowned and Reborn* 217. See Chapter 7 for a discussion of the history of poverty, lack of infrastructure investment, police corruption, and rising prison population in New Orleans. and lack of infrastructure investment in New Orleans.

<sup>6</sup> See Hartman and Squires, *There is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster* and Carl Bialik's "We Still Don't Know How Many People Died Because of Katrina." Bialik notes that while most initial body counts for Katrina hover at around 1800, we have no way of knowing how many people died in the storm without being found.

conversation toward slower-moving forms of disaster (climate change, structural racism, and so on) that make the acute, spectacular ones what they are (like televised images of flooded neighborhoods, or of storefronts with broken windows). This disjunction has much to do with the opportunities that acute disaster events like this one create for the consolidation of profit and privilege under the guise of recovery. Post-disaster rebuilding efforts in New Orleans fulfilled economist Milton Friedman's exhortation "to preserve law and order, to enforce private contracts, to foster competitive markets" rather than to provide massive streams of needed public aid.<sup>7</sup> As public housing turned into condos, public schools converted into for-profit charters, and a web of contracted (and sub-contracted) services slowed the restoration of livable conditions, a classic disaster capitalism scenario found its ideal home. In this way, a government-sanctioned narrative of rebuilding and growth served only to extend historically entrenched conditions of racialized inequality and social divestment.<sup>8</sup>

The immediate failures in emergency planning, the systemic failures of racialized inequality, the ongoing privatization of public services, and the amplification of long-standing anti-black carceral practices densely populate Cheena Marie Lo's book-length serial work, titled *A Series of Un/Natural/Disasters* (2016). Lo, a genderqueer Bay area poet writing in the wake of Occupy Oakland, compiles and re-orders uncited fragments of government documents, statistics, paraphrased quotations and news reports, and criminal justice research that present an array of competing accounts about the circumstances

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in *The Shock Doctrine* 6. Friedman wrote these comments in a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed three months after the levees broke, at the age of 93.

<sup>8</sup> "There's No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster." Smith also points out that the many of the contractors hired during hurricane recovery were the same ones used wholesale in the Iraq War, itself another classic example of disaster capitalism given free rein.

surrounding the storm. This method of poetic making demands that readers do the contextualizing work—prying apart varying accounts of disaster, examining underlying social conditions, and revealing the invisibility of the storm’s most vulnerable environments and citizens. Doing this work accumulatively confounds the stable frame of disaster as a spectacular event occurring at a particular time and place. The reading of the poems in this collection, then, demands new frames of reference, which include attention to multiple and overlapping social disasters of varying speeds, durations, and repetitions.

The sprawling and recursive nature of this collection—and the expansive, pattern-oriented point of view that its reading requires—invites redefinition and recontextualization, thus making room for imagining ad-hoc configurations of mutually sustaining communities. Alongside sheets of statistics, commentary, and descriptions of ruined homes, Lo develops a conceptual method in which birds, mammals, plant life, debris, and devastated buildings draw attention to light and life shining through the material and social ruins of “natural” disaster. This formalization of mutual aid (as a kind of horizontalized, improvisatory assemblage of debris) further confounds capitalist hierarchies of valuation and privileged spectacle that have been central to the state’s handling of the storm. By re-examining the status of that which manages to persist in the midst of destabilizing crises, the poet prescribes a model of reading that is both interpretive and speculative, thus actively requiring readers to imaginatively take in the materials of disaster in order to attend to larger networks of public care.

It is helpful to briefly locate Lo’s poetic experiments in relationship to two prominent branches of contemporary poetry—one built by the self-expressive legacy of the lyric, the other built in opposition to it—whose formal methods and purposes have



long been subjects of critical debate. As we saw in Chapter 3, forms of witness-based and event-based contemporary poetry, called the “New Poetry of Engagement,” have been recently positioned as evidence of a newly politically alert poetics that expresses the magnitude of sensed crisis after 9/11.<sup>9</sup> A *Publisher’s Review* synopsis of *A Series of Un/Natural/Disasters* seems to group Lo’s work within this genre of writing, calling it part of a “niche field of post-catastrophe narrative.”<sup>10</sup> Conversely, various inheritors of avant-garde experimentalism, who privilege language’s constructive possibilities over lyric’s presumed universality, have cultivated constraint-based poetics that engage in “uncreative writing” from “environment[s] of textual abundance” found on the web.<sup>11</sup> Despite their technical differences and competing aims, these two poetic taxonomies share a tendency to write about their subjects and audiences in generalized terms—whether as a surprised subject of a pierced pre-9/11 innocence, or as a theoretical tinkerer for whom the pain of historical violence is raw material for play.<sup>12</sup> Both of these methods

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<sup>9</sup> See Gray and Keniston’s *The News from Poems: Twenty-First Century Essays on the American Poetry of Engagement*, and *The New American Poetry of Engagement: A Twenty-First Century Anthology*.

<sup>10</sup> “*A Series of Un/Natural/Disasters*.” The review also lists the genre of Lo’s text as “fiction.”

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Goldsmith, “Why Conceptual Writing? Why Now?” xviii. Goldsmith later writes: “If you can filter through the mass of information and pass it on as an arbiter to others, you gain an enormous amount of cultural capital. Filtering is taste. And good taste rules the day” (xix).

<sup>12</sup> The claim for newly “engaged” poems after the twin tower attacks assumes that previous forms of poetry were decidedly apolitical, thus excluding a long line of activist poets, movement poets, and poets of color—and some of the leading practitioners of Conceptualism have recently been accused of leveraging the pain of racialized violence in their work. See Timothy Yu’s “Engagement, Race, and Public Poetry in America,” which makes the case that Keniston’s and Gray’s declaration of a politically relevant poetics after 9/11 is primarily “a white poet’s problem,” particularly for those who write in universalizing language meant for “a general, abstract audience.” See also Ken Chen’s “Authenticity Obsession, or Conceptualism as Minstrel Show,” which, in response to Kenneth Goldsmith and Vanessa Place, contends that “Conceptual poetry has created an aesthetically justifiable way to ingest the racial body: the use of supposedly neutral tropes (quotation and appropriation) as a force field that can both repress and exhibit the excessive ‘authenticity’ of race.”

presume the abstractness of its subjects, the singularity of their occasions for writing, and a default position of privilege for its audiences—a method that, in some ways, is not unlike the generalized and acute assumptions of disaster rhetoric in the present.

In response to the limitations in taxonomy, historical context, and generalization that poetry and politics sometimes share, Lo writes a poetics of mutual aid that demands close attention to the webs of connection that become visible among the re-ordered materials of social disaster. These methods pry open the auto-poetic capacities for rhetoric and policy to silently reproduce the conditions of dispossession, and they query the conditions under which citizenship and belonging are contingent upon their shaping (and devaluation) by recursive and unwieldy networks of discipline and profit. In so doing, Lo queries the possibilities for thinking with and through the absences of the subjects, communities, and environments left out of the state's disaster calculus. They examine absence not just within the space of Hurricane Katrina itself, but across multiple histories of violence and othering, whose capacity for visibility may now generate new possibilities for imagining the terms of disaster response.

### **Ideas of Order**

*A Series of Un/Natural/Disasters* is written in serial form, with a loosely abecedarian constraint that organizes its 33 sections, each taking up anywhere between one to five pages. Like the rest of the poem, the title makes no reference to a specific disaster event or linear sequence of events. As the slash marks in their title indicate, Lo relies on fragments of found text, statistics, testimony, policy, and images—many of which are borrowed from “numerous news articles aggregated by Google News

searches”—to revisit and reorder Hurricane Katrina’s many failures in public care.<sup>13</sup> The poem incorporates major elements of documentary poetry, which seek to “extend the document,” as Muriel Rukeyser put it, of historical records in which vulnerable citizens have been excluded, demonized, or both.<sup>14</sup> And by organizing various source materials by alphabetical constraint, Lo’s collection begins in a way that resembles a dictionary or similar system of reference, thus seeking to extend the historical record of Hurricane Katrina by first redefining its parameters. The opening poem, “Always already,” queries ongoing definitions, context, and evaluations of disaster organized by the indefinite article, “a”:

a socialized system

a structure

an institution

a number of overlapping networks

a complicated history

a feedback loop

a nuance

a trace

a complex web of connected services and systems

a problem

a disaster<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *A Series of Un/Natural/Disasters* (hereafter referred to as *ASOUND*) 65.

<sup>14</sup> “The Book of the Dead” 604.

<sup>15</sup> *ASOUND* 8.

Lo introduces a range of interrelated concepts that are central to their text: social programs, complex systems, institutions, and networks. They do not, however, define or link any of these terms in obvious ways aside from the repetition of “a”—rather than the definite article, “the,” or even “this,” or “that.” The reader is left to make sense of these terms—to draw contrasts between them, or to sit with them, letting them become the starting gambit for a larger structural undertaking. Any reading of this poem requires both: a simultaneous eye for critical interpretation and an openness to a meaning that is not, at present reading, fully articulable.

In the service of drawing initial contrasts, one can observe that services and systems sound more like sources of immediate public aid, while overlapping networks, complicated histories, and feedback loops require the benefit of time to interpret their effects. Feedback loops describe self-regulating systems, whose recursive patterns can represent either a system in perfect balance, like a smoothly functioning ecosystem, or a pattern of compounding error, like a malfunctioning formula. Feedback loops also provide ways of regulating and evaluating the flow of information and material objects. In a way, the poem itself functions as a feedback loop, where the abecedarian constraint brings order to sets of related terms whose variances are clearer once put alongside one another. The resulting collection is designed not to form a single argument about the value or insufficiency of particular social systems, but rather to map the various workings of “complicated system[s]” and “institution[s].” The meaning it derives is ambient and accumulative, held open to demand closer attention to the patterns, hierarchies, and absences that attend descriptions of seemingly acute disaster. In this way, Lo draws

attention not just to the fictions of the national security state, but to its recursivity, to the lack of propulsion in many of its systems.

As the second poem in this series, “Because Another Tropical Storm is Looming,” examines various stated causes for the storm’s damage, the evaluative capacity of its procedure-based constraint—to trace the contradictions, repetitions, and purposes behind disaster rhetoric—becomes clearer. Lo moves between news commentary about Bush’s “failure to step in” and legalistic language about how “FEMA regulations prohibit [levees] from being installed in flood-prone coastal areas.” This poem, which repeats the word “because,” queries how disaster is identified and mitigated, who determines the scale and force of disaster response, and what gets priority for relief.

because another tropical storm is looming

because the levees that protect New Orleans from floods are weak

because of his failure to step in

because FEMA regulations prohibit them from being installed in flood-  
prone coastal areas

because most of the victims were black

because of the war in Iraq

because many of the victims were poor and black

because the Hurricane Center says at least another twenty minutes  
before we call where the eye made landfall

because the winds come up this way over this way and then down this  
way<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *ASOUND* 9.

Here, specific references to New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina expand to include the larger ecosystems of race, poverty, and the war in Iraq—and repetitive references to black victims, not the storm itself, become the common thread of analysis. After the storm, black people in New Orleans became both hypervisible and invisible in specific and often contradictory ways: hypervisible as emblems of destruction and suffering, but also as alleged looters and pathologized criminals; then, at the same time, invisible as anything other than a televised spectacle, essentially a source of disaster porn rather than an occasion for witnessing widespread human disaster. Here, the representation of black life becomes as important (and as difficult to track) as government officials' varied attempts to define and predict the path of the storm. These multiple and competing attempts to find a stable frame of reference confound definition, requiring the reader to hold them both open as ways of understanding the unfolding disaster.

The control term “because” implies attribution, a tracing of sources—in this way, it is an ideal term for pinpointing the sources of disaster. Yet in this poem, the actual lives of those who were dispossessed of their property, their communities, and the resources to rebuild are absent from consideration except by way of taxonomy—“poor black people”—although sometimes even that level of recognition disappears from view. Almost as soon as they began, these early references in the poem to “black victims” are replaced by various accounts of lapses in public services. Some stated causes include the presence of “busloads of people” who are “not really the priority,” the bureaucratic assumption that the Superdome could accommodate all of the evacuees, and inaccurate estimates of the number of evacuees (tens of thousands rather than hundreds of thousands). Here, we begin to see a layering of bureaucratic narratives that seldom match

up with one another, with devastating effects for the care and transportation of hundreds of thousands of predominantly black evacuees. In the middle of this vast network, precarious life is made visible only by accumulating their absence among other competing frameworks of observation—like the war on terror, or the tracking of the storm.

One predominant framework does proceed to overshadow both the storm and its victims, and it takes the form of the Bush administration's disproportionate focus on the war on terror. The spectacle of the war siphons away attention to those most impacted by the storm, and it draws resources away from forms of disaster response and recovery that might otherwise be allocated to vulnerable citizens and environments. Three pages in, several lines about the war on terror emerge in succession:

because it reveals clearly the complete fraud of the 'war on terrorism'

because the entire purpose of the 'war on terrorism' has not been to  
respond to a disaster, natural or otherwise<sup>17</sup>

These declarations, presumably from news reports, punctuate the Bush administration's focus on "the acts of evil men" over the actual disaster conditions on the ground.

Meanwhile, an unnamed "he," presumably George W. Bush, continues to "[divert] funds and manpower to Iraq,"<sup>18</sup> where a parallel example of spectacular disaster capitalism is well under way. On four separate occasions, "he," one of the few personal pronouns used in this book, becomes the primary agent of willful ignorance for a cascade of oversights: failure to respond to the hurricane radar, failure to help those in need, failure to allocate funds to the poor and vulnerable. Many of these excerpts capture the ways in which Bush

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<sup>17</sup> *ASOUND* 10-11.

<sup>18</sup> *ASOUND* 11-12.

became the primary villain of the storm, but Lo's purpose in identifying him here is not to dwell on Bush himself. By putting "his" failures in quick succession, without actually invoking his name, they contextualize Bush's place as one of many facilitators of an emergency culture that prioritizes war and privatized growth over the mobilizing of public resources to render aid to the vulnerable.

By seeing these multiple and shifting accounts of various breakdowns, distractions, and oversights subordinated to generalized concepts of war, readers are compelled to develop their own independent webs of connection among the materials of disaster. One line toward the end of the poem reads: "because of a combination of factors that had not been anticipated," encapsulating the way in which the Bush administration's focus on war facilitated its inability (or, its refusal) to draw obvious connections between environmental degradation, the growing social and political vulnerability of the poor, and a historical decline in infrastructure and public services. But just after that line, another set of lines lays out a specific cluster of complicating and intersecting factors that were observed at the time, presumably from different media reports:

because of the inherent weakness of the soils behind it and pushed into  
the adjoining neighborhood

because tens of thousands of mostly African-American voters displaced  
by the storm have not yet come home

because I have to keep up now with where everybody, where they are now

because they didn't trust voting early or absentee<sup>19</sup>

As if in response to the "factors that had not been anticipated," these lines emphasize a set of cascading non-spectacular disaster conditions, like "the inherent weakness of the

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<sup>19</sup> *ASOUND* 12.



soils,” and the political and social ramifications of the displacement of poor, predominantly black neighborhoods that ensued. As one neighborhood built upon a foundation of weak soil begins to erode among similarly vulnerable “adjoining neighborhood[s],” multiple communities (very likely black neighborhoods, both middle class and poor)<sup>20</sup> the effects of their displacement also then decreases the city’s black voting population. There are no particular actors singled out for causing these problems, but rather a failing series of procedures—automatically populated failures, one after the next, where the number of available voters in the neighborhoods most impacted by racialized violence are no longer available to protest policies that do not support them. By rearranging these separate media accounts so that their reported consequences are now clearly interrelated, Lo illuminates the vastness of the consequences for social displacement—essentially, the destroying of entire communities of solidarity and support, and the dwindling of needed political voices and balances to state power.

As these compiled observations about the storm’s aftermath continue, it becomes clearer that Lo’s focus is on the accumulation of sites and scenes of vulnerability punctuated by ongoing absence. These absences include people, their property and their environments, and the underlying infrastructure, both physical and social, whose long-standing erosion now becomes fully visible. “I have to keep up now with where

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<sup>20</sup> See Rivlin, “Why New Orleans’s Black Residents are Still Underwater After Katrina.” According to Rivlin, “[t]he city had a population of 455,000 before the storm, two-thirds of whom were black; by 2010 there were 24,000 fewer whites and 118,000 fewer blacks. That year, the city elected its first white mayor in 32 years. A 5-2 white supermajority controlled the City Council, which had been majority black before the storm. Orleans Parish had a white district attorney; its Police Department, a white chief. White-majority boards ran most of the city’s schools and the housing authority.”

everybody, where they are now,”<sup>21</sup> says one displaced voter from the Upper Ninth Ward, who voices the difficulty of maintaining contact with “everybody”—community members who have been displaced to separate locations after the storm, across vast distances, many with little hope of having the resources to return. In this versified catalogue of causes, the lasting consequences of environment and human disaster become representable not just by tracing the sources of their absence, but by articulating the precariousness of their future. “Everybody, where they are now” represents the atomization of communities that have been divested of their property, their jobs, their communities, and their sources of social and political solidarity.

### **The Carceral Roots of Disaster**

As this collection of poems proceeds, Lo examines the ways in which a narrative of enforced security has been central to the social, political, and economic disenfranchisement of black life in New Orleans. New Orleans has long figured prominently in studies of mass incarceration for its outsized prison population and long record of police corruption. What has sometimes been less readily apparent, however, is the lucrative role that mass incarceration has played for the city and for private individuals, both before and after the storm. In the years leading up to Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans led the nation in incarceration rates, to include an 80% occupation rate of

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<sup>21</sup>The last three lines of the section quoted above are lifted from a reporter’s observations and witness testimony in a 2006 NPR article about New Orleans voter limitations. See Troeh, “City Elections Held in Post-Katrina New Orleans.” In the article, Pamela Charles, who was displaced to Appaloosa, Louisiana, said: “We drove in. It took us about two and a half, three hours. To me, this is not a fair election. I think it should have been called off until more people were more better informed over who’s running and what they stand for. This is really just an injustice to the voters.”

people of color. This prison system paid sheriffs a per diem for each inmate, while criminal courts and commercial bondsmen collected lucrative fees from potential offenders. Those who could not afford their bonds were jailed, pre-trial—including a third of the 7000 prisoners at Orleans Parish Prison, all of whom were abandoned during the storm.<sup>22</sup> The poem, “Connect Reinvestment to Reinforcement,” likewise, draws together threads of public policy, law enforcement, and profit that undergird the city’s carceral history:

connect with anything  
 connect feedback loops to webs  
 connect reinvestment to enforcement  
 connect enforcement to reentry  
 connect legislation to analysis  
 connect analysis to prisons  
 connect prisons to police  
 connect police to policy  
 connect policy to probation  
 connect probation to reinvestment  
 connect reinvestment to jails  
 connect jails to enforcement  
 connect enforcement to legislation  
 connect this web to something<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See Olenka Frienkiel, “Prisoners of Katrina.”

<sup>23</sup> *ASOUND* 13-14.

The idea of a feedback loop returns here to capture some of the interlocking, long-lasting, and easily overlooked features of a bureaucratic structure defined by its power to discipline its citizens. Beginning by connecting law enforcement to re-entry, the common term for the typically ineffective return of incarcerated people to their communities,<sup>24</sup> this feedback loop depends upon powerful webs of carceral connection that, over time, silently gut entire communities. The line “connect reinvestment to reinforcement,” for instance, is followed by patterns of imprisonment, reentry, legislation, and probation, all of which serve to keep more people behind bars than to rehabilitate them. Reinvestment and reinforcement, two terms with generically positive connotations, stand in for the uneven revitalization of post-Katrina New Orleans, the outsized enforcement of law and order, and the continued growth of prisons throughout this period. This connection alludes to the fact that in the rebuilding of New Orleans infrastructure and services after the storm, the opening of a detention center was among the first immediate measures to be put in place, and subsequent plans to rebuild and even expand a local prison also figured more heavily in rebuilding plans than the restoration of public housing or schools.<sup>25</sup>

The term “connect,” then, figures as an invitation for the reader to re-evaluate established links between investment and prosperity, law enforcement and safety, and policy and public services when the city’s history of profit-seeking punishment shows that these connections simply aren’t the case, or at least not for everyone. “Connect with anything,” one line simply says, putting pressure on existing systems of knowledge and

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<sup>24</sup> According the Justice Reinvestment New Orleans project, about half of those who attempt re-entry in New Orleans will return to the prison system within three years.

<sup>25</sup> See Woods, *Development Drowned and Reborn*.

belonging in order to make room for new, more substantial webs of connection. Then, as if to revise that sentence, the final line of this poem reads, “connect this web to *something*”<sup>26</sup> (emphasis mine)—as if that something is not *just anything*, but that which gives form to those who have been rendered disposable by these carceral webs of connection. Here, the voice of the poet directly intervenes, as if this time to call out to the reader. In this final line of the section, Lo gestures toward an interpretive model of reading geared toward deriving “something”—a community, however nascent or ill-formed, from the appropriated materials of disaster.

As Lo continues to show, the materials of disaster are both physical—prison systems, failing social services, the uneven distribution of recovery funds—and affective. Indeed, an entire affective network of public fictions facilitates the post-hurricane dismantling of already vulnerable communities. In the longest poem of this collection, “Poor Marks for His Handling of Federal Response,” Lo compiles the multitude of storm-related associations with the word “poor”:

poor people who were caught in the wake  
 poor folks whose lives were washed away  
 poor have lost most  
 poor without transportation would be left behind  
 poor people at a relocation center in Houston were faring better than  
     before  
 poor planning on the part of our government  
 poor people were not able to evacuate  
 poor black residents  
 poor judgment in not evacuating  
 poor are suffering most from shortage of doctors<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *ASOUND* 14.

<sup>27</sup> *ASOUND* 29.

The versions of “poor” run the gamut: poor as in sympathetic or vulnerable, poor as in divested of capital, property, and resources; poor as in badly designed or executed, poor as in bad judgment or quality. In listing this variety of meanings so exhaustively, the people, things and events to which these terms are attached—mainly, poor black people and the conditions of their devaluation—come into visibility. The fictions that sustain these common judgments of poor black people come to the surface here, too. The line “poor people at a relocation center in Houston were faring better than before,”<sup>28</sup> for example, refers to Barbara Bush’s chuckling assessment that the evacuation of impoverished residents to Houston was “working out very well for them.”<sup>29</sup> By this logic—which was repeated by various politicians, news commentators, and administrators throughout the storm coverage—black residents were cast as a monolithic and objectified mass of opportunists, looters, and criminals that needed to be “cleaned up.”<sup>30</sup>

As the judgments listed in this section relegate black citizens to a less than human status, they also authorize and sustain the smooth functioning of disaster capitalism. Multiple accounts of storm revitalization efforts embodied the widespread sentiment, among both developers and politicians, that unlimited opportunities for growth in the city were made possible by the mass dispersal of black residents, which one developer called

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<sup>28</sup> *ASOUND* 29.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted by the New York Times in “Barbara Bush Calls Evacuees Better Off.” The full quote reads: “What I’m hearing, which is sort of scary, is they all want to stay in Texas. Everyone is so overwhelmed by the hospitality. And so many people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this, this is working very well for them.”

<sup>30</sup> See Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, which quotes a comment from Richard Baker, a Republican congressman from New Orleans, to a group of lobbyists: “We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did” (4).

a “clean sheet.”<sup>31</sup> The plausibility of treating the city like a “clean sheet,” of course, is only made available if black residents are viewed as expendable, essentially less than human. This is the only way to sustain the fiction that the mass displacement of entire black neighborhoods were not in themselves a cause for restoration and rebuilding; instead, their absence created a blank space, ready for the repopulation of a smaller, whiter city.

Lo’s copying and pasting of these news accounts, however, also leaves some of their terms open to reinterpretation—especially the last line of this poem, in which the word “poor” evolves into “pour.” This poem ends with three lines of blank space, followed by the phrase “pouring water into a pail with no bottom.” The phrase comes from a newspaper article whose author describes the city’s public housing projects as already having been “sinkholes of crime and despair” before the storm, and the article also quotes a local resident’s sentiments (the origin of the “pail with no bottom” line) that any more money sunk into public housing will only sanction ongoing violence and poverty.<sup>32</sup> In quoting this statement, Lo continues to compile the affective tools of antiblack dispossession that served to make the city more profitable for its white residents. However, in its differentiation from the rest of the poem, the line automatically reads differently, as well. In positioning any potential investment in black life as “pouring water into a pail with no bottom,” one gets the sense of the sheer volume and power of many droplets of water without a container—in essence, the elements of a flood, now

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<sup>31</sup> Klein recalls a comment from Joseph Canizaro, a wealthy New Orleans developer: “I think we have a clean sheet to start again. And with that clean sheet we have some very big opportunities” (4).

<sup>32</sup> Tampa Bay Times Staff, “New Orleans Housing Plan Upsets Residents.” The full quote from then resident is: “[u]nless they do something, it’s not going to change. You can pour all the money you want into this type of situation. It’s like pouring water into a pail with no bottom.”

threatening to spill over the top of its frame of containment. Over the course of this poem, the repetition of the terms “poor” and “black” have written the subjects of absence and exclusion into visibility. Where other poems in this collection seek to elevate the forgotten voices of the dispossessed, here Lo excavates competing forms of testimony in order to register their accumulative visibility as essential to their persistence and survival.

In this way, these poems begin to require an extraordinarily flexible interpretive lens, where the accumulative presence of terms, data, and concepts reveal different ways of reimagining previously fixed categories of belonging and un-belonging. Lo’s inclusion of six different poems comprised entirely of unlabeled data sets, for instance, can be interpreted only through the presence of their numbers. There is no additional text; these charts are poems in themselves. The first data-based poem in the collection is comprised of a long string of numbers, beginning with zero and ending, three pages later, in 4,624,400.<sup>33</sup> The poem immediately following it depicts a chart in four rows and five columns of numbers from 0.3 to 100.<sup>34</sup> The numbers come from one of Lo’s few cited sources, the Justice Reinvestment New Orleans project. As they stand alone among whitespace, with no other frames of reference, they do not compete for noise with the various networks of uncited news reports that most of this collection contains. Instead, each unlabeled chart conveys the sheer weight borne upon those who are usually least equipped for undue financial and social burden. This list of numbers leaves a sense of uncountable absence that can only be represented as a vast accumulation of vulnerability uncoupled from any specific set of identities, locations, or even particular periods of time. Here is yet another representation of presence without absence, but this time on what is

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<sup>33</sup> See “Justice Reinvention New Orleans” 14.

<sup>34</sup> See “Justice Reinvention New Orleans” 19.



clearly a grander scale than what can be covered by individual snippets of commentary and observation.

Of course, because we know at least some of Lo's sources in consulting these statistics, it is possible to determine their original context, and the poem's interpretive method requires at least some sense of the multiple webs of connection that exist beyond a sense of the poem as simply a conceptual exercise. Where Rankine, in the previous chapter, treats citationality as a central aspect of filling in historical fissures and omissions, Lo's method requires the reader's active curiosity about their original contexts, while remaining flexible to what these lines of data, commentary, and testimony represent as objects and assemblages in themselves. The content of these first two data-based poems, for instance, represents the rising costs of New Orleans prison expenditures and the concentration of prison admissions by district, respectively. Knowing this information does not change the visual content of these poems, which are intended to stand apart from their original sources. But it does lend further weight to a culture of punishment that repeatedly curtails the flourishing of black communities that have been gutted by mass incarceration. In this way, the accumulation of cost, both personal and financial, is a tangible presence, both in form and content, of the accumulation of wasted lives that exceed time and place-based tabulations of damage, lives lost, and numbers of the displaced.

### “Amidst Otherwise Most Cruel Animals”

In the last line of an early poem, Lo asks, “/how to quantify absence?”<sup>35</sup>—or, how to reverse the tide of a crisis made by the smooth functioning of systemic dispossession. As if in response, Lo’s poem gives flesh not just to uncounted individuals and communities, but to the possibility of embracing collectivity and common ground—to treat all persons, essentially, as part of the same mutually sustaining ecosystem. To do this, *A Series of Un/Natural/Disasters* turns to the concept of mutual aid. Mutual aid has its own meaning for emergency management purposes; it usually signifies a formal agreement among utility companies, or between states, in the event of disaster. Lo, however, conceives of the term from its anarcho-communist roots, where the term is synonymous with various forms of political solidarity, fellowship, organizing, and resource sharing. Mutual aid has been an essential concept not only for various forms of informal community organizing, but it was also instrumental in Bay area activist and poetic communities of which Lo is a part, especially those writing in the wake of the Occupy Oakland movement and the Oakland Commune.<sup>36</sup> Mutual aid is also historically grounded in the work of the Paris Commune of 1971 and the socialist ecologies surrounding its formation exemplified by Karl Marx, William Morris, Elisée Reclus, and Peter Kropotkin.<sup>37</sup> Kropotkin’s *Mutual Aid* served as one of Lo’s major sources in the writing of this book; for Kropotkin, mutual aid represents a system of non-hierarchical cooperation among living beings, to include bees and ants, which functions by way of cooperation rather than competition with one another for scarce resources. By these

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<sup>35</sup> *ASOUND* 14.

<sup>36</sup> See Lau, “Occupy Oakland.”

<sup>37</sup> See Ross, *Communal Luxury*.

lights, mutual aid rejects competition, categorization, and hierarchy by offering a speculative alternative of a self-organizing public, stripped away from capitalist and institutional enclosures.

Lo first engages Kropotkin's work by treating paraphrased terms from his book as lively interruptions to repetitive and empty disaster rhetoric. In the poem "it keeps getting better," phrases from *Mutual Aid* are interspersed amid lines about emergency plans, evacuation, jails, and investigations:

"it keeps getting better" "it reminds me of a little joke" "in order to move forward" "immense part played by mutual aid" "is more cost effective" "in the evolution of the animal world" "implement the following recommendations" "in the evolution of mankind" "implement a coordinated emergency plan" "in societies" "institute of corrections" "in common" "is capable" "individual jails" "it would be quite contrary" "in mutual support" "in the months after" "its performance" "in nature" "in assisting" "in evacuating" "it is encouraging" "it has never found a lack of supporters" "it does not appear" "in its most primitive position" "interest" "in evaluating" "if the institution" "it be possible" "it may be taken as a rule" "in any other" "insufficient" "in what should be" "individuals held" "in all possible circumstances of village life" "investigative body" "is part of the routine life" "identifying" "in light of these projections" "improve jail conditions" "it has been shown that" "inefficiencies" "in all parts of the country" "in the system" "is no public"<sup>38</sup>

Here, a series of observations about emergency recovery and response appear in an almost perfect square of disconnected quotations. The paragraph begins with generically optimistic conversational language—"it keeps getting better"—but that quickly changes into clipped business speak, such as "in order to move forward," and "is more cost effective." As the poem continues in this symmetrical shape, market-based terms are later subordinated to disciplinary terms such as "institute / of corrections," "individuals held," and "investigative body." In this way, the poem resembles a structure, built by narratives

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<sup>38</sup> *ASOUND* 21.

of efficiency and growth, that also depends upon a foundation steeped in the rhetoric of punishment.

But within this foreclosed structure of deadening language, small signs of life persist. In between this mix of expressed optimism, efficiency, and punishment are various terms from *Mutual Aid*: “in common,” “in mutual support,” “in nature,” and so on. These terms of basic organic cooperation occupy a “most primitive position” among its contemporary bureaucratic scaffolding. While by Kropotkin’s lights, “primitive” refers to the idealization of self-sustaining pre-capitalist cultures, Lo employs the term here to embrace basic units of proximity among discarded materials that no longer depend upon idealized visions of belonging and solidarity. These small units of collective imagining dwell within the empty structure of capitalist rhetoric in order to embrace what may persist beyond it.

In subsequent poems, Lo extends the possibility of imagining mutual aid by repurposing terms from Kropotkin’s book about the vitality of nonhuman life. Here, Lo turns to the mutual survival of birds, insects, and lakes—all parts of self-organizing systems, like swarms or flocks, that work together as part of an ecosystem:

so what about the instinct to survive.

so what about birds and burying beetles.

so what about support and what about struggle.

so what about ants and bees and termites.

so what about the field upon which tender feelings develop  
even amidst otherwise most cruel animals.

so what about migration, breeding, autumn.

so what about the numberless lakes of the russian and siberian steppes

and what about aquatic birds, all living in perfect peace—<sup>39</sup>

The repeated “so what” in this poem strikes a casual, interpersonal tone that communicates either a careless indifference, as in “so what about it?”, or a more speculative position that demands accountability, as in: “so what about this, or that?”. These lines are clearly more aligned with the latter, but in keeping both versions alive in this poem, it is easy to observe the ease with which one version can slide into another, and vice versa—and to observe the one thing they have in common, which is imagination. To say “so what?” either conveys an utter lack of imaginative curiosity, or it treats imagination as a vital tool for remembering both forgotten pasts and speculative futures.

In this way, Lo introduces the possibility of improvisatory survival among completely unlike beings, an act that requires a historically alert imagination, and a careful attention to the ease with which familiar terms of inequality and enclosure can be re-inscribed into new forms and containers. Rather than rearrange and essentially replicate the conditions in which some humans come to matter more than others, Lo holds open a space in which a decidedly non-human representation of mutual aid serves as a model for searching out imaginative connections and improvisatory materials. Turning to nonhuman life here also dismantles the individuated fictions of a survival-of-the-fittest narrative, which Kropotkin opposed in his own work, and which Lo applies to the fiction of “competition” that sustains capitalist narratives of opportunity and accepted risk. Instead, Lo assembles a minimal narrative of survival in which various species

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<sup>39</sup> *ASOUND* 38.

survive in their recognition of mutual precarity, without single authorized subjects and enclosing social hierarchies.

In this way, the smallest grains of common survival can be conceptually discerned from within the various forms of disrepair that Lo compiles and reorders. Other poems pay a similarly granular but surprisingly optimistic attention to photographs of ruined homes and neighborhoods in order to seek out on the potential liveliness of what remains. The poem “Direct Sunlight Looking Over 4725 Dauphine Street,” for instance, repeats and extends descriptions of a photograph’s most basic elements of structural disrepair:

direct sunlight looking over 4725 dauphine street creates black shadow  
straight line broken by either an arch or porch roof or just the  
way the light bends.

lines of parallel panels painted gray and peeling.

eight lines of parallel panels in the frame painted gray and peeling.

orange X spraypainted on eight lines of parallel panels in the frame, so  
bright against paint gray and peeling.

green lines, also peeling, of presumably a doorway and certainly a  
window perpendicular to eight lines of parallel panels in the frame, so  
bright against paint gray and peeling.

green lines, also peeling, of presumably a doorway and certainly a  
window perpendicular to eight lines of parallel panels in the frame  
painted gray and peeling.

green lines, also peeling, of presumably a doorway and certainly a  
window perpendicular to eight lines of parallel panels in the frame  
reveal the gray paint underneath.

green lines, lighter and of a different hue, of parallel panels in the  
window pane.

green lines of parallel panels in the window pane angled in different  
ways, some letting the light in, a few reflecting the light back out,  
some missing and letting the light through anyway.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> *ASOUND* 17-18.

This poem, one of several of its kind in the collection, dwells on the image of an orange spray-painted X, a coding symbol that rescue groups used to identify structural instabilities and numbers of casualties during the storm. The picture of the home described, “4725 dauphine street,” comes from one of Lo’s cited sources, Dorothy Moyer’s “Katrina + 5: An X-Code Exhibition” and “the X-Codes: A Post-Katrina Postscript.” Moyer curates photographs of decaying homes with particular attention to the x-code markings, which, by her telling, were “the only signs of human intervention” in her visit to New Orleans’ most flooded neighborhoods a year after the storm.<sup>41</sup> The X became a divisive symbol for New Orleans residents—a traumatic and insensitive source of desecration to some, while a symbol of faith and enduring survival to others.

Neither of these versions is present in Lo’s treatment of the image, however, which focuses on the deteriorating lines of the home, and the X marks themselves, the bare materials of disaster. As Margaret Ronda observes, these portraits dwell “with patient attention” upon both the wreckage of the storm and its larger human aftermath in order to “engage with hope in skeptical and ambivalent ways.”<sup>42</sup> We can see elements of this hopeful ambivalence in Lo’s focus on the orange lines that form the X, which leap out “so / bright against paint grey and peeling.” In a separate poem, Lo borrows a line from Moyer’s exhibit: “Xs may shine with startling clarity.”<sup>43</sup> In treating the X as an object separate from its original signification, Lo holds onto the possibility of seeing what passes through otherwise enclosed structures. Lo instructs us to re-read the photograph

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<sup>41</sup> “The X-Codes: A Post-Katrina Postscript.”

<sup>42</sup> *Reminders* 131.

<sup>43</sup> *ASOUND* 61.

for its form—for its imaginative constraints and possibilities, with a careful attention to the structural conditions of degradation and dispossession that it manages to outlast.

This assemblage of nonhuman life is remarkable not just for what it rejects, then, but for what it proposes to let in. Light literally reanimates the photograph by bending or even distorting the view of “either an arch or porch roof” on 4725 Dauphine Street. Light also makes it through the broken windows, “some letting the light in, a few reflecting the light back out, / some missing and letting the light through anyway.” The light gets in “anyway”—not intentionally, but by filtering through the edges of a structure in such a way that it now frames the assemblage differently. As Lo puts it in a separate poem, writing poetry in this way envisions a mode of “simply feeling proximity.”<sup>44</sup> To feel proximity is to remain open to improvisatory connection—to attachment, repetition, or perhaps a surprising form of parataxis. By paying closer attention to that which moves through otherwise enclosed structures, one may work both within and against their grain. We can apply this method of thinking, of course, both to Lo’s formal conceptualist method, which rejects the elevation of appropriation as an end in itself, and to the larger politics of non-spectacular disaster to which she turns her reader’s attention. Here, in dwelling upon the most basic dismantled elements of a home, we learn to read for both the magnitude of what has been invisibly lost, while also remaining open to imagining new structures and sustaining elements among their dismantled elements—essentially laying the groundwork for new forms of political life that are, at present, yet to come.

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<sup>44</sup> *ASOUND* 39.



### Mutual Aid for “The Crowd to Come”

Both the materials and the methods of this collection’s making demand a reimagining of not only the kinds of disaster to which we should remain attentive, but the kinds of formal alliances and ways of being that could be central in averting the disasters of the future. As we have seen, Lo does this by dwelling within the re-ordered details of a familiar disaster event, Hurricane Katrina, only to defamiliarize and disrupt readers’ abilities to rely on that familiarity in interpreting the stakes of human and social disasters. Faced with vast and confounding streams of information, the reader must mine this collection for patterns, shapes, and repetitions that determine who and what is most deserving of aid. This critical alertness to the shape of disaster, Lo argues, forms the basis for imagining forms of self-sustaining and mutually supporting life that must endure outside the framework of the state-sponsored disaster calculus that they lay bare.

In this way, *A Series of Un/Natural/Disasters* treats the multitude of crisis conditions it presents as a formal expression of the need for a politics of mutual aid—one that is eminently portable, across various scenes and scenarios of normalized disaster. As if to demonstrate the portability of the forms it examines, *A Series of Un/Natural/Disasters* closes by moving outward to imagine the impact of an anti-capitalist politics of care for the incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, and their communities. On the last page of the book, Lo presents a curious pair of phrases and images. The first is the line “Zones are color-coded and labeled A, B, and C when represented on a map,”<sup>45</sup> which refers to a New York City map of flood evacuation zones designated during Hurricane Sandy. In what could have easily become a tragic repetition

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<sup>45</sup> *ASOUND* 64.

of the abandonment of 7000 prisoners in New Orleans, the prison at Riker's Island was excluded from hurricane evacuation plans despite inhabiting part of a marked flood zone. The prison, which housed 12,000 people, did not sustain major damage—partly due to luck, but partly also due to the relatively more stable infrastructure, streams of wealth, and environmental concerns that protect the New York City metropolitan area. Had the long-standing socioeconomic and environmental conditions in New York City rivaled those of New Orleans, a catastrophe of a higher order could very well have unfolded at Riker's Island. On the evacuation map itself (which is not shown in the poem), Riker's Island is not visibly marked; in fact, by some accounts, it was labeled a “no-flood zone”—thus echoing the less-than-human status attributed to those who have been relegated to a forgotten zone of surplus people, not to be handled except as an undifferentiated and criminal “other.”

This instance of prisoner abandonment reinforces the powerfully interlocking crises of incarceration, socioeconomic inequality, and environmental collapse that are central to the networks of disaster that frame this collection. After the line about color-coded flood zones, Lo copies and pastes an unlabeled chart, which appears to be full of haphazardly positioned state abbreviations:

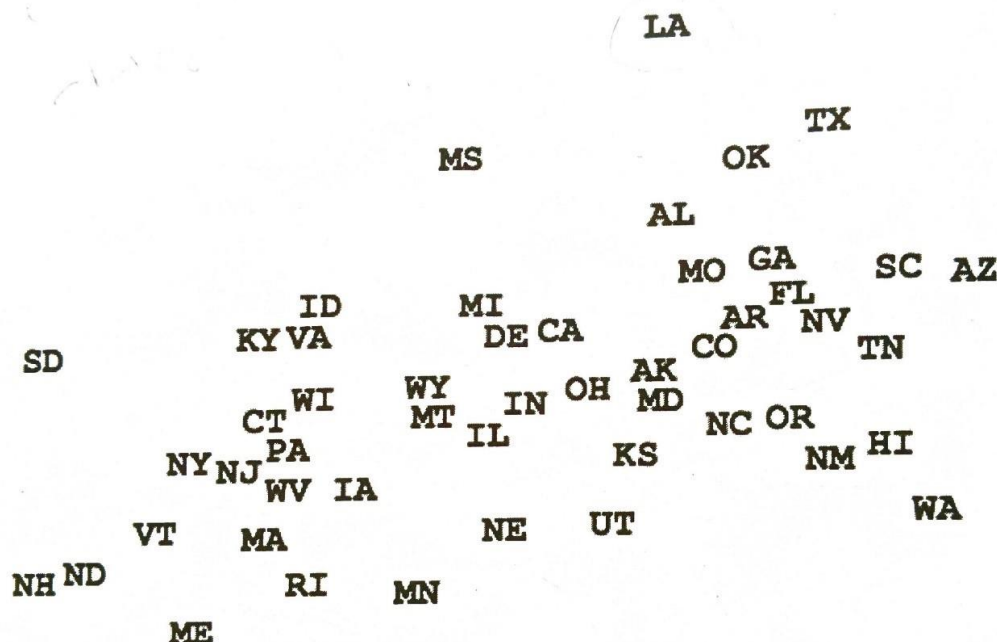


Figure 3: National incarceration map. Reprinted with permission of Commune Editions<sup>46</sup>

The actual chart from which it is drawn depicts the range of statewide incarceration rates for the United States, which has the largest incarceration rate in the world, with Louisiana (LA) in the lead.<sup>47</sup> The graph, intended to trace the “geography of incarceration” (as opposed to geographies of crime) in the United States, shifts the focus away from individual perpetrators to a view of who is incarcerated most often (and in the highest numbers), where they reside, and what we can learn about the environments from which they come and eventually return. The authors of this project reveal that “states are spending in excess of a million dollars a year to incarcerate the residents of single blocks or neighborhoods,” and that the lowest-income neighborhoods of New Orleans are stark

<sup>46</sup> *ASOUND* 64.

<sup>47</sup> See “Justice Reinvestment New Orleans” 6.

examples of this trend.”<sup>48</sup> Prisons, which are often the largest and best-funded apparatuses of American local infrastructure, hollow out opportunities for the most vulnerable communities of a city to survive.

This project shows that New Orleans is a powerful representative example of a heterogeneous national pattern of mass incarceration, profit and privilege, and dispossession that has persisted across geographic locations, political ideologies, and periods of time in varying degrees of disrepair. Seeing disaster in this way refuses any singular frame of analysis, interpretation, and blame, and it leaves in its place the difficult question of how to reimagine forms of community in its wake. In this complex, sometimes vertiginous, sometimes seemingly inaccessible series of poetic forms, a reader might have no choice to arrive at this question conceptually by looking in unusual places—in abandoned buildings, lakes, swarms of bees—for ways of persisting outside what are now very familiar conditions of containment and enclosure. In this way, Lo highlights the critical importance of speculation—of imagining forms of co-existence in the world that are not yet possible, but may, with the right frames of reference, be imaginable.

Here, the parallels between two possibilities of imagining collective life—one conceptual and derived from poetic making, one modeled after this same form of making but rooted firmly in the politics of the present—take loose shape under the concept of a commons. In his work about poetry’s relationship to contemporary capitalism, Walt

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<sup>48</sup>“Justice Reinvestment New Orleans” declares that “a disproportionate number of the 2.3 million people in U.S. prisons and jails come from very few neighborhoods in the country’s biggest cities.” The authors of this study have identified what they call “million dollar blocks,” which show a pattern of poverty and disinvestment in particular city blocks or neighborhoods whose residents are regularly incarcerated. “Millions of dollars are spent on these neighborhoods,” the authors write, “but not *in* them” (7).

Hunter writes that one possible poetic response to ongoing precarity is to “desperately conjure a globalized ‘we,’ a crowd to come” that lays in suspense without jumping straight into another “totalizing and potentially totalitarian politics” of solidarity and belonging.<sup>49</sup> Hunter goes on to call this method of poetic making a “commoning of diverse poetic leftovers” that “[become] the stockpile that powers a collectivity yet to come.”<sup>50</sup> Privileging heterogeneity over fixed and totalizing forms, Lo proposes a similar model of commoning that is speculative, in part, in order to refuse the perils of singularity that come with enclosing forms, both poetic and political, whose architects have attempted to describe and, indeed, speak for the subjects of public disaster. The non-hierarchical model that Lo ultimately depends on, conversely, refuses narratives of singularity as the only possible way to describe the status of dispossessed persons.

For Lo, these politics remain firmly aspirational, even ambivalent, throughout their poetic project. In what is the only appearance of a particular lyric “I” (other than those copied and pasted from news reports) in this poem, the idea of speaking out, of identifying oneself as a person, is structured around the poet’s stated inability to do just that:

(unspeakable this anxiety i am  
unable to find the language  
until long after waking  
until then, there is this)<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> “A Global ‘We’? Poetic Exhortations in a Time of Precarious Life” 72.

<sup>50</sup> “A Global ‘We’?” 73.

<sup>51</sup> *ASOUND* 53.

In moving through various structures of dispossession, the poet voices both their limitations of self-expression in the present and the impossibility of their self-fashioning in the future. What is left is a sense of a future held open, in which what Hunter calls “the crowd to come” may be more thinkable, and therefore more expressible in some other place and time, “long after waking.” Thinking in this way is speculative, to be sure, but it is not entirely formless. Instead, it demands a critical openness to the way we come to determine our subjects of analysis, and the potential permeability of a collective body of being. To imagine the crowd to come is to visualize what may persist (and, what is necessary for its continued flourishing) outside the exclusionary frames of crisis narratives that have been for too long focused on spectacle and the protection of the privileged.

To imagine a crowd to come, in other words, breaks the endless iterations and magnifications of inequality that invisibly punctuate this current era of crisis. In charting this path of resistance, the poet also instructs the reader to make room for the multitude of voices that may, in turn, arise. If *A Series of Un/Natural/Disasters* is a poetics of witness, it serves that purpose mainly to rearrange and reimagine what has long been missing from an emergency framework that consigns the dispossessed to a future of resignation and premature death. As this poem shows in its arranged patterns of disaster rhetoric, systems of accounting, and varying public accounts of a single storm, a poetics that is attentive to the slow violence of racialized capital requires a fine-grained attention to its embeddedness in the way properties, streets, neighborhoods and communities are labeled, determined as objects of value, and unevenly protected.

This poem, perhaps more so than the others in this dissertation, demands the reader's participation in a taking in of a slow violence that is incomprehensible by any linear standard of accounting. As such, it demands an interpretive flexibility that is essential in imagining not only the sheer magnitude of disaster, but in forging a careful attention to a politics of mutual aid that is free from the hierarchies of racial capitalism and disaster capitalism. Each of the poets of this study has demanded their own terms of flexible witnessing, in which the testimony of an eyewitness or spectator would not be enough to account for and think beyond the powerful exclusions of emergency culture. But in this poem, perhaps more so than the others, Lo demands the necessity of mutual care as the central tenet of their poetic philosophy. This comes not only from a keen awareness of the real states of emergency that exceed the empty spectacle of a disaster event, but it also derives from being open to improvisation, recombination, forms of unlikely alliances. In this way, they not only gesture to, but perform the necessity of rethinking the order of emergency, from the ground up.

### **Coda: The Time of the Virus**

Even in the early days of writing a dissertation, I imagined that my project would call back to the path I took long before I studied poetry—a path I took out of financial necessity, but which has now profoundly impacted my identity as a scholar and teacher. I came to Rutgers, initially, to study the literature of war. I did so in large part because, long before I went to graduate school, I served in the US Army. For me, the military was a world peculiarly knotted with dense bureaucratic questions of national security and civil protection that I didn't always understand. But it was also a world tied up with the formation of life-long friendships, personal practices of loss, mourning, solidarity, as well as the vague feeling of complicity that surround those who have in some way been affiliated with war. I wanted my academic work to have a place in conversation with that world.

My thinking, of course, has evolved considerably over the course of this project. It is no longer so much about war (though it is still about the obscure connection between bureaucracy and national security familiar to most Soldiers) as it is about what a national obsession with war has wrought. But it has always been my hope that I could hand parts of this project to an old friend—some of whom are Soldiers, some of whom are government workers or contractors, and some of whom are now politicians. And as I write this now, I still hold out the hope that some of the things I have to say about poetry can resonate in some way (even if uncomfortably so) for many of these friends who still remain dear to me. While much of my work remains within the peculiar bubble of scholarly conversation, I still think there are new places in which this conversation about



an “emergency poetics” can take root (perhaps by a different name, in a different form) not only among these friends, but in a broader public intellectual conversation about the inner workings of exceptionalism for those who have lived it all too intimately.

What I could not have imagined for this project, however, was the way in which its concerns would become so central to an unfolding global crisis just as I was writing its final pages. The complicated and horrifying contours of the coronavirus pandemic has brought some of the principal claims of this dissertation to the fore. The pandemic has wrought if not the most spectacular, certainly the most ominous economic and public health crisis of our time, while also serving as a searing object lesson in the necessity of public care. In this coda, I’ll briefly address the intersections between this project’s major through-lines—the dominance of the national security state, the waning of public infrastructure and social services, and the dominance of racial capitalism in fomenting social inequality—in the current crisis we are experiencing today.

As the work of the poets in this project suggest, rethinking the shape of emergency culture demands a careful attention to the ways in which universalizing language functions as a powerful tool of normalization and exclusion. This statement is especially true in light of a culture of public emergency that has long been synonymous with the amplification of state-sponsored security and externalized blame. Under this paradigm, American exceptionalism stands as a moral and affective imperative for citizens committed to self-reliance and “small government,” loosely conceptualized as the gutting of social programs even when they effectively reduce safety and security for the majority of Americans.

These contradictory patterns of security and self-reliance hold painfully true for the unfolding of this first wave of the coronavirus pandemic in the United States. We are now witnessing the unfolding of a nation's decentralized and disorganized emergency hierarchy in accelerated and magnified form, to the point that its slow violence has dramatically altered most citizens' ways of life. In this crucible, it might be assumed that slow violence would suddenly be available for a long-overdue public reckoning with the normalization of disaster. Yet what we are now seeing is in fact the further magnification of normalization itself.

The dominant note in the federal government's COVID response is the ready acceptance of death, in tones that range from defiantly combative to casually resigned. The former is in evidence in the current president's declaration, once he finally acknowledged the scope of the crisis, that he is a "wartime president." The latter, which rotates around the administration's rhetoric of "opening up America again," suggests a collective resignation to death as the cost of doing business. Most prominently, Trump has repeatedly declared war with a "hidden enemy," or an "invisible enemy."<sup>1</sup> Taken together, these metaphors shuffle blame for the nation's public health failures toward an alien "other"—a carrier, a patient zero, to whom a singular paranoid fault can be assigned. Even the naming of this virus—not just a coronavirus, but a "Chinese virus"—gives the disease a plotline that marginalizes Asians and Asian-Americans, insists on a limited scope and duration of the crisis, and distracts from the systemic failures in health care, disaster preparedness, and economic and labor equity that render workers, the sick, the elderly, and prisoners, just to name a few, vulnerable to an ideology of "getting back

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<sup>1</sup> Elving, "Trump Tries on The Mantle of 'Wartime President'."

to work.”. In employing this narrow and grim point of view, the president is free to champion the economy, crowing that the “cure” (an economic downturn) “can’t be greater than the disease.” Meanwhile, over thirty-eight million people are unemployed as of May 2020, forty percent of whom make under \$40,000 per year.<sup>2</sup> And among the growing numbers of the dead, people of color remain disproportionately vulnerable. As the historical arc of this dissertation has shown, the contours of this emergency narrative are all too familiar.

The poets in this project bear witness to the fictions and the exclusions of these narratives to call them out, to resist them, and to imagine a world that endures beyond them. This is perhaps the most important outcome of an emergency poetics: to be more alert to possibilities for non-hierarchical survival, hope, solidarity, and exchange even when they may not be available in the politics of the present. Emergency poetics ultimately seeks to make visible the most dangerous contours of normalized violence in order to remake the terms of their exclusions—and, in turn, to remake the way we think about our capacity to care for others, as well. In light of the current unfolding crisis, the long-standing urgency of these concerns are now incredibly palpable. Slow violence comes into focus here in a surprising moment of speed. And yet, the politics of social division that characterize American citizens’ responses to the pandemic remains incredibly stark—and powerful—too.

### **Across the Social Distances**

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<sup>2</sup> “Fed Chair Powell Warns of U.S. Recession After Coronavirus.” In Powell’s own words, “the burden has fallen most heavily on those least able to bear it.”

In what follows, I want to suggest that our extended lives of social distancing provide us with one way of seeing the coronavirus crisis through the lens of emergency poetics. This is not to advocate for the material privilege or the “enjoyment” of isolation, but rather to argue for the conceptualizing of care through an awareness of the space between us. One thing to say about social distancing is that it mandates an awareness of our impacts on others—those in our neighborhoods, but also those we don’t know, especially those who may not have the privilege to socially distance at all. And if social distance requires an alertness to others, then it also requires an alertness to the underlying social and political inequities that have been normalized as part of everyday life—our health care, our lack of national preparedness, our focus on the market over questions of public care. Poet Anne Boyer recently said that “social distancing . . . requires faith: we must begin to see the negative space as clearly as the positive, to know what we don’t do is also brilliant and full of love.” In other words, social distancing shows us how the invisible can become visible, in ways that require both creative acts of faith, and a closer attention to crisis conditions under the surface of our national fascination with war.

The kind of critical faith that social distancing requires is antithetical to the paradoxes of emergency politics (security and decentralization, paranoia and accepted risk) that this project has outlined. Indeed, the imperative to “distance” or “stay at home,” in addition to the mandated wearing of face masks, has recently emerged as yet another front in the American culture wars.<sup>3</sup> As we have seen in numerous armed protests,

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<sup>3</sup> See Beckett, “‘All the psychoses of US history’,” which quotes historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz in saying that “[t]he coronavirus culture war is ‘kind of a petri dish of all the psychoses of US history.’” As Beckett explains, “it’s not a new idea that thousands of people must die to preserve America’s ‘business as usual.’ It’s not a new assumption many of those people will be brown or black.”

conservative media postings, and the president's own rhetoric, the rhetoric of "freedom," for some Americans, represents a false dichotomy with the preservation of life. But this version of freedom—in particular, the freedom to "open" large sectors of the economy at the expense of vulnerable wage laborers, first responders, and medical professionals—sustains only the richest and whitest segments of the economy. As Fintan O'Toole observes, this logic does not enforce the New Hampshire motto of independence, "live free or die," but rather sustains a more ominous turn, where long-standing infrastructural and policy failures are explained away with a defiant shrug that sounds more like "live free *and* die."<sup>4</sup> But of course, the casual acceptance of this macabre motto works only if the burden of death is unevenly shared, where people of color, the sick, the poor, and the elderly are affirmed as disposable.

In contrast to these ideologically driven responses to the virus, poetry allows for the expression of an intimate distance across multiple scales, temporalities, and social registers of experience. Poetry scholar Kamran Javadizadeh, for instance, has regularly posted or reposted poems during the coronavirus crisis—many of which pertain to the recognition of social distances, though of course most of them were written for a far different time. James Merrill's "body," Eavan Boland's "Quarantine" (on the day of her death, April 27), and an excerpt from Lorine Niedecker's long poem, "For Paul," are among his latest entries. From Niedecker's poem, Javadizadeh quotes the following lines:

I've been away from poetry  
 many months  
 and now I must rake leaves

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<sup>4</sup> "Vector in Chief."

with nothing blowing  
 between your house  
 and mine.<sup>5</sup>

This poem, like many others that Javadizadeh has posted, foregrounds a lyric “I”: but in this instance, it casts forth a single speaker to elevate a personal drama of distance. This distance is compelling precisely because it models a suspense that can be shared across our varying experiences of the crisis. Unlike the individuated “I” that punctuates the indignant subjectivity of the freedom protester in front of City hall, this “I” contemplates the act of raking leaves with no wind, and no present recipient of her desire. In a separate essay, Javadizadeh, in a Levertovian moment, reflects on what poetry can provide us by saying: “[f]or some time now, I’ve been wanting to sit very close to someone and look together at something very far away. This desire, the kind you don’t know until you hear yourself declaring it, preceded the pandemic but has intensified since its arrival.”<sup>6</sup> This idea, which he later glosses as a simultaneous fantasy “about a kind of close intimacy and about a kind of radical isolation,” alerts us to the possibility of imagining shared intimacy while still holding open the critical distances that make such sharing impossible in practice. Niedecker’s poem reminds us that this is the difficult work that a poem, including a lyric poem with a single speaker, can do: it can return us to a studied concentration about wanting to hear someone on the other side of a wall, a door, or a house, exactly at the moment at which that person is most unavailable to you. It can return us to a loneliness, to borrow from Claudia Rankine, that is also a source of faith in the presence of another.

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<sup>5</sup> *Collected Works* 157.

<sup>6</sup> “Lunar Phase.”

From this perspective, it becomes possible to argue that in the contemplation of our loneliness, we can more clearly see the distant intimacy that Niedecker imagines. When she writes the line “and now I must rake leaves / with nothing blowing / between your house / and mine,” she suggests that we can more clearly see the stakes of our losses in the space of what resides in the distances between us. This is cruel optimism, of a sort, in reverse. I think this is what Levertov meant when she aspired toward an “empathic projection,”<sup>7</sup> as she once called it, between the Cold War homefront and a world of wartime violence that she could not see or experience fully. It’s what Hemphill desired when, in the space of a low-rent bar, he imagined his ambivalent solidarity with a room full of white men gazing at a drag queen performance. Rankine, in an entirely different register, eventually equates the writing of a poem about sustained loss and dispossession with a handshake, or even the singular expression of mutual presence, “here.” There’s a simplicity, too, even in the midst of Lo’s complex feedback loops, where the poet interjects to write, “until long after waking / until then, there is this.”<sup>8</sup> That liminal sense of dwelling on “this”—the leaves between homes, the distance between continents, but also the shaking of hands, the momentary feeling of material solidity—stands in for the spaces that make us both intimate and far apart. On this view, crisis becomes an occasion to join intimate longing—loneliness—with an imagination of solidarity both within and beyond the historical realities of dispossession and suffering in which they wrote.

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<sup>7</sup> In this 1973 interview with Maureen Smith, Levertov says: “I’ve always had a sort of empathic projection into things. I suppose it’s true of most poets . . .” (84). This is a concept about which she is more explicit in the essay “On the Edge of Darkness,” in which she argues for poetry that “demonstrates active empathy—the projection of a nonparticipant into the experience of others very different from himself” (168).

<sup>8</sup> *ASOUND* 53.

The paradox of the coronavirus crisis in this respect is how it encourages an intense longing for a normalcy that is at the same time revealed (once again) as deeply corrupted and inequitable. Javadizadeh's daily chronicling reminds us of poems we might turn back to in the face of this antinomy—poems written for other readers and at other times, which suddenly flash back to us for the instant of reflection they provide. But these poems provide us with isolated moments, and much of this dissertation has urged us to examine poetry not just for what it tells us about a particular human condition or acute historical moment, but for what it tells us about the complex and overlapping textures of crises as they are unfolding. Most of the poets in this dissertation were not writing in the midst of an acute crisis event, but in the midst of an extended crisis time that an emergency event laid bare (although Essex's Hemphill's moment of writing required an awareness of both). The coronavirus pandemic also has the unfortunate distinction of operating in both immediate and protracted ways. It is both an acute crisis and a crisis ordinary, with cascading effects seen across multiple genres of crisis.<sup>9</sup> Poetry that attempts to capture the multiple temporal frames, and frames of experience that the coronavirus occupies is, indeed, already being written. Much of this poetry bears witness to both the immediate personal effects and the massive, ongoing social consequences of this crisis. Their poetic frames of reference intertwine one's own personal experience of

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<sup>9</sup> See Gunn-Wright, "Think This Pandemic Is Bad? We Have Another Crisis Coming." According to Gunn-Wright, "[p]andemics like the coronavirus may occur more often when climate change is unabated. Warming and changing weather patterns shift the vectors and spread of disease. Heavily polluting industries also contribute to disease transmission. Studies have linked factory farming—one of the largest sources of methane emissions—to faster-mutating, more virulent pathogens. The same corporations that exacerbated the climate crisis are literally helping to create deadlier diseases, more quickly, in a world that keeps changing how they spread. Similarly, the same populations that are bearing the brunt of the health and economic effects of the coronavirus are the same populations that bear the brunt of fossil pollution—which, in turn, makes them more vulnerable to serious complications."



isolation with the slow violence of a public health infrastructure and social welfare system that was not built to take care of all of us.

What will “poetry in the time of the virus,” as poet and poetry scholar Becca Klaver has put it, have to tell us, or show us, about the possibilities of reimagining the stakes of an unprecedented economic and public health crisis? In the spring of 2020, Becca, a friend from graduate school, sent out an invitation for poets to write and submit poetry to a tumblr, called “Across the Social Distances.” There are now over sixty submissions posted. The forms they take (and the topics they approach) vary widely, from a “quarantine haiku,” to a multimedia collage on the concentration of power and wealth among those “enjoying” quarantine, to a makeshift flow chart, titled “How to Vote for a Third-Party Candidate In the 2020 American Election Season During a Pandemic.” The inaugural poem Becca wrote for this tumblr, also called “Across the Social Distances,” encapsulates what emergency poetics can do in times of public crisis: namely, draw a thoroughgoing attention to who and what has been left out of the frame of emergency thinking not only to bear witness, to but treat the vast scales of crisis as an occasion for turning to a new logic of care.

We lost faith in the government  
that was not made for us  
We lost faith in the schools  
closing too fast or too slow  
We lost faith in the hospitals  
full of nurses with tied hands  
We kept faith in the voices of friends  
timbres warming  
from across the social distances  
We kept faith in the kindness of strangers

landing at our doorsteps  
from across the social distances<sup>10</sup>

Unlike Niedecker's poem, which deliberately holds open the concept of social distance, Becca asks us to turn from loss—the losing of faith—to solidarity, or the keeping of faith, from across those very distances. As I reflect on an official coronavirus death toll nearing 100,000 in the US, it strikes me that we are now faced with having not only to “keep faith,” but to continually mourn losses of staggering proportions. In *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, Claudia Rankine taught us the difficult necessity of grasping, perhaps even embracing, the concept of interminable loss. Cheena Marie Lo, too, turns to statistics, data, and compilation to convey the magnitude of losses for which they are “unable to find the language.”<sup>11</sup> In the weeks and months that follow, these same dense formal concerns will sit with us as we try to imagine new forms of belonging, new forms of being in the world with one another, new ways to deliver aid and assistance when the state cannot be counted upon to do so.

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<sup>10</sup> *Across the Social Distances: Poetry in the Time of the Virus*.

<sup>11</sup> *A Series of Un/Natural/Disasters* 53.

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