Toward a Different Way of Knowing/Being/Speaking: Poetic Openings and Feminist Praxis in Contemporary Works

by

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Joseph Winters

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
English in the Graduate School
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2022

ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation looks at feminist and antiracist interventions in contemporary literature and culture and the ways in which poetry and the concept of poiesis can be taken up to imagine more equitable political praxis. My first chapter offers a sustained close reading of Diane di Prima's *Loba* and its mythical, feminist intervention within "open field" poetry, a movement associated with the Black Mountain poets. The remainder of the dissertation extends my analysis of poetic "opening" into other contexts, advocating for newly imagined forms of care in the worlds of poetry, academic and online discourses, collective protest movements, and popular music. My project examines "poetry" not just as a particular genre or medium, but as a mode of thinking and being in the world. I turn to poetry for the tools it has the capacity to give us: the ability to read closely and carefully; the understanding that "meaning" can be layered, subjective, and even contradictory; the desire to inwardly reflect and reach outside of ourselves, simultaneously; a call to witness. Poetry offers a way of writing, but also a way of reading, interpreting, and responding. In this spirit, I include "Interludes" that offer pauses, spaces for reflection, and bridges between the major contexts and concepts of different chapters; these Interludes, as well as my Introduction and Conclusion, each contain an original poem and encourage the interrelationship between scholarly and creative modes of writing.

Dedication

To my husband, Michael Manset,

and my sister, Brittany Montgomery—

my very best friends.

Thanks for making the path less rocky,

and way more fun.

Contents

Abstract iv

Dedication v

Acknowledgements ix

Introduction 1

Cento 1

Why Poetry 7

Outline of Chapters 9

Chapter 1: Woman and/as Myth in *Loba*: di Prima's "Open Field" as Poetic Process and Feminist Praxis 16

A Road Map 17

Reading Loba as a Feminist Open Field 19

The "Dance" Between the Whole and Its Parts 27

Embracing Excess Through "Projective" Verse: Formulations & Limitations 31

Loba's Own Limits 35

More on Gender: Woman as (W)Hole 38

Under Construction: Freeing the Human/Woman Through Radical Mythmaking ... 41

Loba's Dual Impulses (Pain vs. Pleasure), and Its Implications for Feminism 49

The Limits of Myth; and, Simultaneously, Mythmaking as Inexhaustive 54

Interlude 58

Where to Begin 58

Reimagining the Body: Mutual Vulnerability, Assemblage, and Intercorporeality ... 61

Chapter 2: Taking "Care" Seriously: Racial Trauma, Pained Bodies, and the Responsibilities of Poetry 70

A Case Study 74

The Artist Re-corporealized 78

Care and the Body 86

Case in Point: Blackness as Commodity 94

The Gimmick 100

Trolling Vulnerability 106

Interlude 118

Black Will Be the Loud Thing 118

A Close-Reading: Racialized Violence and Gendered Care 119

Chapter 3: Revisiting Mother's Madness: Counternarratives of Mourning and Grief ... 133

Clinging to Disposable Life 142

Valuing Madness 146

The Personal and Political, and the Haunting of History 151

More on "Weaving" and Other Poietic Gestures 154

Who's Got the Body? 164

Melancholic Hope 172

Interlude 181

For Ethel Trew Dunlap, and Other Black Women Poets 181

Poetry for the People, Then and Now 182

The Made-ness of HEAVN 187

Chapter 4: Tracing *HEAVN's* Black Feminist Traditions: From Sojourner Truth to #BlackGirlMagic........189

Background on Jamila Woods and HEAVN........190

Self and Community: A Side-by-Side of Two Tracks........193

Continuing Black Feminist Traditions: Self-Naming, Re-Narrativization, and Consciousness-Raising........199

Failed Dreams, Missed Love: The Blues and Black Power........205

Embracing Vulnerability, Seeking Community........212

More on Re-Narrativizing: Black Feminist Imagination........217

Claiming Space: "Elsewhere" and "Here"........219

Demarginalizing/Re-centering Black Girls and Women........225

Still........227

Conclusion........229

In Memory, on Tense........234

Bibliography........237

Biography........252

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Sixteen months before I finished writing this dissertation, I had no idea how I was going to write it, and I was quite overwhelmed at the thought of beginning. To be at the end of it feels surreal—but, thank goodness, I have been taking notes on who to thank throughout the process, so as to (hopefully) not forget too many names.

First, I would like to thank Professor Tsitsi Jaji for serving as committee chair, and for allowing me to take some unconventional, creative directions in my dissertation. I am especially grateful for her suggestion that I open a chapter with my own poem (rather than squeezing it into the middle, as I had originally had it); this ultimately led to the formation of "Interludes" and the inclusion of five original poems across the dissertation. This changed the whole spirit of my project, made me excited about my writing, and left me with a dissertation that flows nicely and feels true to me.

I would also like to thank the other members of my committee, Professors Nathaniel Mackey, Priscilla Wald, and Joseph Winters. My first chapter started as a shorter essay for Nate's Open Field Poetics class, and his feedback both encouraged and helped clarify my scholarly writing. Thanks to Joe for his continual faith in my writing, and to Priscilla for her excitement and openness. I'd also like to thank Professor Ranjana Khanna, whose feedback on my third chapter was especially helpful in shifting it from a loose essay to a more structured, substantial piece.

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Introduction

Cento

I am a woman carrying other women in my mouth.
O lost moon sisters,
I tell your stories to keep myself alive.

We see how these men have amused themselves—
woman's only choices are drink or swim.
"You are an empty vessel. You are a plundered tomb."
You are who I love.

A river of sighs poured from the cut.
The sigh is the pathway to breath; it allows
breathing.

This comes first as an amen,
a hallelujah, a suckling.
Begin by shaping your mouth into the shape
of your mother's when she was concentrating.
To pray you open your whole self:
a prayer dissolved in water
casts a spell.

Each body has its arts.
It's possible we know the world better because
of the blood that visits
some of us.
"If there is a river more beautiful than this…"
But in Paradise, I don't bleed
because this world
asks too much of mothers.
Lose something every day.

We mourn the broken things.
I was birthed restless
and elsewhere,
mothered by lonely women.
My mother was a freedom fighter.

Freeing yourself was one thing,
claiming ownership of that freed self
was another.

I learned with men
around there were no safe spaces;
it forced my inside places to whisper
woman
woman
woman

I'm glad God's ways are not our ways.
There is no recorded
description of the first temple,
but picture a woman
riding thunder:
She dances like a Bomb—
She increases the object's human dignity,
more like magic
than anything else
I can think of.

Behold her rising star.
Rave stark as a mad woman:
My name is my own my own my own…
my mind set on loving me.
Phenomenal woman,
that's me.
Show me someone not full of herself
and I'll show you
a hungry person.
**
Find your own voice!
I just wanted to hear
your voice.
I, who am ageless
and half-grown
and still seeking
my sisters…

I remain who I am,
 multiple,
your dreams and whimpers
 tangled with mine.

It means all of us.
It means this moment.
Too tight to hold a stranger.

My sisters tell me I am a bird.
We are faithful
only to the imagination.
Love becomes our legacy,
driving however we can our own destiny—
something you could spend a lifetime chasing
 without ever
  feeling sure it exists...

I dwell in Possibility—
there are only *ifs*.
Won't you
 celebrate with me...
The key is turned.
Extend yourself.

I include the above poem as an "epigraph," of sorts, to introduce myself as a poet as well as an academic writer and researcher at the outset of my dissertation. My cento, or patchwork poem, consists of 100 lines (including blank ones) entirely taken from other poets' previously published work; therefore, nothing is original except for the weaving-together. I have borrowed these lines exclusively from woman-identifying poets, in the feminist spirit of my project. These poets go as far back as Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, the nineteenth-century activist-poet who wrote in earnest for abolition and for women's rights; and they continue into the present-day, with living poets whom

I admire from afar or have the pleasure of knowing up close.[1] I've shared conferences, open mics, and journal publications with some of these poets, and one of them is the committee chair for this dissertation. My cento seeks to unpack, riff on, celebrate, mourn, denounce, and uphold—in turns, or all at once—the concept of Woman, and all that we as women are, have been, and can be. It is both praise poem and elegy. Stay with me.

The cento is a key turning, opening a project that wants to invite you in. This dissertation was not preformulated, but developed from what most excited me in an array of courses, conferences, and conversations. It relies on the relationships that I have and have had with others: in my departments/fields (English, Feminist Studies, African & African American Studies); with peers, mentors, mentees, and strangers, in and beyond academic institutions; and now with you, writer-to-reader. It proceeds from the awareness that you could be anybody and anywhere, but have chosen to be here.

---

1. Alphabetically listed, these poets are: Elizabeth Acevedo, Ai, Maya Angelou, Gloria Anzaldúa, Elizabeth Bishop, Gwendolyn Brooks, Mahogany L. Browne, Dominique Christina, Lucille Clifton, Kai Coggin, Jayne Cortez, Diane di Prima, Emily Dickinson, Ethel Trew Dunlap, Jo Angela Edwins, Safia Elhillo, Joshua Jennifer Espinoza, Nikki Giovanni, Aracelis Girmay, Joan Kwon Glass, Marissa Glover, Louise Glück, Amanda Gorman, Sonia Greenfield, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Joy Harjo, Frances E.W. Harper, Trish Hopkinson, Tsitsji Jaji, June Jordan, Jen Karetnick, Karen An-Hwei Lee, Denise Levertov, Audre Lorde, Katie Manning, Syreeta McFadden, Aja Monet, Toni Morrison, Claudia Rankine, Adrienne Rich, Sonia Sanchez, Evie Shockley, Patricia Smith, Bianca Lynne Spriggs, Jessica Q. Stark, Natasha Trethewey, Han VanderHart, Sarah Ann Winn, and Jamila Woods.

My dissertation is concerned with "here" and our being together in it. I think about the contemporary moment, how we know what we know (what media, methodologies, and worldviews we pull from), and what kinds of arguments (and political claims) can be made through writing, art, ritual, and everyday acts. I am deeply interested in the self, identity, and community, and in the ways that we create these both through and beyond common social categories like gender, race, and class. Relationships, again, are paramount to my project, as is a framework of care that encompasses the responsibilities and possibilities therein. And for there to be "possibilities," there must also be imagination and creativity—a willingness to think otherwise, seek other ways, and remain open.

This desire for "openness" and mutability is what drew me to the "open field," a concept associated with the work of Charles Olson and Black Mountain College, and other poets influenced by that school. On the one hand, the call for open field poetry was a formal intervention, concerned with how the poem operates on the page and how it is composed; rather than taking up traditional, closed, or strictly metered forms, poets were to let the form of their poem flow from its content and from the poet's own ear and breath. But beyond form and composition (though certainly related to this), open field poetry also had cultural concerns and implications: the open field was a call to return to the "natural" in an increasingly modern, technological world, and to explore other,

multiple ways of knowing, being, and speaking outside of what had come to be expected or "given."

I, like the poets who coined the term, see the "open field" as a particular poetic process—but also as a concept that transcends "poetry" per se and carries cultural, even political, stakes. It reminds us that ways of writing and reading always have a bearing on ways of living, and vice versa. The entirety of my dissertation is invested in these connections; to that end, my first chapter is dedicated to excavating the open field, its limits and its possibilities, in order to find a strategy and a language to approach the cultural, political issues that most interest and concern me: those of gender, race, and class in the present day. If the open field was driven by change and improvisation, or at least imagined to be, I approach it with that same spirit—for it not a given that open field poetry should be used towards feminist or antiracist imaginings, though that is how I take it up. In fact, the "open field," originally, was a white masculine enterprise that women writers (like Denise Levertov and Diane di Prima, the subject of my first chapter) entered into. I analyze this field as my object in the dissertation's first chapter, and then carry it through my remaining chapters as a (loosely) guiding concept and as an invitation to creativity, expansiveness, and critical transformation. For the whole of the dissertation, I understand the open field as my go-ahead for a more liberated and conscientious storytelling, one where I seek other ways of knowing, being, and speaking in the face of arguments (in a variety of media—discursive, visual, sonic) that work to

constrain the lives and representations of women and people of color, especially where those social categories overlap. The opening chapter does not take up race and class as explicitly as my later chapters, but it helps set the stage for the conversation. Moreover, it establishes a timbre of imaginative possibility and poetic opening, which resonates (despite the varying "tones" across chapters) throughout this project.

On the subject of tone and content: this dissertation is an attempt to register the multiple (and sometimes contradictory) tones that this kind of work creates and necessitates. As in my cento, there is space for both celebration and mourning, in large part because my objects of study involve both life and death. Likewise, I incorporate sources from a variety of media and disciplines, emphasizing that "reading" happens outside of and beyond the textual and/or literary. Finally, in between my chapters are "Interludes" that offer pauses, spaces for reflection, and bridges between the major contexts and concepts of different chapters; these Interludes, as well as my Introduction and Conclusion, each contain an original poem, so that my critical prose is interspersed with and bookended by my creative writing. But my dissertation pushes back against that very dichotomy, showing that "critical analysis" can happen in and through poetry, just as analytical prose can also be creative. As I've written, this is an open field.

Why Poetry

To be clear: I read, write, and have taught a full range of genres/media, so it is not my intention to argue the supremacy of one over the rest; in fact, this dissertation

adopts an expansive notion of the poetic, to include not just "poetry" in the traditional sense, but also critical writing, music, and what I will call poetic acts. The poetic, here, is above all else a mode—of writing, but also of knowing, speaking, being. It is just as much epistemological and ontological as it is rhetorical. It follows Audre Lorde's definition of poetry as "magic."[2]

Poetry can be, and is, so many things, and any attempt to sum it up will surely leave us wanting. But speaking for myself, at least, there is something about poetry (or poetic *impulse*, in any genre/medium) that invites me to speak differently—more earnestly, messily. In my dissertation, I turn to poetry for the tools it has the capacity to give us: the ability to read closely and carefully; the understanding that "meaning" can be layered, subjective, and even contradictory; the desire to inwardly reflect and reach outside of ourselves, simultaneously; an attention to the body and the soul; an acceptance of excess; a call to witness. Poetry offers a way of writing, but also a way of reading, interpreting, and responding. It is not restricted to the page; throughout my chapters, I find the poetic at work in scholarly writings, Internet discourses, collective protest movements, and popular music. The poetic as it is taken up in this dissertation is, we might say, a mindset.

---

2. See Lorde's "Poetry is Not a Luxury" and "Uses of the Erotic," in particular.

My hope is that, when you read the opening cento, it put you in a mindset to accompany me to many different places, even if some are unfamiliar, and even if the journey is unpredictable or discombobulating. I hope the Interludes help maintain or return you to this mindset, and that you leave with it as this dissertation concludes. I hope that you will imagine these poems, coming and going, as my hand extending towards you. Let them be, in the spirit of the open field, a way of listening and breathing—together.

Outline of Chapters

After defining and exploring the poetic open field in my first chapter, discussed above, the following three chapters extend the field into other contexts, employing it as a methodology in "reading" feminist and antiracist interventions in the worlds of poetry, academic discourse, American culture, and popular music. The second chapter, "Taking 'Care' Seriously: Racial Trauma, Pained Bodies, and Conceptual Poetry," draws heavily from a paper I wrote for an English class called Contemporary Literature & Digital Media, taught by Professor Aarthi Vadde. This chapter explores ethical and political questions surrounding the role of the poet/poetry in the contemporary world, especially around issues of racialized trauma. It homes in on Kenneth Goldsmith's conceptual poem "The Body of Michael Brown," though this micro-focusing is done in an attempt to spark a broader, in-depth conversation; I seek to center care in discussions of life and art, especially in the contemporary moment—in a Digital Age that actually reinvigorates

issues of ethics, ownership, and authorial intent, rather than diminishing them. My chapter examines public reactions to Goldsmith's piece in news articles, online discussions, and statements by members of the poetry community, and reads these side-by-side with scholarly work. I take up Sianne Ngai's theory of the gimmick, Heather Love's questions around objectification and authorial distance, and Anthony Reed's critique of the commodification of blackness. I also employ Christina Sharpe's praxis of "wake work," Susan Sontag's theories around pain and witnessing, and Saidiya Hartman's conceptions of the afterlife of slavery and "redressing the body." Furthermore, I connect the Goldsmith trope with the #MeToo moment to underscore trauma, and the troping of trauma, as a prominent gendered, sexualized, and feminist issue in addition to a racialized one.

While I take harm and wounding seriously, this second chapter is also bent on theorizing "care" and imagining new ways of being together, in the spirit of the open field. Drawing from a portion of my written exam, I seek to explore the language of pain/trauma and the politics of identity and intersectionality in today's world. I examine three related theoretical contributions to feminist, queer, and race studies: Jennifer Nash's concept of "mutual vulnerability" in *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality*; Jasbir Puar's concept of "assemblage" in *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*; and Laura Doyle's concept of intercorporeality in *Bordering on the Body: The Racial Matrix of Modern Fiction and Culture*. These concepts

point towards the possibility—and the responsibility—of transgressing the borders that exist between us due to our different subject positions (racial, gendered, class, etc.) in order to partake in political, transformative action. I am reminded, too, of Nash's *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography*, which highlights Black feminist theory that is "imaginative, restorative, world-making, generative, and politically necessary," centering a politics of ecstasy rather than one of woundedness. Bringing these ideas together, I pose the following questions: How can we incorporate a politics of care, and an ethic of artistic responsibility, together with an emphasis on that which allows us to live, and live imaginatively? How might the poetics of the open field allow for that balancing act? Or might we call it a "dance"—the word Robert Duncan used to describe his poetic process?

In my third chapter, I further extend this question of how to live (imaginatively, capaciously, lovingly), especially amidst structural violence that marks certain bodies as disposable, and therefore ungrievable. I draw from my final paper for Death Drives, a class that combined cultural anthropology with psychoanalytic and other strands of feminist theory. This chapter, titled "Revisiting Mother's Madness: Counter Narratives of Mourning and Grief," looks at the gendered and racialized conceptions of mourning as "excessive," "unreasonable," or even "mad" in anthropological discourse and in contemporary culture; it then seeks to provide a "counternarrative" that reclaims and dignifies the role of mourning, especially in connection to motherhood and radical

theories of care. To frame the issue, I analyze Jonathan Parry's concept of "excess" in *Death in Banaras*, which he uses to describe the gendered nature of mourning rituals, wherein men bury the dead while "women weep," clinging to the body. I also take up Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" to establish the prevalence of the idea, in Western culture, that there is a suitable, reasonable timestamp marking "the end" of mourning; beyond that is madness, melancholia. I then counteract this pathologization of what I see as "care," reading it instead as a potentially revolutionary act, especially in the context of feminist and antiracist work. I ground this reading in Desjarlais' concept of "poiesis" in "A Good Death, Recorded," to argue that rituals—formal or informal, political or quotidian—can be understood and valued as poietic acts. Work by Karla Holloway, Hortense Spillers, Laurence Ralph, and Christina Sharpe supports my argument and enacts the political, poietic praxis that I hope to revalue. Their work underscores the ways that mourning might be extended (perpetual, in fact) in the context of Black life in the United States; moreover, it demonstrates a determination to not let go, to cling to the body, to "annotate" unjust accountings of the dead, and to revalue life beyond what is quantifiable. It also draws from Adam Rosenblatt and M. NourbeSe Philip, who in their forensic and poetic work register ways of mourning long after the fact; they each provide a multi-valanced reckoning with *history* as a repressed trauma—one that needs to be exhumed, literally, or otherwise carried up and cared about.

While this chapter attends especially to Black life, I simultaneously foreground the role of women (and/or mothers, both literally and figuratively) in radical enactments of mourning and care. I follow scholars who have pushed the concept of "motherhood" beyond the biological, using it as a framework for centering "mutual vulnerability," "love," and "aggrievement" as templates for caring, for one another and oneself. I am most interested in how "motherhood" can be utilized to reimagine care beyond what is considered reasonable/profitable in a white, patriarchal, capitalist state. I am also interested in how the invocation of "foremothers" can help ground the self within a larger community, establishing creative genealogies and legacies of resistance and survival—through acts of the imagination, rather than notions of blood/biology. I examine: the fraught role of the mother figure in African American literature; and Alexis Pauline Gumbs' radical, inclusive theorizing in *Revolutionary Mothering*. Motherhood, too, becomes an open field—one that invites play and endless variations. I accept the tropes of motherhood as offering new beginnings, as life giving, and as the act/art of creation. I think of it as a sort of liberatory mythmaking.

My fourth and final chapter is, ironically, developed from my very first paper in graduate school: "Tracing *HEAVN's* Black Feminist Roots: From Sojourner Truth to #BlackGirlMagic." I have had extensive time to think with and through this paper, especially as I have adapted it for two separate conferences and intended it for a special journal issue on Black Popular Culture. In this chapter, I explore an album by Jamila

Woods (Chicago singer, songwriter, and teacher-poet) called *HEAVN*—special in that it takes Black girls as its clear primary audience, within a culture and a music industry where they are often sidelined. My chapter offers a close reading of Woods' album, taken as a musical collection of poems, and foregrounds that reading within the lineage of Black women artists/activists whom Woods' echoes directly or indirectly. I give special attention to Audre Lorde, the Combahee River Collective, and artists of the Blues and the Black Arts Movement. I argue that Woods' intergenerational approach to Black feminism echoes the radical praxis of the 1970s and 1980s, when Black feminism emerged out of (and in tension with) Black nationalism and second-wave feminism, establishing creative, intellectual, and political foremothers as they forged a movement tailored to their own needs and desires. I argue that, by listening with an ear attuned to Black feminist traditions, we gain insight into how the past can be utilized, flexibly and imaginatively, to assert agency in one's present political moment.

It is satisfying to end with this chapter, in part because it is the most hopeful among the four I've outlined. Throughout my graduate career, I have found myself drawn to ambiguity, and to the simultaneous, if paradoxical, impulses towards tragedy and hope. In my dissertation, I draw from both "pessimistic" and "optimistic" readers, dancing between them. This is an act of weaving—something that describes this dissertation in multiple ways. As previously discussed, the chapters differ not only in tone, but also in content and types of source material. Nevertheless, there are through-

lines between them that I feel compelled to hold onto and thread together: the mythic, and the made-ness of all things; emotion and its multiplicity; the category of woman, and the mother as an archetypal (but not always biological) version of woman; the body, how it is read, and how it speaks; and care, how to think about and practice it. What could be more fitting than the metaphor of weaving? It is, traditionally, woman's work; and this is a woman-centered project. I am reminded of a moving chapter in Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cyrpress, & Indigo,* when the eldest of these daughters takes up weaving as the language/art of her mother, and of the mothers before her. I understand this as a sort of feminist project, establishing a sense of community among women otherwise separated by time and space: an intergenerational, trans-geographical legacy. I also understand it as a reclamation of what was once alienating labor, transformed into something creative, expressive, and self-affirming. While the writing of a dissertation can often feel like a solitary project, I, too, imagine myself within a larger community of artists and scholars—one that welcomes creativity and personhood even in our (arduous) labors. If this is true in the writing, let it be true in the reading.

Chapter 1: Woman and/as Myth in *Loba*: di Prima's "Open Field" as Poetic Process and Feminist Praxis

This chapter takes the "open field," a concept associated with the Black Mountain poets, as its object of study. There is much to value in the creative work and explications of those poets who claimed the "open field" as the ideal terrain of modern writing; they embraced contradiction and excess, cultural difference (in theory, at least), and a return to the natural world. At the same time, much of what these poets aimed to do is not what they accomplished. They fell short of their most visionary impulses when they drew back into racial fetishization, patriarchal mindsets, and a love of difference only insofar as it re-entrenched the Other, confirming themselves as Human. However, Diane di Prima, I argue, is both of this formation and apart from it; she offers an opening within an opening. What and who she calls into her field are outcasts elsewhere, and it is precisely that reclaiming of the otherwise lesser-than that this chapter hopes to foreground. Through a deep investigation of di Prima's *Loba*, this chapter will name and assess an intervention in poetry and poetics that had (and still has) significant implications for the aims/ethics of art, debates in feminism, and the sociopolitical sphere more broadly. It is my hope, moreover, that this chapter will go some small distance in

remedying what Roseanne Giannini Quinn has called the dearth of critical attention given to di Prima's work, especially when contrasted with male poets of her generation.[1]

A Road Map

To begin, I outline the characteristics of "open field" poetry using the logics of those poets who espoused it—namely Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, and Denise Levertov. I firmly situate di Prima within that circle, arguing for *Loba* as a particular, feminist open field that is similar in spirit but markedly different in its content, audience, and sociopolitical implications. With this framework established, I then take up Robert Duncan's concept of "the dance" to describe the tension between the poem as singular/whole and the many, distinct parts that make it up; I draw an analogy to di Prima's poetry and how she imagines "Woman" as a whole—a mythical category made up of (but not equivalent to) individual, real-life women. Next, I explore open field poetry's formulation of "projective verse" and its embrace of excess. I clarify di Prima's unique intervention, arguing that she pushes the projective past its originally white/Eurocentric and masculinist framework, further embracing "excess" with and through the myth of woman.

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1. Roseanne Giannini Quinn, "'The Willingness to Speak': Diane di Prima and Italian American Feminist Body Politics," *MELUS* 28, no 3 (2003): 175-93, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3595266.

Moving deeper into the text, I highlight and describe di Prima's process of mythmaking in more detail, emphasizing the freedom it provides in its ongoingness versus static/permanent characters and definitions. I offer close readings of some poems in *Loba*, outlining the ways in which di Prima provides a counter-narrative to the limited (and masculinist) framings of the loba/woman through her mythmaking and her self-reflexive awareness of the constructedness of myth. I mark an affective duality between representations of the loba that are characterized by pain, woundedness, rage, and anguish on the one hand, and pleasure, triumph, joy, and (re)birth on the other; both impulses are most strikingly embodied in *Loba* through the figure of the mother and the scene of childbirth. (I take up the mother figure and mothering in a much more sustained way in my third chapter, but the connections between myth, motherhood, and magic that I hope to foreground begin to take root here.) Moreover, I relate the loba's (or, di Prima's) dual tendencies to current debates in feminism, and the divide between the rhetoric of woundedness versus that of celebration. I close by arguing that di Prima's particular attitude towards mythmaking is most revolutionary in its acknowledgment that Myth both exceeds and falls short of the living. The myths of the loba that di Prima offers are an inspiration: an opening, not a closure. They render the category of "woman," and the whole body of feminism, open-ended—refreshingly (if frustratingly) capacious and ever-evolving.

Reading Loba *as a Feminist Open Field*

This chapter examines *Loba* as an "open field" of a particular kind, situating di Prima in the context of other open field poets while maintaining the specificity of her "field" as not only poetic process, but feminist practice. As this chapter will demonstrate, di Prima shares many of the same tenets—echoing their interests in the shout and the dance, in craft and lore, in pain and the sometimes violence of emotion, in contradictions, and in the human in relationship to nature and planets. Moreover, di Prima is invested in difference and in decentering the West as sole Creator (i.e., the arbiter of all existence). But di Prima uses the techniques and inventiveness of the "open field" and brings them to bear on the feminine specifically, opening up to the many ways it might mean to be and do as women. Moreover, di Prima takes myths beyond their individual limits; the loba as an amalgamated figure seeks not to "represent" women, but to balance a desire for coherence and belonging *around* this identity with the desire to retain our many distinct experiences. As such, the identification which the loba reaches towards is not natural, given, or static, but always in the process of becoming. Di Prima calls attention to this process throughout *Loba*, exposing myths (both borrowed and her own) as made things; this too, is a particular instantiation of a practice common to the "open field," in which poets regularly call attention to the process of their writing and thus the made-ness of their poems.

To begin, one might wonder how compatible an emphasis on gender is with the project of the "open field," which in many instances is dedicated to discovering some universal truths, stripping us down to basics in order to relish our shared humanity. In a world which was overwhelmed with fascist regimes and hatred for "the Other," this was a radical enterprise. But *Loba* attends to difference not to circumscribe us, nor to solidify positions of power and powerlessness through us-and-them mentalities. Instead, the loba's female-specificity (its reference to the feminine implicit, marked by the "a" that ends the word) is a beginning, not an endpoint. Gender does not have to be another way of nailing down through strict categorization. In fact, it can involve play, incorporating an array of archetypes and mythological figures so that the loba is not just the other (and always the Other, ontologically) end of the gender binary, but rather, multifaceted and eternally expansive. As such, the loba is not contained in any particular time and space, even though her existence depends on being able to draw from diverse particularities and to respect their specificity even as she, herself, seeks towards transcendence.

If *Loba* is an open field, as I maintain, then what is it made up of? Di Prima's version jibes with notions of the field as it is described by Olson, Creeley, and Duncan, but with a feminist spin. In his foundational essay "Projective Verse," Olson turns our attention to the *objects* of the poem-as-field, emphasizing their importance. He writes: "(We now enter, actually, the large area of the whole poem, into the FIELD, if you like,

where all the syllables and all the lines must be managed in their relations to each other.) It is a matter, finally of OBJECTS, what they are, what they are inside a poem, how they got there, and, once there, how they are to be used."[2] Taking this emphasis on objects literally, perhaps, *Loba* includes one poem that is comprised almost entirely of objects—or, more specifically, of names.[3] This poem, which begins "Belili Ishtar," has already been the subject of some recent feminist scholarship. Polina Mackay comments on how these "many female characters . . . come together, their names making up the lines of the poem with very few words added and no punctuation to separate them. It would seem a deliberate attempt is being made here to unite them all as one being."[4] Estíbaliz Encarnación-Pinedo tracks these characters down to their roots, describing them as "goddesses, nymphs, monsters, and other fantastic creatures from world mythologies, religions, folklore, or legends from different origins—Greek, Latin, Egyptian, Sumerian, Navajo, Japanese, Hopi, Irish, Welsh, Celtic, Etruscan, Indian, Hindu, Buddhist, Hebrew, Jewish, Christian, Yoruba, etc."[5] But, to take Olson at his word, the poem-as-

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2. Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," in *Selected Writings*, ed. Robert Creeley (New York: New Directions, 1966), 20.

3. Diane Di Prima, "Belili Ishtar," in *Loba* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 54.

4. Polina Mackay, "Politics of Feminist Revision in di Prima's Loba," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 18, no. 5 (2016): 2, doi: 10.7771/1481-4374.2977.

5. Estíbaliz Encarnación-Pinedo, "Intertextuality in Diane di Prima's Loba: Religious Discourse and Feminism," *Humanities* 7, no. 4 (2018): 3, doi: 10.3390/h7040132.

field is not just about what these objects are or where they came from, but "how they are to be used." Encarnación-Pinedo (taking a note from Frances Babbage's *Re-Visioning Myth*) suggests that these mythical figures are used precisely because they are open to revision, since the meaning of myth is not inherent but is, in fact, a product of their *telling*.[6] Over time, writers can return to old myths and invent new stories out of them, building on what came before but speaking more directly to their present contexts or future-oriented imaginings. Di Prima certainly retells a number of these myths throughout *Loba*. And by listing them here, outright, as objects in a poetic field, di Prima calls attention to their openness and presents them as the materials of her own telling—to be picked up by later generations of writers, perhaps, and thus constituting her own poetic opening.

But while di Prima and her contemporaries of the open field are open to the new, they are simultaneously invested in a return to the inventions of the past; these poets offer not a choice between the past, present, and future, so much as a belief in the meeting and intermingling of different times through the poetic act. For example, in "Human Universe," Olson writes about the Maya civilization, advocating for a modern-day return to what he sees as their closer communion with nature and greater concreteness in writing; in fact, he bases his aspirations for open field poetry on the

6. Encarnación-Pinedo, 3.

Maya glyphs' propensity to "retain the power of the objects of which they are the images."[7] Meanwhile, in constructing his idea of "assemblage" in the open field, Duncan quotes Alfred North Whitehead's *The Aims of Education and Other Essays*, describing "assemblage" as a meeting-together of the "saints" of different time periods—a meeting which the future might depend upon, but which can only take place in the present moment.[8] The present is all that exists because it is the position from which the poem speaks, bringing what it can from other points in times—often, through inherited language. Duncan writes: "The storehouse of human experience in words is resonant too, and we have but to listen to the reverberations of our first thought in the reservoir of communal meanings to strike such depths as touch upon the center of man's nature."[9] This can readily be applied to di Prima's use of myths in *Loba*. In the same way that words do, myths accrue meaning and depth over time; the reader is the recipient of all these layered meanings, both through the myths as they have known them and through the poet's own contributions.

But as the open field poets remind us, such gathering and layering is no peaceful endeavor, and neither is the poem a strictly harmonious construct. Rather, the field is

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7. Charles Olson, "Human Universe," in *Selected Writings,* ed. Robert Creeley (New York: New Directions, 1966), 58.

8. Robert Duncan, "Towards an Open Universe," in *A Selected Prose*, ed. Robert J. Bertholf (New York: New Directions, 1995), 12.

9. Duncan, 7.

held together through contradictions and tension, which *Loba* demonstrates both on the level of form (poetics) and on the level of content (gender/women). Olson writes that "every element in an open poem (the syllable, the line, as well as the image, the sound, the sense) . . . are to be seen as creating the tensions of a poem just as totally as do those other objects create what we know as the world."[10] Creeley builds on this idea of creative (that is, world-building) tension in his essay "A Note on Poetry," further explicating the necessity of tension in the formation of a "whole." He writes:

> Olson's notion of the poem as a field at once clears us from the usual sense of progression, i.e., that we have a line, building forward perhaps to 'climax,' and then relaxing to an 'end.' For example, seeing a poem as a field, a high energy construct, we assume a sense that points to one basic means of coherence: a relevant and actual tension between the divers parts present, to come to (in this sense only) what we call the 'whole.' This is then clear: a poem will be a thing of parts, in such relation, that the tension created between them will effect an actual coherence in form.[11]

While Creeley is focusing here on formal elements rather than content, his description can easily be applied to di Prima's bringing-together of various female voices/characters into one poem, or into a larger conception of women/the feminine. "Belili Ishtar" performs this wholeness-through-tension the most apparently, placing its "divers parts" one after the other in a huge block of text, with nothing but a few small spaces between them. Not only are these parts taken from different times, places, and religions, but

10. Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," 20.

11. Robert Creeley, "A Note on Poetry," in *A Quick Graph: Collected Notes & Essays*, ed. Donald Allen (San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1970), 25.

Encarnación-Pinedo points out that they are "both positive and negative," carrying distinct moral and affective valences.[12] And yet, the text still holds together, and gains in significance through its seemingly self-aware presentation of clashing (even jarring) female archetypes, which come to be understood as "types" of women. In other words, the poem's coherence is in the knowledge it creates as a reflection on the many images of women. These images often contradict each other, certainly, and that is what the poem "means" by bringing them together.

The feminist questions at work in such a poem as "Belili Ishtar" are concerned with who counts as women, and which images get to stand in for what women are; thus, the tension between parts in the construction of the "whole" has just as much to do with gender (or, the category of woman) as with the poetics of the thing. Thus, the open field can be said to make room for feminist practice—and a specifically capacious and inclusive one, at that. Indeed, Encarnación-Pinedo lauds *Loba* for "creating a feminist mapping of multiple representations of women" in what she calls an "expansive and transnational approach."[13] The cover of *Loba* features a similar quote by Adrienne Rich, who describes the book as "an epic art of language, a great geography of the female imagination." Both of these critics invoke *place*, pointing to the ways in which *Loba*—in drawing from an array of the world's regions and religions—actually paints the category

12. Encarnación-Pinedo, "Intertextuality in Diane di Prima's Loba," 3.

13. Encarnación-Pinedo, 3.

of woman or the feminine as boundless terrain. That is, by crossing national (as well as racial, religious, and economic) borders, di Prima transgresses the boundaries by which womanhood might otherwise be contained. But this sense of boundlessness is not natural or given, but rather, of di Prima's own doing; the critics' uses of the words "mapping" and "geography" highlight the poet's work in bringing that terrain to our attention, making it visible, knowable, and existing *in relation to each other*. In her work of gathering and (re)arranging myths, di Prima draws lines between characters/places and acknowledges them as co-present and co-constitutive. Like other open field poets, di Prima works to decenter the West and its ontological monopoly on what Man is[14]—but in this case, what Woman is.

Loba demonstrates that geography—*any* geography—is highly charged (indeed, a "high energy construct," as Creeley would have it) because it is not natural or given: it is all construction, which does not make it any less real or any less germane to people's lives. There is an inherent dilemma facing the "open field": how to draw a field and yet leave it open, if the objects are still to be chosen by someone (the poet) so that other objects are necessarily left out, and if the poet herself can only speak from where she is in the present, no matter how much assembling she invites from "over there" and "back

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14. Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257-337.

then." However, di Prima overcomes the dilemma of exclusion-through-gathering by presenting the loba as not only constructed, but in fact always under construction. It defies the limits of "you" or "one" by suspending the conflation. Di Prima makes this caveat explicit in her "Author's Note," in which she defers the completion of her work. She writes, "The Work is, like they say, in 'progress'. The author reserves the right to juggle, re-arrange, cut, osterize, re-cycle parts of the poem in future editions. As the Loba wishes, as the Goddess dictates."[15] Indeed, the publication of various parts of *Loba* spans from 1973 to 1998, quite an expansive time frame. Di Prima's note recalls Olson's approach to his own work, *The Maximus Poems*, which he constantly revised or expanded up until his death in 1970.[16] Without such a caveat, the job of *Loba* would be quite impossible. How can the loba be asserted as "a being who contains the soul and consciousness of all women,"[17] without presuming all that women are or might be?

The "Dance" Between the Whole and Its Parts

Both *Loba* and the history of feminism(s) demonstrate that even when plurality among women is emphasized and valued, there is still a desire for some felt singularity, some form of wholeness. Similarly, as much as a book of poems might claim itself to be

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15. Di Prima, *Loba*, xiii.

16. "The Maximus Poems," Poets.org, accessed August 20, 2020, https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/book/maximus-poems.

17. Mackay, "Politics of Feminist Revision in di Prima's Loba," 2.

unfinished, that book is opened and closed in our hands, and we might even feel relief at reaching "the end." This is where the "dance" of the open field becomes useful, as a complement to the idea of assemblage; it accounts for the ways in which such different parts, once assembled, weave together and reach towards something like a whole, in all its tensions. Duncan seems to contradict himself when he writes: "Our gods are many as our times are many, they are the cast and events of one play. There is only this one time; there is only this one god."[18] But he is addressing the very dilemma that the loba embodies, as "*the* Goddess" even as she is made up of so many goddesses (both mythic and real-life women). The dance becomes a way to balance the singular and the plural, and to make the contradictions of the many work towards the One.

For Duncan, the dance is all about "the exchange of opposites, the indwelling of one in the other."[19] The dance requires a letting-go of control, actually giving way to "demonic disorder" over the self-righteous containment known as "Reason."[20] Duncan makes clear that this is a dangerous and chaotic endeavor, entailing "a real threat of upset and things not keeping their place."[21] But as Duncan sees it, God is all things,

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18. Duncan, "Towards an Open Universe," 9.

19. Duncan, 6.

20. Robert Duncan, "Ideas of the Meaning of Form," in *A Selected Prose*, ed. Robert J. Bertholf (New York: New Directions, 1995), 35.

21. Duncan, 35.

including violence and destruction. Indeed, Duncan borrows from Haraclitus, who relates God to fire and uses this image to explain God's many manifestations: "God is day, night, winter, summer, war, peace, satiety, hunger, and undergoes alteration in the way that fire, when it is mixed with spices is named according to the scent of each of them."[22]

Elements of this chaotic dance (and its relation to fire) can certainly be seen in di Prima's "The Loba Dances," in which the loba "raises / in flames / the / city" through her dancing.[23] The (re)construction of the city—and the "new / creation myth" that it brings—is enabled through its *de*struction, since the loba only raises it by burning it to the ground; indeed, the word "raises" conjures up its homonym, "razes," to give a two-sided image of the loba and of what it means to create. This vision of the city rebuilt from "the ashes" recalls the myth of the phoenix, whose rebirthing is but one stage in an endless cycle of dying and being born again. Furthermore, this implication of being "born again," along with the explicit images of the city and fire, are strikingly resonant with Duncan's comments on religion in "Pages from a Notebook," in which he writes: "At times I would rather be burnd or physically tortured for my disinterest in or disavowal of salvation than to be subjected to Xtian argument. 'It is not my intention to

22. Duncan, "Towards an Open Universe," 6.

23. Diane di Prima, "The Loba Dances," in *Loba* (New York, Penguin Books, 1998), 18.

enter the city of man's salvation.'"[24] Here, Duncan is resisting the idea of one god reigning supreme; and while this might seem to contradict his declaration that "there is only this one god" in the creation of a poem, we have already touched upon god-as-fire being "mixed with spices" and thereby given plurality (multiple instantiations) while maintaining its overall singularity/unity. However, I want to suggest that Duncan embraces god-as-fire not just for its "dynamic unity," but because he erotically and masochistically embraces its violence, its pain. And I do not use "masochistically" in a derogative way; indeed, if "dance and poetry emerge as ways of knowing" for Duncan,[25] then the dance *with fire* grounds a renewed sense of *feeling* that is generative in its painfulness. This might shed light on di Prima's sense of reverence in "The Loba Dances," apparently reveling in the loba as a sexily monstrous goddess who is "mistress / of many" and whose "breath / itself / is carnage."[26] In fire, pain, and sex, feeling trumps Reason and is taken to a place of excess. If the role of the Christian God is to contain this danger through the promise of salvation, the god-as-fire (and the open field poem it creates) is all that inundates, bleeds through, and bubbles over.

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24. Robert Duncan, "Pages from a Notebook," in *A Selected Prose*, ed. Robert J. Bertholf (New York: New Directions, 1995), 16.

25. Duncan, "Towards an Open Universe," 6.

26. Di Prima, "The Loba Dances," 18-19.

Embracing Excess Through "Projective" Verse: Formulations & Limitations

For the open field poets, excess by another name is "projective," and it is what connects the poet to his own carnal and primordial self and then to nature outside of him; for di Prima in particular, the selves and the nature involved are boldly feminine, and so her take on the "projective" might have somewhat different aims and assumptions. But, taking the "projective" back to its genealogical beginnings in the open field, it is clearly accompanied by a particular formulation of the universe which is worth exploring. In his essay "Human Universe," Olson invokes the binary of Nature vs. Reason, advocating for a return to universe not as "discourse," as the West has made it, but as in "the only two universes which count . . . that of himself, as organism, and that of his environment, the earth and planets."[27] In a sense, Olson is arguing for overcoming our unique socializations or the differences of culture/race/nation/religion/gender that separate us as human beings. Levertov later takes up the question of gender more explicitly in "Genre and Gender vs. Serving an Art," calling for the poet's "transcendence of any inessential factor—including gender" so that poetry is seen for its aesthetic qualities, and not just as a vehicle for (gender-specific) subject matter.[28] At the same time, however, Levertov acknowledges that a woman's experiences might inflect

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27. Charles Olson, "Human Universe," 54.

28. Denise Levertov, "Genre and Gender v. Serving an Art" in *New & Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1992), 103.

and inform the content of her poetry; and in “Some Affinities of Content,” which is published nine years later, she confesses that “the older I grow the more I find myself concerned with content, and drawn towards poems that articulate some of my own interests.”[29] Even so, the content that Levertov grows in affinity towards is about nature and “a quest for or encounter with God,” and not so much about gender explicitly.[30] Indeed, for Olson, Duncan, and Levertov alike, the aim of open field poets is to “project” their work past themselves and towards the other. Nature is seen as a way of doing this because it is imagined as more chaotic, free-flowing, and wild, altogether less interested in the categorizations and containments that Reason demands. Moreover, Olson writes that nature is at the very core of the human—in breath, in sound, in language—and has already “given him size, projective size.”[31]

However, an invocation of Nature over the bounds of Reason does not necessarily cleanse the poet of their socialization or “free” the project of its cultural baggage; therefore, I do not agree that the theme/analytic of nature is necessarily more “projective” than that of gender, especially as di Prima invokes it. To take one example: Olson takes an interest in the Maya because he believes them to be closer to nature; and

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29. Denise Levertov, “Some Affinities of Content,” in *New & Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1992), 2.

30. Levertov, 5, 11.

31. Olson, “Projective Verse,” 25.

in fact, he uses his encounters with Maya descendants to demonstrate his own desire to get back to flesh-and-blood senses, to have more free-flowing (i.e., excessive) contact between people, and to overcome the boundaries we have come to know in society. However, instead of overcoming these differences, he seems to underscore them, making ontological claims about "us" in the U.S. and "them" as our static counterparts. What Olson does not admit is that he actually relishes difference *per se*—that he is intrigued by and attracted to it. As he jostles against them (those "others" he has constructed) on the bus, he makes their difference something exotic/erotic. He writes: "The admission these people give me and one another is direct, and the individual who peers out from that flesh is precisely himself, is a curious wandering animal like me—it is so very beautiful how animal human eyes are when the flesh is not worn so close it chokes, how human and individuated the look comes out of a human eye when the house of it is not exaggerated."[32] His point is that we are all human in that we are all animal, and that our commonality can be more easily seen if we can take a look at each other up close. This entails a couple of things: first, that one "house" (i.e., a person's body) is "not exaggerated" by being closed-off to those around it, isolating itself and guarding its personal space; and, that we not be so distracted by the things that are put on by society, like clothing, race, or gender, which likewise exaggerate the "house" of a

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32. Olson, "Human Universe," 57.

person and diminish their natural humanity/soul. Olson undoubtedly thinks he is complimenting the Maya descendants by claiming that they are closer to the state of nature and less guarded/differentiated with each other. However, he performs the same logic as the colonizer, who believes himself farther along in the stages of civilization: less animal, more Reason. While the people he writes about exist, with him, in the present, he acts as if he would need to go back in time to be like them.

Regardless of his stated intentions, Olson's poetics perpetuate the logic of white supremacy through the fetishization of racial difference; similarly, while Olson would like to dismiss gender as superfluous to an understanding of the human, his "imaginative" framework reinforces patriarchal norms. Returning to our earlier quotation, it is clear that Olson imagines the human as a man—not only because he uses the pronoun "him" in what should be a gender-inclusive statement, but also because the emphatic preoccupation with "size, projective size" carries a clear phallic signification. Even as Olson resists Reason (traditionally associated with the masculine) in favor of Nature (traditionally feminine), he nevertheless occupies a masculinist position by invoking man as the default for "human" and for the type of poet he envisions. This is an obvious limitation to his version of "projective" verse. Conversely, di Prima's use of the projective turns this framework on its head by occupying a feminine voice and character, through pronouns and the icon of the loba, and by prioritizing subject matter marked as "woman's realm."

Loba's Own Limits

As discussed above, the intention of "open field" poets was to expand the field of poetry; and despite this ideal, the project certainly had its limitations, especially with regard to gender and race. My chapter argues that di Prima offered a generative and necessary revision, particularly through her rethinking of Woman and women's place in poetry. However, I would be remiss to represent di Prima or her book *Loba* as a cure-all for the shortcomings of poetry, which often mirror the injustices and exclusions found in society, even when the poets themselves hope to reach beyond. *Loba* certainly does not deal much with race, and when it does, the mention is offhand and potentially fetishizing. Indeed, while feminists have increasingly recognized the need to confront issues of gender and race together, in theory and in practice, di Prima's book lacks direct engagement with and explication of this project. Di Prima is undoubtedly aware of race and of the ties between ideas of Western supremacy and those of patriarchy—and she clearly sees the overthrow of the latter as being caught up with that of the former. This rings in the lines "See the young, black, naked woman riding / a dead white man . . . ."[33] Not only is "man" contrasted with and overtaken by "woman," but "black" is shown conquering "white." The depiction offers a double reversal, taking aim at white supremacy and male dominance in tandem. And yet, Di Prima's lack of appropriate

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33. Di Prima, *Loba*, 14.

contextualization and her position as a white woman makes this an uncomfortable scene; though she seems to imagine herself armed against the white man and thus aligned with the Black woman, the history of relations between Black and white women in America is heavily fraught, with a number of Black feminists denouncing the racism and classism they encountered in feminist circles dominated by white, middle-class women. This has been documented in field-forming works such as the "Combahee River Collective Statement," the anthology *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*, Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought*, bell hooks' *Ain't I a Woman*, Angela Davis' *Women, Race, and Class*, and Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider*—to name just a few texts. And while biographical information might help to establish di Prima as a person in community with Black writers/thinkers and the project of Black liberation,[34] there is no information or voice in *Loba* to establish di Prima's perspective or activities regarding race relations, and there are no reflections on her identity and how that might impact the reception of her words.

As it is, the one line in the book directly referencing Black women as such is made to shock, and perhaps shocks for more reasons than were intended. As a white woman myself, writing in the twenty-first century, I read the description of the "black,

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34. For example, Diane di Prima had not only personal, but creative and collaborative, relationships with both Audre Lorde and Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones). Roseanne Giannini Quinn discusses the importance of this detail in her article "'The Willingness to Speak': Diane di Prima and Italian American Feminist Body Politics."

naked woman" and wonder what the significance of "naked" is, especially as it is juxtaposed with "black." Given the history of sexualization and objectification of Black women in America and beyond, it gives me pause. Of course, "naked" could be meant to simply accentuate the adjective "young"—contrasting the "dead white man" with the Black woman's naked youth. This implication is problematic in its own right, since it presents Black women merely as signifiers of something white men allegedly lack and probably desire (i.e., life, energy, freshness). In this case, the onus is placed on Black women to provide a correction to the world of white men; it holds them responsible for rejuvenating society and culture. The narrative is not so different from Olson's fetishization of the Maya, described above, and that should likewise give any reader pause.

With this limitation established, the focus of this chapter is on what *Loba* contributes to poetry and feminist thinking/writing, with the caveat that feminism should always and already be thinking through the lens of race. Read with a critical (yet open, generous) mind in the present day, *Loba* may be used for the purposes of overturning seemingly given hierarchies and (hopefully) transgressing the boundaries of not just gender, but also race, nation, and religion—thus expanding the limits of imagination.

More on Gender: Woman as (W)Hole

Di Prima's intervention as a woman poet, writing poetry about "woman" and for women, is radical not because the idea of woman would be absent from the open field otherwise; in fact, the philosophy and poetics of the open field are built around the concept of woman, if only as a metaphor for "opening." I have been using the word "opening" throughout this chapter to mean imagination, expansiveness, capaciousness—and this of course is the meaning that registers most explicitly in the open field poets' descriptions of their vision. However, I would be remiss to not acknowledge the apparent sexual, and gendered, connotations of the word, especially as it is used by mostly male poets who often seem to assume poets are themselves and other men. Moreover, the politics of gender are not divorced from, but actually tied to, the politics of race/culture in these imaginings. I have argued that Olson performs the same logic as the colonizer in reference to the Maya people; I add that this logic, in all times and places, has carried gendered signification, and that signification tracks in the poetry of the open field. The land (in this case, the "field") is gendered feminine, and the colonizer (the poet) is male. As the heteronormative narrative goes, the male poet revels in having found an "opening": his lover, his Muse, the thing that inspires his poetry and makes it more expansive.

This is perhaps most obvious looking at the broad expanse of Robert Creeley's poetry, which is rife with the image of holes. Often, the hole carries existential anguish,

registering an absence or a sense of emptiness; however, the hole also (and often simultaneously) tends to refer to a woman. His poem, "The Hole," is an easy example.[35] But it rings true even in one of his most famous poems, "The Language," which is perhaps not supposed to be about woman at all, but is. He writes:

> I heard words
> and words full
>
> of holes
> aching. Speech
> is a mouth.[36]

Creeley is speaking about language, perhaps, and making a salient point about the inability to say something—even (or especially) through the medium that allows us to say anything at all. However, his poem is not just about language; he is speaking of his lover, and of his inability to "Locate / I love you" in her "teeth and / eyes." The hole is the absence of affirmed love, of the words "I love you" when the speaker of the poem so wishes them to be there. Because the poet envisions a hole, and then attaches it to a woman who is object of his poem, "she" is not really there at all. She is a hole, just as the hole and/or "opening" always refers, on some level, to her.

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35. Robert Creeley, "The Hole," in *Selected Poems, 1945-2005* (Berkeley: University of California, 2008), 107-9.

36. Robert Creeley, "The Language," in *Selected Poems, 1945-2005* (Berkeley: University of California, 2008), 91-92.

As a result, the poem is stages removed from any woman as an autonomous being, as agent of herself and her parts. Of course, the reduction of woman to her anatomy (and her anatomy as it is described by a men, at that) is a long-standing tradition in poetry—most famously called out in William Shakespeare's poem that begins "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun" (which some know as "Sonnet 130"), in which the poet subverts the then-popular Petrarchan blazon.[37] However, in Creeley's poem, woman is not even so much a "part," per se, since the (w)hole of her is an absence.

Di Prima's intervention, then, not only in open field poetry specifically but in poetry more broadly, is essentially in representing woman as something more than a hole. Di Prima grants agency and autonomy to women over poetic material that would otherwise refer to them only (or mostly) in sexually objectifying ways. Di Prima, through her being and through her poetics, allows woman to be not muse or metaphor, but poet. She amends and projects past the "projective" as it was originally imagined by taking woman as a whole.

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37. "Glossary of Poetic Terms: Blazon," Poetry Foundation, 2000, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/blazon.

Under Construction: Freeing the Human/Woman Through Radical Mythmaking

Undoubtedly, di Prima's project has much in common with both Olson's and Creeley's, but hers departs in crucial ways. First, she might be said to draw from Olson's interest in "the animal" in her own configuration of the loba, the she-wolf that is goddess of her poem. Moreover, so much of *Loba* is populated with images of "the earth and planets," the second of the two universes that Olson is concerned with. (I take "planets" here to stand in for all things astral/astrological in *Loba*, the sun, moon, and stars included.) Finally, as has already been implied, her use of fire can be seen as "projective"—not just because it is excessive (projecting past limits), but also because it is a natural element. However, even with all these apparent resonances, there is an important difference: di Prima is playing with myths, making them speak to real-life women, whereas Olson seems to be doing the reverse, representing real-life people in a way that mythologizes them. As a result, di Prima's approach to the "projective" in *Loba* is more expansive than the narrative Olson offers by way of definition, since it actually explodes the categories that Western Man has constructed himself upon, rather than reinforcing them.

While di Prima pulls from nature in her images, she does not naturalize the things that she borrows from or creates, and that includes the constructs of gender/womanhood; in fact, as I have previously explained, di Prima regularly points to the constructedness that *is* representation and/or mythmaking. Part 4 of *Loba* also

demonstrates this self-reflexivity, beginning with an epigraph which states: "I have come to know myself and have gathered myself from everywhere."[38] The quote is attributed to the "Gospel of Eve," emphasizing her knowledge not of "good and evil," as the Biblical story would have it, but of her own being; moreover, such knowledge actually attends her own self-creation, so that she knows herself precisely as a made thing[39]—not entirely new, but derived from what had already existed. Eve, the myth we all know, *knows* she is mythic. But before Part 4 concludes with the "LOBA AS EVE" poem, it features four poems back-to-back that highlight the loba in all its mythic proportions, as that which is made to be so large that it exceeds/evades even our capturing of it. In "Some Lies about the Loba," the speaker offers a litany of what amounts to rumors/hearsay, some claims directly contradicting each other, as with the li(n)e "that she is black, that she is white."[40] But these are not lies in the sense that they are false; for it is a lie "that there is anything to say of her / which is not truth"—meaning that anything said about her *is* truth, or that nothing said about her is *not* truth. Perhaps

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38. Di Prima, *Loba*, 57.

39. Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, Persephone Press, 1982. This work is not in direct conversation with *Loba*, but it has in common a feminist assertion of self-knowledge and self-creation. Lorde coined the term "biomythography" in describing this work, signifying the creative admixture of personal (auto)biography and myth, with an eye to collective history as well.

40. Diane di Prima, "Some Lies about the Loba," in *Loba* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 62.

“lies” are simply “fictions,” not so much “made up” in a moralistic sense, but “made” in that they are constructed or given a narrative through storytelling. By acknowledging the loba as fictitious, then, the poem actually opens up her possibilities to infinity, or to the limitlessness of our imagination, since “there is [not] anything about her / which cannot be said.”[41]

The following poem, “FOUR POETS SPEAK OF HER,” takes similar fictions about the loba and places them in quotations, humorously offsetting these with the speaker’s own voice at the end, ostensibly asking what kind of booze those four poets must have been drunk on when they said all that.[42] The poets have represented/lied about the loba to the point of “nodding out,” exhausting themselves but not exhausting all there is to say about their favored object of conversation. In the next poem, “A PAINTING OF THE LOBA,” our goddess figure is once again guessed-at, glimpsed through unsure eyes and not quite decipherable. The speaker, acting as reader of some found depiction of the loba, asks: “Is it vampire as we know it? Werewolf / as in the Slavic hills?”[43] The speaker is unsure, but brings us (the readers) in as fellow gazers and audience members when she writes: “I guess she sings, I guess her hunting song / is

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41. Di Prima, 62.

42. Diane di Prima, “FOUR POETS SPEAK OF HER,” in *Loba* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 64.

43. Diane di Prima, “A PAINTING OF THE LOBA,” in *Loba* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 65.

what we're listening to." The speaker invites us to be confused right along with her, only making conjectures as to what we are gathering. And so *we* become the liars and mythmakers, constructing the loba out of what we do not know but creating a new "knowledge" out of it. Finally, in "DREAM: The Loba Reveals Herself," the loba-as-myth turns back on us, "the hunted turning hunter" and quite literally refusing capture.[44] As if calling upon a Muse, the speaker first summons the loba through "the awesome thunder & drum of her / Name, the LOBA MANTRA." But the poet seems to fear the source of her inspiration, the myth(s) she has been tracking and conjuring up, since she retreats from the loba when she finally appears before her. Indeed, writing can be a terrifying process. The speaker seems to think that her subject will devour her, or else chew her up and spit her out. But the poet might imagine her subject as, simultaneously, her reader; we are told that the loba "came to hunt," and Duncan refers to readers as "our hunters."[45] Perhaps the poet is unsure how her own portrayal of the loba will live up to all that has previously been told; perhaps it is these earlier configurations of the loba that hunt/haunt her. But when she turns to face the loba, she sees her as someone quite different from the werewolf or vampire she has heard of. She

44. Diane di Prima, "DREAM: The Loba Reveals Herself," in *Loba* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 67.

45. Duncan, "Pages from a Notebook," 13.

calls her a "kind watchdog I cd / leave the children with. / Mother & sister. / Myself."[46] The conclusion of this poem reflects another version of "excess," revealing that the loba is always "something more" than all that has been previously said.

In the four consecutive poems discussed above ("Some Lies About the Loba" through "DREAM: The Loba Reveals Herself"), the loba is re-presented to the reader as a figure that has often been mistreated and maligned; in other poems, this mistreatment is directly or indirectly connected to the violence that human woman has been subjected to, both ontologically and physically/materially. For example, in "And will you hunt the Loba?" the speaker calls us to "Look" and see that the loba "lies on her back in the sand like a human woman."[47] This comes after a series of gruesome images of violence, all framed as questions for those who might hunt the loba. As the speaker cries "After her!" we see that the comparison between the loba and woman serves not to create sympathy for the former, but to actually incite violence against her—as if building off "the fact" of woman as the natural and necessary recipient of such violence, thereby justifying the loba's slaughter. But the speaker's tone is important: referring to the potential hunters as "Fools" in the second line, she establishes that her suggestions of violence are not given with sincerity, but rather, hurled in accusation and as challenge. The loba triumphs in

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46. Di Prima, "DREAM: The Loba Reveals Herself," 68.

47. Diane di Prima, "And will you hunt the Loba?," in *Loba* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 29.

the end, as the hunter's horse "turns to tumbleweed" in the chase, and "once again it is written / NOLI ME TANGERE in jewels / across the sky."[48] A sense of justice/righteousness is evoked through the Latin, which means "Touch me not" and is taken from a Biblical verse: "Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God."[49] Calling upon the power of Scripture, the poem nonetheless flips it on its head, switching gender roles and defying patriarchy. In its original context, "Noli me tangere" is spoken by Christ when he finds Mary Magdalene weeping at his empty tomb; in preparation for his ascension to the "Father," he insists on distancing himself from Mary by not letting her touch him, all the while calling her "Woman." Di Prima's poem calls out the gender dynamic staged in the verse, taking the words "Noli me tangere" away from the man (and his Holy Father) and repurposing them in defense of a female goddess. Indeed, don't the words ring out more righteously when they are wielded against bloodthirsty hunters, instead of a woman who means no harm, who is simply grieving a man she has loved and lost? The poetic twist pushes back against Biblical framings that would critique or diminish women for displaying "excessive" emotions.

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48. Di Prima, 29.

49. Jn 20:17 (KJV).

In *Loba*, it is "the fact" of gender, of womanhood, that di Prima speaks out of—not because it is natural, but because it is written into all our operations, into our human relationships and spiritual knowledges; instead of abdicating the female/feminine, di Prima makes of it her "open field." In that field, seeming binaries like pain and ecstasy, life and death, grief and celebration coexist, much as they do in the lives of women. This resonates with Duncan's idea of embracing contradictions through the "dance." Moreover, it calls up Levertov's essay "Poetry, Prophecy, Survival," in which she holds that "A poetry of anguish, a poetry of anger, of rage . . . can be truly a high poetry," but also advocates for "a poetry of praise" as something that is necessary for survival.[50] In di Prima's "LOBA IN CHILDBED," the modes of anguish and praise are woven together into a single poem. Descriptions of the pangs of labor gather in intensity, reaching their climax at the moment of delivery, a time of utter desperation for the loba. Di Prima writes:

> Only
> shrill mantra scream, arch
> mudra of tossing pain
> torture of watching spirit, measured
> in pulse beat   from wires tied
> to heart of her cunt, center
> of her womb. Have the oceanic

50. Denise Levertov, "Poetry, Prophecy, Survival," in *Poems 1968-1972* (New York: New Directions, 1987), 143-4.

presences deserted her?[51]

Indeed, if Olson calls the poet to get back to the senses, the "shout," and away from the abstract and discursive, then the loba's scream is an excellent example of this.[52] Is there anything more primordial than a "natural" childbirth? Di Prima weds the shout to womanhood, making it bubble up from the "heart of her cunt" and thereby situating the feminine inside the open field. Moreover, she borrows again from Christian texts; the question that ends the stanza recalls Christ's suffering upon the cross, when he calls out to his/the Father in despair and agony: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"[53] The loba's physical pain carries fear alongside it, as she finds herself inside this "Dark cave. Dark forces countering / magic w/ magic."[54] The magic of childbirth contends with that of death. Even the poem's conclusion suspends our definite knowledge of whether or not the child has been born alive: "Was he limp, did he stir / w/ life, did she hear / his soft breath in her ear?" A sense of worry and impending grief at the possibility of a "limp" body is mixed with a sense of overwhelming joy and relief at the mention of his breath. Indeed, the reader's breath seems to hinge on the child's, as

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51. Diane di Prima, "LOBA IN CHILDBED," in *Loba* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 32.

52. Olson, "Human Universe," 57.

53. Mt 27:46 (KJV).

54. Di Prima, "LOBA IN CHILDBED," 31.

we wait to exhale at this hesitant revelation of new life. It is the violence of labor, the intensified reality of life and death, that finally gives way to awe and delivers us unto praise. Levertov writes, “To sing awe—to breathe out praise and celebration—is as fundamental an impulse as to lament.”[55]

Loba's Dual Impulses (Pain vs. Pleasure), and Its Implications for Feminism

“LOBA IN CHILDBED” and its emphasis on pain—on pain mixed with pleasure, specifically—holds a certain resonance with the work of Fred Moten, Elaine Scarry, and Susan Sontag, in their readings of pained bodies that give way to (someone else's) pleasure. It is worth bringing their contributions to bear on *Loba*, to ascertain whether di Prima is performing what these scholars urge us to critique. Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) questions the utility and the ethics of circulating images depicting people in pain, arguing that it provokes voyeuristic pleasure in viewers more than it promotes either sympathy or material change. Scarry's *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1987) is a protest against torture and analyzes the vocabularies produced through (and inhibited by) suffering; one cannot truly express pain, or make anything of/through it, but is in fact unmade by it. Finally, Moten's *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003) looks at pain in relation to Black expression and performance; in his first chapter, “Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester's Scream,” he

55. Levertov, “Poetry, Prophecy, Survival,” 144.

uses the concept of subjectification as a double entendre, arguing that the Black subject has traditionally been formed at the scene of a Black body subjected to suffering.

All three books point to the problematics of representing a body in pain, especially the body of another—or the body deemed "Other" from a white, masculinist framework. They are relevant to "LOBA IN CHILDBED" in that this poem perhaps risks producing a "wrong" sort of pleasure in its depiction of the loba in pain, especially since the loba is representative, to a certain extent, of "woman" writ large, and women are so often presented in objectifying and violent ways. Indeed, Catharine MacKinnon has provocatively argued for woman as a symbol of suffering, tied to the condition of being hurt/violated so habitually that it reaches an almost ontological level; she writes: "To be rap*able*, a position which is social, not biological, defines what a woman is."[56] Is di Prima's representation, then, problematic? Pornographic, even?

Keeping these scholars' arguments in mind, I propose that di Prima's subject position, as well as both her relation to and treatment of the concept of "woman," go a long way in inflecting the poem with something other than gross pleasure at the sight of a woman in pain. Because the poet/speaker identifies so strongly with the loba and with womanhood throughout the book, this scene does not read as voyeuristic even though it is rendered in the third person. It might be deemed "pornographic" given its attention to

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56. Catharine A. MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: Toward Feminist Jurisprudence," *Signs* 8, no. 4 (1983): 651.

and use of the word "cunt" and the fact that the loba's pain gives way to pleasure; however, I am not interested, as MacKinnon is, in making generalizable moral judgments of pornography (or of masochism, for that matter). That is to say, whether or not the poem is pornographic, it does not represent/appropriate pain in a way that dehumanizes, exploits, or inoculates us to others' suffering.

We have also to consider the contextualization of the poem in a sea of other poems, where the loba is situated in myriad conditions not reducible to childbirth or pain. Indeed, an attention to the loba's "opening" would strike quite differently in the hands of another open field poet such as Olson or Creeley, belonging as it would in a sea of other poems where women figure mostly as holes. I argue that the loba, on the other hand, is a multi-valanced character, giving expression to the many conditions of woman and her agency/dignity within them.

As much as womanhood can be rooted in pain, di Prima balances the urge to scream or to raise/raze the city in flames with a parallel desire for "rebirth," to see the loba joyful and triumphant. This has as much to do with a "rewriting" of myth as it does with the rhetoric of political action: should feminism invest itself in a record of wrongs against women, or should its energies go towards imagining something different in its place? Both Levertov and di Prima seem to get at this difficult question, though di Prima does so more explicitly and with a more intense grounding of gender. Much like "And will you hunt the Loba?," di Prima's "LOBA, TO APOLLO, AT THE FOUNTAIN OF

HEALING" enumerates horrific scenes of violence, phrasing many of them again as questions; but this time, the questions are not hypothetical/conditional (i.e., "*would* you"), but rather, asking for a confirmation of events that have already taken place. The loba asks "did I not burn?" and "was I not sold & sold & my daughters broken?"[57] Interestingly, the loba has begun the poem by boldly claiming: "now dervish I slough off / pain, which is my claim to / commonality of woman." And yet, she has "remembered / since childhood" experiences of great pain, and she seems to want Apollo to admit or own up to them. In bitterness and heartbreak, she asks him:

> can you laugh, father
> can you deny
> mouthfuls of blackened blood
> I spit out
> each morning
> to sing?[58]

It seems that it is still not possible to just sing without acknowledging what all she is triumphing over. The indented line underscores the dailiness of it: the fact that she must wake up each morning and spit, all over again, before she can think of singing. Further emphasizing this cyclicality on the level of form, di Prima repeats the first stanza. But because of what has directly come before, it seems impossible to take the loba at her word; the reader suspects that the claim to slough off pain is just another

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57. Diane di Prima, "LOBA, TO APOLLO, AT THE FOUNTAIN OF HEALING," in *Loba* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 147.

58. Di Prima, 147.

prayer the loba says to herself, willing herself to move on. The loba believes she must trade her rage "to be born / in uniqueness," but she cannot seem to perform the act of forgetting that she is calling for.[59] What, then, of feminism born of rage? Can it still allow for uniqueness, for imagination? Can it serve as fertile ground for something future-oriented?

Answering this question in its more generalized form, not directly in relation to feminism, Levertov writes: "Affliction is more apt to suffocate the imagination than to stimulate it. The action of imagination, if unsmothered, is to lift the crushed mind out from under the weight of affliction."[60] She advocates for the sharing of personal experiences and sorrows only insofar as they serve "a *creative* function, producing new forms and transforming existing ones" and only insofar as they become "autonomous objects available to others, and capable of transforming *them*."[61] Imagination almost comes to mean "healing," which is precisely what the loba, in the poem just discussed, was supposedly seeking at the fountain. In that instance, the loba did not seem to find what she was looking for. Similarly, as much as Levertov invokes praise as a method of survival, several of her "To Stay Alive" poems come into conflict with her desires for peace and healing. She says as much in her preface to that collection, speaking of her

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59. Di Prima, 148.

60. Levertov, "Poetry, Prophecy, Survival," 145.

61. Levertov, 146.

community activism: “The personal response that moves from the identification of my lost sister, as a worker for human rights, with the pacifists ‘going limp’ as they are dragged to the paddywagon in Times Square in 1966, to the understanding by 1970 that ‘there comes a time when only anger / is love,’ is one shared by many of us.”[62] While the creation of something new is at the heart of her work, Levertov is sometimes induced not only to acknowledge the injustices done, but also to register a sense of communal rage. This project is not so different from di Prima’s. Indeed, when Levertov pays her respects to the monks who set their bodies on fire to register “the burned bodies / of other people’s children” in war, this is not so different from the loba who raises/razes the city in flames.[63] Perhaps it is not so much the tone of the poem (or the politics) that determines its feasibility or merit, but whether it serves a greater purpose, and whether it is able to register its anguish alongside praise, towards imagination.

The Limits of Myth; and, Simultaneously, Mythmaking as Inexhaustive

In true open-field fashion, Levertov is interested in “the whole” of humanity, and how her work can project past herself and speak to/with that whole. She maintains that her work, in gathering the experiences of a number of people, “transcends the peculiar

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62. Denise Levertov, “Author’s Preface, 1971,” in *Poems 1968-1972* (New York: New Directions, 1987), 106.

63. Denise Levertov, “Prologue: An Interim,” in *Poems 1968-1972* (New York: New Directions, 1987), 135.

details of each life, though it can only be expressed in and through such details."[64] This "transcendent" quality is called up in di Prima's *Loba*, not just in that it transcends the individual woman and moves towards the larger concept or community of women, but also because it points towards that which is always left over in any representation of woman—that *excess* which this chapter has already called the "projective" of the open field. In "POINT OF RIPENING: Lughnasa," di Prima responds to a quote (made an epigraph here) by Carl Jung: "What Myth are you living?" Jung is known for developing a theory in psychology around a conception of "archetypes," which he understood as underlying all human experience and behavior, finding varied expressions/images through different cultures and individual consciousnesses.[65] The archetypes, then, are seemingly open-ended, finding endless expression in the particularities of place, time, and person. They are intended as grounds for imagination, not as its upper limit. And yet, the speaker of di Prima's poem seems to be calling out a lack of potential, responding in the first two lines: "There is no myth / for what I am living now."[66] If we take capitalization seriously, however, a distinction might be drawn between "Myth" as expansive potential, connecting all of humanity, and "myth" as an already given form—

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64. Levertov, "Author's Preface, 1971," 107.

65. "Jungian archetypes," Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, last modified June 15, 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jungian_archetypes.

66. Diane di Prima, "POINT OF RIPENING: Lughnasa," *Loba* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 305.

indeed, one of the "twelve common archetypes" that have come to stand in for Jungian psychology. For di Prima, these given forms would be the preconceived notions about what "woman" is, as well as the female figures which have come to dominate art and literature but which are not necessarily relatable for all women. This is not just a statement about various media's lack of positive female role models; it is an acknowledgment that even if the quality and quantity of representations were to increase, no amount of representation could exhaust all women's beings.

Indeed, without doing too much biographical work, we might take the speaker of "POINT OF RIPENING" to be di Prima herself, noting the absence of a "myth / for this older, ample woman."[67] Having dedicated a book to exploring the Myth of woman, di Prima admits that her own life does not find its carbon copy in any myth that she has found. This could be seen as a "lack" in mythology or cultural production as it exists; but, taken another way, it could be meant to suggest that any individual life will exceed the capacity of myth to perfectly capture it, just as the loba herself avoids capture. The threat of any myth is that it will be conflated with the whole, though it be a single representation. Di Prima's loba thus walks a tightrope, resisting this conflation: it attempts to be of mythic proportions (or mythically "projective") so that it can be any- and everything; and yet, it also tries to incorporate the specific and quotidian, as they

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67. Di Prima, "POINT OF RIPENING: Lughnasa," 305.

apply to the lives of real women. I would argue that the loba is not something to look to, but to look towards. Duncan writes: "Our engagement with knowing, with craft and lore, our demand for truth is not to reach a conclusion but to keep our exposure to what we do not know, to confront our wish and our need beyond habit and capability, beyond what we can take for granted, at the borderline, the light finger-tip or thought-tip where impulse and novelty spring."[68] The loba opens up the possibility for us—wherever, whenever, and however we are—to point to our own lives and argue for "Some myth that encompasses that."[69] Knowing that it will never be complete, never perfect, the loba becomes a way of thinking "woman" without collapsing back on what has already been written/said or on women as we presently know them. Indeed, *Loba* allows women to be excessive, "projective" past the limits of whatever we *could* know. *She* is an open field.

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68. Robert Duncan, "Towards an Open Universe," 12.

69. Di Prima, "POINT OF RIPENING: Lughnasa," 307.

Interlude

Where to Begin

Where should one start, except at
where it hurts.
Here: place two fingers on my wrist
and listen, closely
through the skin.
Be careful not to take
your own heartbeat
for mine; that is
make sure that I'm alive, and then
search for the wounding.

Suppose you start
with the neck instead—
but the rest remains still.
What else is there to do
but press your fingers down,
lightly and listening
for my body to answer.
You, who are different from myself.
Do that bit, and then—
why, you'd search for the wounding still.

Why else come to my body
on the floor?
Aware by now that something
has happened here,
you must wonder, too,
how else to begin?
If not at the wound, and then
the wounding.

How else, you see—where,
why else
would you begin?

This poem, published in the poem-a-day series *What Rough Beast* in February 2020, reflects on the humane and essential desire to care about/for someone outside of oneself, while also taking care not to fetishize or revel in pain that is not one's own. It is heavily inspired by Saidiya Hartman's concept of "redressing the body" and Susan Sontag's warning against the pornography of pain, both of which I will explore in my second chapter. Allegorizing an emergency medical response, the poem asks someone—perhaps the reader—to not flee at the site of blood, but to sit with and care for the wounded. It asks someone to recognize that "something has happened here" that first demands attention and aid, and then warrants some investigation into how it happened, and how it might be made right. It asks someone to fully witness—that is, listen and respond. At the same time, it cautions against (necessary) empathy being converted into an unhelpful substitution with oneself for another, mistaking the witness for the wounded. Finally, it calls into question any "witnessing" of pain (standing by, reveling) that does not involve an attempt to assist as one can.

"Where to Begin" is also a reminder of the power the body can hold, for better or for worse; it can be a site of wounding, but also a site of healing and, indeed, the medium through which we experience the world and each other. Like the loba, discussed in my first chapter, the body can be a site of both pain and pleasure; it too is an open field, and we can come to a better understanding of its limits and possibilities (and our own responsibilities) by approaching it as such. In the chapter that follows, I

am concerned with (and by) particular uses of the body, and the lack of care shown towards it, in certain understandings of and claims about poetry. I delve into contemporary conceptual poetry and its interactions with our digital world—a world of endless data and increased interconnectivity—whereby the body, too, becomes "data" that is (allegedly) open and available for use in/as art. I contend that this version of "openness," in the absence of a rigorous framework of care to accompany it, is harmful and antithetical to what I have proposed in my reading of the open field. I examine the impact of racialized trauma and memory, in particular, and the need for care in art as in all sectors of society.

The problems in poetry, as I discuss them, are but repetitions of larger social ills: anti-Blackness, capitalism, and misogyny, and ideological abstractions that obfuscate the violence of these systems. I highlight the necessity of recognizing historical and present-day traumas that frame certain bodies as disposable commodities. In the face of this violence, and drawing from the work of Jennifer Nash, Jasbir Puar, and Laura Doyle, I call for a practice of caring for the body—a labor that all who are ready and willing can share. Among other things, I maintain that vulnerability, and a regard for emotion, is essential to practicing care and mitigating harm, and I push back against conceptual poetry's disavowal (even disparagement) of such considerations.

Reimagining the Body: Mutual Vulnerability, Assemblage, and Intercorporeality

I argue in the following chapter that the body, itself, is not inherently tied to harm, and that a discussion about how to "care" for the body is both analytically useful and politically necessary. Feminist scholars Jennifer Nash, Jasbir Puar, and Laura Doyle—and their respective concepts of mutual vulnerability, assemblage, and intercorporeality—locate the body as a promising site of healing, hope, and even love. They prompt us to admit the body's vulnerability but to understand it as the potential for connection and generosity. This framework powerfully reimagines "vulnerability" outside of a framework of precarity, death, exploitation, and crisis, while nevertheless allowing us to recognize the ways in which certain bodies are systemically subjected to violence due to all-too-relevant histories of oppression.[1] Two things can be true at once, and I want to maintain an awareness of both throughout my second chapter.

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1. In her most recent book, *Birthing Black Mothers*, Nash speaks to thinking beyond the rhetoric of crisis—which, she argues, not only frames long-standing issues like racism as sexism as seemingly new, but also centers narratives of death and precarity rather than those of vitality. She is particularly wary of the way in which the crisis framework has converted Black mothers, in both Black feminist and more general Leftist discourses, into "a political category that is a synonym for pain." Jennifer Nash, *Birthing Black Mothers* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 4. See my Q&A with Nash on the Duke University Press blog, where Nash discusses her book and this question of "crisis." Jessica Covil-Manset, "Q&A with Jennifer C. Nash," Duke University Press, August 18, 2021, https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/chicago_manual_17th_edition/cmos_formatting_and_style_guide/web_sources.html.

These three inter-connected concepts are also useful in that they provide a way of looking at what is possible in terms of care and consideration (with respect to the bodies of researchers, authors, artists, etc.) across multiple identities. I am interested in theorizations that question the fixity of social categories and that work to resist them, with the knowledge that systems such as capitalism, racism, and patriarchy benefit the most by keeping us in separate boxes. Especially for those whose social positions grant them a greater amount of power, influence, or comfort, this work of challenging hierarchies and hegemonic norms involves unlearning internalized hatred and biases, along with more subtle (but dangerous) conceptions of how the world operates. Nevertheless, this work is possible, and difference is not an impassable roadblock but a social reality that we must recognize in order to "examine the distortions which result from our misnaming [these differences] and their effects upon human behavior and expectation."[2]

Following this vein, in *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality*, Jennifer Nash attends to the ways in which new and powerful solidarities might be forged through a rethinking of the body and a retelling of feminist history. For her, assumptions about bodies (and geographies) have disunified two major feminist

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2. Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," *Sister Outsider*: *Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg: Crossing Press, 1984), 110.

movements/paradigms, intersectionality and transnationalism, and have resulted in convening Black feminists around the former and other women-of-color feminists around the latter. She writes: "Intersectionality and transnationalism . . . are imagined as separate analytics, traditions, methods, and modes of analysis that correspond to different geographic locations (United States vs. global South), and to differently raced bodies as object of study and often implicitly as the body of the researcher (black vs. nonblack person of color)."[3] Drawing on the work of another feminist scholar, Clare Hemmings, Nash maintains an interest in the "stories we tell"—particularly the histories we give of our fields and movements—and the way this storytelling can enable or disallow possibilities for understanding and alliance. Nash hopes to provide a counternarrative, and to remember the history of feminist studies (especially as embodied through the National Women's Studies Association) differently, so that Black feminism, in turn, can be imagined more expansively.

Moreover, Nash's attempt to incorporate these two paradigms is matched with a desire to reimagine racial difference more broadly, so that it does not signify, necessarily, an insurmountable division between people who demonstrate an investment in similar causes. She begins to make this argument in her introduction, when she says that the archive of Black feminist work that she is building from consists

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3. Jennifer Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 97.

of Black as well as white researchers. She adds: "I advance a conception of black feminism that is expansive, welcoming anyone with an investment in black women's humanity, intellectual labor, and political visionary work. . . . My contention is that these varied black feminist scholars can all speak on and for black feminist theory . . . even as they make their claims from different identity locations."[4] Instead of focusing on particularized identities and subjecthoods, Nash develops a theory of "mutual vulnerability," which she says "constitutes a commitment to be intimately bound to the other (or to others), to refuse boundaries between self and other."[5] Nash builds her theory off that of "assemblage," which Jasbir K. Puar conceptualized in her book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* and then elaborated in her essay "'I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess': Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory."[6] In Nash's words, Puar's concept of assemblage thinks "relationality, subjectivity, and sensation" in a way that might better capture the fluidity of life and the "messiness of identity" than certain discourses around intersectionality seem to suggest,

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4. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined*, 5.

5. Nash, 116.

6. Jasbir Puar, "'I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess': Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory," *philoSOPHIA: A Journal of Continental Feminism* 2, no. 1 (2012): 49-66; Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist assemblages: Homonationalism in queer times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

according to Puar.[7] The body, beyond its racialization, is integral to Nash's theory, since it is through our bodies and our physical presence in the world that we meet, relate, and bind to one another.

My reading of the body as a crucial and hopeful site is further influenced by Laura Doyle's writing on intercorporeality, particularly in her book *Bordering on the Body: The Racial Matrix of Modern Fiction and Culture*. "Intercorporeality" is compelling in that it sees the body not just as a sign, but as a medium.[8] Through this concept, Doyle calls her readers to resist re-naturalizing or re-inscribing difference as a firm boundary, and instead reimagines the body as a means of contact and proximity between us, and as a medium through which we communicate, both taking in and sharing information: a bridge between self and others.

Doyle's chapter "'To Get to a Place': Intercorporeality in *Beloved*" and the "Conclusion" that directly follows it are perhaps most relevant to a discussion of body as medium, and to understanding Doyle's attempts to destabilize boundary markers that are taken as "fixed." Doyle moves through several works of African American literature and lands, ultimately, at Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Doyle theorizes intercorporeality in her reading of Morrison's novel, offering close readings of the

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7. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined*, 51-2.

8. Laura Doyle, *Bordering on the Body: The Racial Matrix of Modern Fiction and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

intimate relationships between characters who make attempts towards mutual recognition and solidarity. Doyle sees potential for solidarity-via-intercorporeality in the intimate, sexual relations between Sethe and Paul D—relations that present an opportunity for them to merge together, to understand the shared pain of the past and move towards a shared future. Paul D runs his fingers along "the tree" on Sethe's back, which was the result of a brutal whipping she received at their old plantation. But while this signifies the possibility of their mutual understanding, empathy, and care/love, Doyle argues that these characters "are blind to their own common ground because of its having become numb scar tissue. . . . They resist even as they touch; their memories are opposed even as they constitute a shared history and a single story."[9]

However, if Sethe and Paul D represent thwarted empathy/solidarity, then Doyle reads other moments in *Beloved* as representations of achieving a mutually affirming relationship among people, even if such an achievement is temporary and must be fought for repeatedly. Doyle shows how intercorporeality in these moments allow for a "reemplacement" of the displaced self, in and through community with others—a healing process for all involved. According to Doyle, Baby Suggs's sermon in the Clearing (which has been discussed at great length in existing scholarship) provides the initial act of reemplacement. However, this reemplacement is temporary/unfinished,

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9. Doyle, 218-9.

and so a repetition of this event must take place. Doyle writes that reemplacement "climaxes when the community women come directly to Sethe's door, see her daughterly ghost, and sing."[10] Self, belonging, and future are reaffirmed through a radical act of community, through "a ring of emplacing others who catch [Sethe] as she falls."[11]

In her reading of *Beloved*, Doyle demonstrates the importance of the body and the history that it bears; but at the same time, she sees the body as a way forward, as a means of reckoning with the past but claiming life and belonging—in the present, and for the future. Moreover, Doyle demonstrates a longing for solidarity that is aware of difference, but that builds community literally *around* that difference.[12] The physical space of the Clearing is read as a metaphor for an encircling of difference; and Doyle

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10. Doyle, 229.

11. Doyle, 229.

12. This understanding of solidarity seems in keeping with Roseann Liu and Savannah Shange's more recent theorization of "thick solidarity," which they define as "a kind of solidarity that mobilizes empathy in ways that do not gloss over difference" and one that is "based in a radical belief in the inherent value of each other's lives despite never being able to fully understand or fully share in the experience of those lives." The drive towards unification is accompanied, importantly, with a respect for histories and a desire to listen: "Thick solidarity layers interpersonal empathy with historical analysis, political acumen, and a willingness to be led by those most directly impacted. It is a thickness that can withstand the tension of critique, the pulling back and forth between that which we owe and that which we share." Roseann Liu and Savannah Shange, "Toward Thick Solidarity: Theorizing Empathy in Social Justice Movements," *Radical History Review*, no. 131 (2018): 190, 196.

further uses this literary example as an allegory for the ways in which scholars/writers can work with and towards each other, displaying an awareness of their difference but acting intentionally around their intercorporeality. In fact, she argues that our very awareness of ourselves as separate bodies is what allows us to see and communicate with each other. She states that "the invisible distance between us both separates and joins us."[13] Her "Conclusion" can be read as a manifesto, of sorts, describing herself and her intentions to write/act in solidarity with others whose values and whose envisioning of the world she shares. She writes first of the need to acknowledge "one's own subject position" as a "way of grounding one's theory" and referring to one's position in the various realms of our reality.[14] But rather than re-inscribing social boundaries, Doyle points to the potential inherent in the very act of writing, in that "our writing bodies transgress the borders constructed among us."[15]

Just as Nash and Hemmings emphasize the importance of the "stories we tell," Doyle affirms the power of discourse to reshape our worlds; in other words, new ways of *being* and new ways of *saying* are mutually constitutive. Writing is particularly effective because it is a reflection of self in communication with others; it is a bridge between self and community, just as it bridges ideological and material worlds.

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13. Doyle, *Bordering on the Body*, 233.

14. Doyle, 232.

15. Doyle, 233.

However, just as is demonstrated through the necessary return to the Clearing in *Beloved*, attempts at solidarity in the real world are often thwarted and undone, and must be reestablished and/or reattempted. It is within this liminal state of possibility that I write this dissertation, with the hope that the thoughtful practice of sharing words, reading closely, and touching hands (literally or metaphorically) is at least as impactful as anything that might make us afraid of being vulnerable.[16]

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16. In her quite famous TED Talk, "The Power of Vulnerability," Brené Brown argues that vulnerability is the key to meaningful human connections and leading authentic, fulfilling lives. She argues that people operating with a sense of "worthiness" and belonging embrace vulnerability, while those operating with shame find it "excruciating." My project does not lean too heavily on Brown's formulation, especially since mine is interested in social systems that complicate "authenticity" and, perhaps, the root causes of shame; moreover, my use of vulnerability is less focused on the individual, in the traditional self-help sense, and more centered on the social/collective. Still, I certainly do not oppose Brown's overall message and see it fitting to cite her here. Brené Brown, "The Power of Vulnerability," TEDxHouston, June 2010, video, https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability/up-next?language=en.

Chapter 2: Taking "Care" Seriously: Racial Trauma, Pained Bodies, and the Responsibilities of Poetry

As indicated in my Interlude, this chapter explores and problematizes conceptual poetry, a twenty-first century movement which, much like that of the open field, has sought to reimagine how poetry is created, talked about, and read. I do not intend to make many generalizable statements about conceptual poetry writ large, since I recognize the extensiveness of the field and the plurality of its adherents, some of whom incorporate practices and perspectives that resist what I take to be the normative or default limitations of the genre. That is to say that conceptual poetry, in and of itself, is not necessarily antiblack or patriarchal;[1] however, some of its tenets and stated aims (at least according to major players in the field) certainly stem from and lend themselves to a worldview centered on white men. Just as Diane di Prima made inroads into some unsettling "open field" territory, so too have poets utilized conceptual poetry for

1. Here, I am particularly cognizant of (and sympathetic to) Trisha Low's dismay, as a conceptual poet herself, at "how an aesthetic affiliation has become conflated with the polemic and practice of . . . specific individuals"—hence my repeated caveats that I do not wish to lump all writers who consider themselves conceptual poets together in the same group, though I do wish to call into question certain tenets of the movement/genre that buttressed both Goldsmith's performance and his subsequent justifications. Trisha Low, "On Being-Hated: Conceptualism, the Mongrel Coalition, the House That Built Me," Open Space, May 20, 2015, https://openspace.sfmoma.org/2015/05/on-being-hated-conceptualism-the-mongrel-coalition-the-house-that-built-me/.

revolutionary aims. With this in mind, I seek to analyze certain emblematic instances of conceptual poetry as it intersects with race, pain, and the contemporary (digital) world.

Much of this chapter is given to close-reading a particular, notorious poetry performance by a well-known conceptual poet, Kenneth Goldsmith, and the considerable back-and-forth between him and other poets, journalists, activists, and critics who questioned the ethics of his performance. This discourse, largely online, serves as a generative touchpoint for my project because it raises important questions about the role of poetry, the responsibilities of the author/artist, and certain boundaries and transgressions that might be felt even more keenly in today's technology-driven and hyper-connected world. I take this instance as a case study, one that exemplifies the tensions between artists who claim to be affectively detached and separate from both history and present-day politics, and audiences who, by contrast, demand accountability and feeling. Moreover, the focus on Kenneth Goldsmith as a case study for conceptual poetry is all the more apt since he co-edited, along with Craig Dworkin, the collection *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, which sought to define and characterize the genre through a selection of works and through their own exposition, laid out in their introductions.[2]

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2. Craig Dworkin, "The Fate of Echo," and Kenneth Goldsmith, "Why Conceptual Writing? Why Now?" in *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, eds. Kenneth Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2011), xvii-liv.

While an accounting of Kenneth Goldsmith's performance is woven throughout, this chapter is not intended as a tirade against an individual, but as a critique of a larger issue—mainly, the troping of trauma precisely because it hurts, and the simultaneous, contradictory discounting of emotion and expressed pain. In addition to analyzing Goldsmith's performance and direct reactions to it, I also place this dialogue in (further) conversation with scholarship in the fields of poetry, digital media, Black studies, and feminism to further understand its impact. I consider discussions of identity, positionality, and the body, and ultimately center on the lack of care that Goldsmith shows towards the subject of his art and the histories with which it is entangled—a failing that I dissect, critique, and counter with my own close readings and care praxis.

The subject of Goldsmith's performance, and of this chapter, is highly charged and potentially triggering; I therefore want to hold space in these pages for hurt and for anger, which feminist scholars such as Brittney Cooper, Rebecca Traister, and Soraya Chemaly have embraced as a valid, necessary, and potentially revolutionary affect/emotion.[3] I also want to repeat my call for *care*—a concept informed by the "ethics of care" that a number of feminist scholars have elaborated. I have in mind Carol Gilligan, referred to as the "originator" of the feminist ethics of care, and Nel Noddings,

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3. See Cooper's *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower*, Traister's *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger*, and Chemaly's *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women's Anger*.

whose approach to ethics differed from traditional philosophies in that it was "rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness" rather than emotionless Reason.[4] I also acknowledge the work of Sara Ruddick, Virginia Held, and Eva Feder Kittay, whose insights into care were informed by their experiences as mothers and/or their analysis of that role, and whose theories have centered dependency, reflectiveness, and the political (global) applications of practicing care. Joan Tronto has continued this theoretical work, extending the framework of care to include people of all genders, and has helpfully suggested "four phases of care, each of which . . . has a concomitant virtue: caring about, attentiveness; taking care of, responsibility; care-giving, competence; and care-receiving, responsiveness."[5] In 2013, citing Selma Sevenhuijsen as her inspiration, she added a fifth phase and complementary set of qualities: "plurality, communication, trust and respect; solidarity—caring with."[6] These various contributions to theorizing care, especially as I have summarized them here, direct my explorations and remind me of this dissertation's indebtedness to feminist studies.

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4. Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 2.

5. Joan C. Tronto, "Care as a Basis for Radical Political Judgments," *Hypatia* 10, no. 2 (1995): 142.

6. Tronto, *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 34-5.

Despite these many touchstones, my own call for care is perhaps most influenced by Christina Sharpe's relatively recent concept of "wake work,"[7] which encapsulates the mental alertness, emotional intelligence and sensitivity, and active, protective stance towards other vulnerable living beings (both human and nonhuman) that, to my mind, makes the concept of care so evocative, effective, and ultimately worthwhile. Sharpe's concept, in turn, owes much to the work of Saidiya Hartman, whose carefulness towards vulnerability and whose concept of "critical fabulation" I also hope to highlight and model.[8] Both emphasize the importance of understanding and remembering history, which is likewise key to my conception of care in its personal and political dimensions. Finally, as a white woman scholar thinking about, discussing, and writing on these issues, I want to take care myself to recognize my own positionality, while at the same time affirming my commitment to being in community/solidarity with others seeking to resist the racist, capitalist, and patriarchal systems we are mired in.

A Case Study

Though several years have passed since Kenneth Goldsmith's reading of "The Body of Michael Brown" in March 2015, his half-hour performance still stands out not as an exceptional but as an exemplary instance of scandal surrounding the work of an

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7. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

8. Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1-14.

artist. Seven months after the event, it was the principal subject of an article in *The New Yorker*, with the tagline suggesting that Goldsmith perhaps stretched the paradigm of conceptual poetry “too far.”[9] Similarly, when asked of his intentions for the piece, among Goldsmith’s many defenses was the following statement: “It had a lot of power, the kind of thing that happens all the time in the art world. People behave very badly in the art world, but it’s what pushes boundaries and makes discussion.”[10] Less than a year before, 18-year-old Mike Brown had been murdered by a white police officer, his body left in the street for hours after; Goldsmith read the first of Brown’s two autopsy reports as his poem, making minor changes to “massage” the text and “transform [it] into literature.”[11] The public outcry that followed was not directed vaguely “at art,” but at this particular work and at Goldsmith’s attitude/relationship towards it. And yet, Goldsmith’s explanation here is seemingly a defense of art, or at least a demand that his work be taken as art and therefore not subject to the expectations and critiques of larger society, outside of the art world.

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9. Alec Wilkinson, “Something Borrowed,” The New Yorker, October 5, 2015, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/10/05/something-borrowed-wilkinson.

10. Wilkinson.

11. Jillian Steinhauer, “Kenneth Goldsmith Remixes Michael Brown Autopsy Report as Poetry,” Hyperallergic, March 16, 2015, www.hyperallergic.com/190954/kenneth-goldsmith-remixes-michael-brown-autopsy-report-as-poetry/#sidr.

Of course, Goldsmith's critics were not just Twitter users and liberal activists, but many fellow artists as well. (And indeed, Goldsmith's statement implies that art, activism, and Twitter do not have considerable overlap, belying the assumption that art is shut away in an ivory tower.) Most notable among artists' responses is a blog post by CAConrad published on the Poetry Foundation's website, in which the voices of twenty-nine poets come together in rejection of Goldsmith's reading and his subsequent self-defenses.[12] It becomes apparent, then, that the issue is not between art and everything else, but is instead centered on a larger question that bridges these two worlds—the question of whether, and to what extent, one should be responsible for their own "bad behavior."

This divide is a broader social issue, and one that has recently been brought into focus through #MeToo, a social media hashtag that went viral in October 2018 in response to sexual assault allegations against Harvey Weinstein. While bad behavior (code here for sexual harassment and assault, in the workplace and elsewhere) is routinely masked or defended, #MeToo has brought about a level of accountability that has stripped famous individuals of titles and jobs.[13] I do not mean to suggest that the

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12. CAConrad, "Kenneth Goldsmith Says He Is an Outlaw," Poetry Foundation, June 1, 2015, www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2015/06/kenneth-goldsmith-says-he-is-an-outlaw.

13. Jessica Bennett, "The #MeToo Moment," *The New York Times* online, November 27, 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/11/30/us/the-metoo-moment.html.

#MeToo movement is a perfect analogue to the Kenneth Goldsmith debacle, especially since the former involves issues that are interpersonal and embodied, whereas the latter is embedded in aesthetics and mediated art. Even so, the example reminds us that what is at stake in the question of self-responsibility is not just conceptual poetry or even art as a whole, but ourselves as social beings with individual agency who nonetheless exist and operate relationally, with certain responsibilities to each other. This relationality, and the imperatives of ethics and care, are precisely what this chapter seeks to clarify and advocate for.

Though I employ close reading throughout my chapter, I do not reproduce any portion of Goldsmith's performance or offer much in terms of description, except to say that his poem appropriates the first autopsy report conducted on Michael Brown's body, with the text slightly reordered for a more shocking effect. I discuss the immediate context in which the poem is delivered (read aloud on stage, so the main visual is Goldsmith himself and the words are sonically transmitted) but am much more interested in the historical contexts that inform and frame the piece. I choose to omit direct reproduction for much the same reason that I no longer watch recordings of the deaths or brutalizations of people of color at the hands of police; at this stage I am well aware of racism (and the need to defund systems that operate with and through racist violence) and have seen enough examples of it that I do not find it educational or strengthening. Furthermore, my "witnessing" of the event by merely consuming it

would be quite feeble, since I am not in a position to intervene for the victim or alleviate/redress the pain it has caused. And I am cognizant of my readers, with whom I hope to discuss and practice an ethics of care, which begins with this small act of weighing consequences and disrupting a needless recirculation of trauma.

The Artist Re-corporealized

"The Body of Michael Brown" and the conversations that followed foreground the issue of care/caring, creating space to rethink the role of art and the responsibilities of the artist. We can understand "care" as both a noun (a form of labor) and a verb (an active doing); both of these are predicated on the adjective "caring" as an attitude. While conceptual poetry (as defined in Craig Dworkin's "The Fate of Echo") asserts the "irrelevance" of the artist to the art object—somewhat echoing Roland Barthes' famously-proclaimed "death of the author"[14]—Goldsmith's case makes it abundantly clear that the artist is, in fact, standing right in front of us, subject to critique or applause. The physical presence of the artist standing there, performing live before an audience, draws fresh attention to the subject speaking and to the intentions and motivations that the subject position characteristically implies. Confronted with the artist's presence, one is reminded of the body itself, of its various relations to other bodies, and of the socio-historical implications of those relations.

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14. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 142-8.

Crucially, Goldsmith's is not the only body placed front-and-center in his reading of a deceased teenager's autopsy report; the body of Michael Brown is both the title and the subject of the piece, and is, moreover, the object of racialized violence and lethal trauma. To interpret this piece and the anger it incited requires an examination of how the body in pain—especially the Black body in pain—has been historically circulated, consumed, and appropriated and continues to be so in the present day. According to Goldsmith, "Any notion of history has been leveled by the internet. Now, it's all fodder for the remix and recreation of works of art: free-floating toolboxes and strategies unmoored from context or historicity."[15] But while the Internet certainly increases information and renders it more readily accessible, it does not empty materials of meaning or erase the past. This chapter argues that conceptual poetry, moored as it is in the Digital Age, does not eliminate issues of ethics, ownership, and authorial intent, but instead reinvigorates them, inviting us to take the concept of "care" seriously and expect this type of responsible labor from the artist.

While Goldsmith's reading serves as the primary example in this essay, it is important to first acknowledge that it was not a singular event, nor was it the first time that ethical dilemmas around horror and the body in pain have been introduced. In

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15. Amy King, "Why Are People So Invested in Kenneth Goldsmith? Or, Is Colonialist Poetry Easy?" VIDA Web, March 18, 2015, www.vidaweb.org/why-are-people-so-invested-in-kenneth-goldsmith-or-is-colonialist-poetry-easy/.

Regarding the Pain of Others, Susan Sontag traces the human "appetite for sights of degradation and pain and mutilation" at least as far back as Plato's day,[16] and she uses this evidence to critique the widespread sharing of such images via photographs in the contemporary moment.[17] While such sharing is often done under the guise of a humanitarian "witnessing," Sontag suggests that these sympathetic urges exist side-by-side with (and are sometimes trumped by) a pornographic interest. She writes, "It seems that the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked."[18] The question that opens Sontag's third chapter ("What does it mean to protest suffering, as distinct from acknowledging it?") is, in fact, a recurring quandary across time periods and across different media/genres as well. In her essay "Small Change," Heather Love sums up Monique Claire Vescia's account of the 1930s arts scene, stating, "Vescia argues that both a particular quality of objectification (attention to actualities, presentation rather than representation, and a stance of neutral distance) and a set of difficult ethical questions (since the poet observes and documents scenes of suffering rather than intervenes in them) were shared across media in this

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16. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador Books, 2003), 57.

17. Sontag's point informs my decision, stated previously, to not pore over and reproduce Goldsmith's performance for my readers.

18. Sontag, 28.

period."[19] Love herself directly connects these "ethical questions" to contemporary conceptual poetry, with its use of "found text" and its insistence on an authorial distance that might even verge on "coldness."[20] Goldsmith's reading, then, is situated in a longer trend of art (older than conceptual poetry) that presents suffering experienced by someone else; but in the Digital Age, the scene of suffering is reproduced to infinity, so that the event that has already been suffered is sufferable again, and again, and again.

But who is suffering? Or, to borrow poet and critic Sueyeun Juliette Lee's provocative questions in her essay on conceptual poetry, "Who cares? And why?"[21] The trouble is that the "sharing" of images or narratives of pain is completely possible without sharing in the pain itself, especially when the very praxis of conceptual poetry "allows the author to seemingly remain unaffected by its content."[22] The "neutral distance" described by Vescia then becomes itself a form of violence—albeit not a physical, visceral violence, but a metaphysical one that captures, appropriates, and widely disseminates the suffering of "Others" while maintaining the Self as distinct

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19. Heather Love, "Small Change: Realism, Immanence, and the Politics of the Micro," *Modern Language Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (2016): 441.

20. Love, 440.

21. Sueyeun Juliette Lee, "Shock and Blah: Offensive Postures in 'Conceptual' Poetry and the Traumatic Stuplime," The Volta, May 2014, www.thevolta.org/ewc41-sjlee-p1.html.

22. Lee.

from, not subject to, or perhaps "above" that suffering; it is an ontological violence, setting the Self up against Others, instead of recognizing and honoring the relationships between social beings.[23] In the case of Michael Brown, "capture" takes on a particular symbolic resonance, if one considers: his direct confrontation with Dorian Johnson, the white police officer who, without actually "arresting" him, ended his life in a series of gunshots; and, the image of the Black body historically inscribed as captive slave. While some might imagine these two dimensions as separate, the former is resolutely connected to the latter. To quote Saidiya Hartman, "This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death,

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23. On this point, I am drawn to the concept of paraontology, first coined by Oskar Becker, but more recently elaborated in the field of Black studies by Nahum Chandler, Fred Moten, Calvin Warren, and J. Kameron Carter. According to these thinkers, paraontology replaces the more traditional, essentializing concept of ontology that understands the Self as a contained being, and which threatens to reduce the totality of Black existence to the oppressed subject position. Writers working in paraontology affirm that Blackness exists in excess of anti-Blackness and therefore disrupt the re-centering of the white body as the ontological Self and the Black body as Other. Calvin L. Warren, "Black Mysticism: Fred Moten's Phenomenology of (Black) Spirit," *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 65, no. 2 (2017): 219-29.

In *Sentient Flesh*, R.A. Judy offers the related, but competing, concept of para-semiosis. A conversation between Judy and Fred Moten somewhat summarizes both of these terms. I do not delve too deep into the weeds for fear of taking this dissertation in a different direction, but I do sense some through-lines between this conversation and some of Nash's warnings against centering Black death at the expense of Black vitality. Boundary2, "Of Human Flesh: An Interview with R.A. Judy by Fred Moten," b20: an online journal, May 6, 2020, http://www.boundary2.org/2020/05/of-human-flesh-an-interview-with-r-a-judy-by-fred-moten/#.

incarceration, and impoverishment."[24] In the moments leading up to Mike Brown's death, it mattered that his body was Black; that is supposedly why Johnson "had reason" to consider him suspect, to match his body to the description of someone who had broken the law.[25] His Black body likewise mattered when an image of him surfaced on the news, and he was immediately labeled a "thug." We can therefore assume that the Black body still has meaning—meaning that certainly does not disappear in Goldsmith's "reframing" but is instead intensified by his presence as a white man onstage. The way that Goldsmith's piece reads to those watching thus becomes irreconcilable with the tenets of conceptual art, which have positioned the artist in "oblique relation to the art object."[26] In Goldsmith's case, the artist, body and all, is inextricably linked to the "other" body that he takes as his (art) object.

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24. Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 6.

25. I am reminded of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric,* wherein Rankin demonstrates that the notion of "black man" as always-suspect becomes its own self-fulfilling prophecy, leading to and justifying more arrests of black men. Rankine writes: "And you are not the guy and still you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description." Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric,* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014), 105.

26. Craig Dworkin, "The Fate of Echo," xxxii.

The Black body made object, "laid bare" and vulnerable to violence, is all too familiar whether one opens a history book or turns on the news.[27] This familiarity aligns well with the repetitive nature of conceptual poetry. In "Art, Work, Endlessness: Flarf and Conceptual Poetry among the Trolls," Jasper Bernes writes: "In place of critique, we find a pure repetition: of the workday, the news, the violence of the state, the injuries of history."[28] (That the workday of a white-collar employee finds itself in the same sentence as "the injuries of history" is disturbing—an astute reminder, it seems, of the way that Goldsmith imagines all of history to be "leveled by the internet.") The ability to merely repeat a violence directed at someone else, without the burden of intervening or altering its course, might be understood as a way of wielding power, or of asserting one's non-vulnerability. In other words, there is privilege in being removed from pain and of not bearing responsibility towards it.[29] Poet Marcella Durand offers her reaction to Goldsmith's repeated violence in verse form: "The problem was that he began / with death and then dissected the dead / even further, declaring the body mute." She

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27. This reality became further emphasized for many in the summer of 2020, which saw a great social reckoning with racism as protests erupted following the police killing of George Floyd.

28. Jasper Bernes, "Art, Work, Endlessness: Flarf and Conceptual Poetry among the Trolls," *Critical Inquiry* 42 (2016): 779.

29. M. NourbeSe Philip provides an excellent example of what "bearing responsibility" towards pain in one's poetry can look like, especially in her book-length poem *Zong!*, which I discuss in the following chapter. M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).

continues, “there is / no poem when the poem begins and ends / exactly where it started.”[30]

Goldsmith’s “reframing” of the autopsy report can be said to end “exactly where it started” not only in that he makes very few changes, but also in that the changes he does make and his brief preface to the reading are repetitions of historical racial violence. Before beginning, “He announced that he would read a poem about the quantified self, meaning one that catalogued the evidence obtained from the close examination of a body.”[31] His notion of “*the* quantified self” seems vague and unspecific, universal even. It is especially troubling when one considers the way in which Black bodies specifically were “quantified” aboard the slave ship, gender and personhood denied in favor of a base acknowledgement of how much space they took up.[32] His version of the “quantified self” also ignores how Black lives were valued in dollar amounts on auction blocks, or how they were once seen as three-fifths of a person by the United States’ government. Durand’s word “dissected” is fitting in light of this fractioning of Black people; it also reinforces many individuals’ objections to Goldsmith’s decision to conclude with the description of Mike Brown’s genitals, even

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30. CAConrad, “Kenneth Goldsmith Says He Is an Outlaw.”

31. Wilkinson, “Something Borrowed.”

32. Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 72.

though the original autopsy report did not end there. Poet and literary journalist Amy King writes, "It is difficult not to associate this final note with the brutality also focused on the genitalia of black men during lynchings—and the sustained effects of that bodily focus on people of color carried on today."[33] The focus on his genitals conjures images of the Black man's supposed hyper-virility or his castration, neither of which works in any way to reinstate the humanity/personhood of Mike Brown.

Care and the Body

Notably, there seems to be some unresolvable paradox around whether Goldsmith's reading is pure repetition or significantly altered; but in either case, it is rife with carelessness, and that is precisely the resounding critique. CAConrad writes, "It is as if you want to embarrass those of us who give a shit about the world, like you are too cool to care and we are a bunch of losers for caring. . . . What we need are concepts to resolve these problems where real human bodies are at stake because the meanness you possess is a form of decadence this world can no longer afford."[34] Here, the demand for care is closely intertwined with the invocation of bodies, just as questions of authorial intent and ethical obligation were earlier said to emerge with the bodies of Goldsmith and Mike Brown. Thus, the corporal can be seen as a driving force for the recognition of

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33. King, "Why Are People So Invested in Kenneth Goldsmith?"

34. CAConrad, "Kenneth Goldsmith Says He Is an Outlaw."

humanity—a reminder of personhood, instated or denied. So, when does the body become a site of re-formation, rather than mere spectacle? When does it move from an object of violence to a subject whose suffering we can grieve?

These questions are not easily answered, especially given the unsettling linkage between images of mangled bodies and voyeuristic pleasure.[35] To some extent, this fraught relationship to the body in pain relates to contrasting definitions of "witness"—whether the noun refers to one who merely sees an event take place, or one who is called upon to give evidence or testify.[36] The former implies passive consumption, while the latter demands an active labor, wherein one undertakes a duty towards another.[37]

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35. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 29.

36. "witness," Merriam-Webster, last modified 2021, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/witness.

37. The Black Church and the larger Pentecostal tradition give added significance to the words "testify" and witness," which can both involve sharing a personal account of spiritual transformation or miraculous intervention before the congregation, declaring the work of God. To relate it to the framework I lay out above, this practice is meant to move beyond passive consumption of religious teachings in favor of an active, expressive labor affirming those teachings.

In the Black Church tradition, testifying and witnessing are part of a system of call and response. This dynamic process is described in *Spoken Soul*, which states: "Congregations and preachers alike are governed by a spiral of conventionalized social cues—both spoken and acted out—within the worship service. The minister sets the spiral in motion by using one or more of the evocative rhetorical tools available, or by overtly seeking feedback from the congregation (Can I get a witness?). Worshippers receive the message and respond (by standing, clapping, testifying, waving, stomping, nodding their heads, . . . or letting loose to a Hallelujah)." John R. Rickford and Russell John Rickford, *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English* (New York: Wiley, 2000), 50. In *Black Church Studies*, Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas stresses that this is an active, not a

Turning again to Hartman, we can understand this labor as the "endeavor to heal the flesh and redress the pained body."[38] Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* focuses specifically on the Black body in America, emphasizing the role of history in her praxis of "redress." She writes:

> Redressing the pained body encompasses operating in and against the demands of the system, negotiating the disciplinary harnessing of the body, and counterinvesting in the body as a site of possibility. In this instance, pain must be recognized in its historicity and as the articulation of a social condition of brutal constraint, extreme need, and constant violence; in other words, it is the perpetual condition of ravishment. . . . This pain might best be described as the history that hurts—the still-unfolding narrative of captivity, dispossession, and domination that engenders the black subject in the Americas.[39]

Hartman's "redressing" of the body signifies an attempt at remedy, and it offers a powerful alternative to the body "laid bare" as it is in Goldsmith's reading. Hartman's

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passive, experience. She writes: "The worshipers' response of 'talking back' to the preacher is action based on the worshipers listening both to what is said and to the self. This method of involvement of Black worshippers reveals that they are not passive listeners who fail to recognize the flow of language, thought, and the feelings of the pastor, self and others." Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, *Black Church Studies: An Introduction* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 192. On the contrary, as Henry H. Mitchell writes in Black Preaching, "when content and imaginative delivery grips a congregation, the ensuing dialogue between preacher and people is the epitome of creative worship." Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), 98.

38. Saidiya Hartman, "Redressing the Pained Body: Toward a Theory of Practice," in *Scenes of Subjection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 75.

39. Hartman, 51.

theory also makes room for the paradox introduced earlier, wherein the body is the locus of brutal dehumanization but also (potentially) of rehumanization.[40] When the body is what hurts, it cannot disappear entirely from the conceptual framework of healing. One returns to the body as to a grave; here lies a person, lost.

This invocation of the body, as it once belonged to a person, is the work of grieving—the work missing from Goldsmith's reading of Brown's autopsy report. In order to grieve, one must be affected in some way. This is not to say that the artist/poet must have directly experienced a particular suffering in order to write about it; indeed, I do not believe that the only way to speak is as a representative of one's own respective community. However, it is parasitic to read a text that features the audience's pain but does not leave space for the artist's own admission of feeling, let alone his concentrated empathy. Goldsmith would have himself written completely out of his texts, directed only by his own firm procedures, beholden to no one. Dworkin, his co-editor in *Against Expression*, boasts in the collection's introduction that the by-product of such methodology/procedure is "unexpectedly, heartbreakingly raw emotion, undiluted by even a trace of sentiment."[41] It is not sentimentality—which implies an exaggeration of or over-reliance on feeling—but indeed, feeling itself that is rejected as something that would taint the project of conceptual poetry. That is, according to Dworkin and

40. Hartman, 77.

41. Dworkin, "The Fate of Echo," xlv.

Goldsmith, conceptual poets must necessarily be unfeeling, or must drain themselves of emotion. However, if the emotion is not their own, it is someone else's. It is not just words they are appropriating, but the very human feelings and experiences behind them. Goldsmith claims that this enables him to reframe existing texts "to greater effect than any subjective interpretation could lend."[42] If by "effect" he means mere shock, then I might agree, but this schema releases him from doing any other work besides. It also allows him to maintain control, since he is free to play off others' vulnerability without making himself likewise vulnerable. It is a taking without any give, a lack of reciprocity.

Moreover, that Goldsmith's piece seems to rely so fully on the pain of "the Other," specifically of the Black body, hauntingly aligns it with history's colonialist project. Poet Lucas de Lima writes, "His embodiment of [the avant-garde's colonial] fantasy required Michael Brown's disembodiment, the cancellation of Black suffering through self-possessed language. Goldsmith's failure to renounce control—and grieve beside himself—is the refusal of an entire poetic tradition to exit the master's house by imagining the latter's destruction. What is it like to be given over to the hands of others? Decolonization is the question they won't entertain."[43] The withholding of grief operates

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42. Wilkinson, "Something Borrowed."

43. CAConrad, "Kenneth Goldsmith Says He Is an Outlaw."

not as a safeguard for "undiluted" art, as Dworkin would have it, but as a way for the "master" to keep the Other under his heel.[44]

At every turn, Goldsmith's piece reminds us of a history that we might rather forget—and that Goldsmith himself does nothing to account for. This repression of history when it is so obviously relevant produces a feeling of the uncanny, which Freud has aptly described as the "return of the dead."[45] But the dead body in our midst, that of Mike Brown, is not reanimated; instead, it is "the past that is not past" which "reappears, always, to rupture the present."[46] Throughout *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being,* Christina Sharpe attends to the Black body by locating herself (and Black life more broadly) in the wake of slavery; she poetically plays on the word "wake," employing its various meanings to firmly connect her own being "in the wake" of the past to a "wakefulness" or vigilance towards the ongoing present. Similar to Hartman's "redressing of the body," Sharpe's "wake work" hopes to move beyond the conceptualization of Black life as a state of "abjection" and instead recognize it as a state

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44. The use of "master's house" in CAConrad's statement also echoes Audre Lorde's now-famous essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," which she first delivered at the 1979 Second Sex Conference in New York, and which was later published in her 1984 book *Sister Outsider*. Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," *Sister Outsider*: *Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg: Crossing Press, 1984), 106-109.

45. Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 154.

46. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 9.

of "consciousness."[47] Sharpe's own reframing of Mike Brown's death, unlike that of Goldsmith, denies neither the impact of history on the present day nor the importance of emotion; and unlike Goldsmith, she takes full responsibility, performing the very wake work she calls for by continually placing what might be thought of as "singular" events in the context of larger, racialized trends. It is perhaps telling that Goldsmith chose to read the first autopsy report, whereas Sharpe elucidates the ways in which that first report was rooted in anti-Blackness. She writes:

> Think of the second autopsy ordered by the family of Michael Brown—the annotated report that shows the extent of his injuries. These necessary annotations were made by the medical examiner hired by the family to prove that there *was* injury and the extent of it; to show, in the face of the readily adopted language of black monstrosity embedded in the language of 'strong-arm robbery,' that he was not armed; to show that he was fleeing and gravely injured. Listen to how Darren Wilson's grand jury testimony evacuates *his* role as 'strong arm' of the law and state power falls away as the armed and trained cop is transformed by his proximity to blackness into a five-year-old child.[48]

Though I will skip reproducing that testimony here, Sharpe's call to "listen" to Wilson's words is a powerful call to slow down, pay attention, and rethink them, and it echoes the desire of Mike Brown's family to demand a second look in order to show their son in a humanizing light. By calling us to a more careful, more ethical attentiveness, such reframings go beyond repetitions that merely reproduce inhumanity. They offer

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47. Sharpe, 14.

48. Sharpe, 82.

something different. Sharpe provides "annotations," to use her own term, to explain and push back against the harms that inhere in Michael Brown's death, in the autopsy report that, by its nature, dissects the body, and in the media's attempts at assassinating Michael Brown's character, to justify his murder. Part of Sharpe's wake work here is the justice she does towards Mike Brown's parents as well, in showing that they, too, were performing wake work for their son in ordering the second autopsy and resisting both false and dehumanizing narratives.

As both Hartman and Sharpe have argued, the body may be the key to reinstating lost humanity; but a body without a history is just a spectacle. If the decontextualized body in pain had the ability to confront the root causes of the suffering, then the site of Mike Brown's literal body would have garnered more sympathy than it did. But Sharpe contends: "It was not enough to see Michael Brown's body uncovered in the street for hours on a hot August day, his mother and stepfather prevented from going to his side. It was not enough to see his mother's distress, to see and hear her scream and fall into the arms of family members."[49] Apparently "raw emotion" (which Dworkin proudly claims to find in conceptual poetry) is not always enough to move others. This brings us directly to the objections that Goldsmith's reading "was a 'spectacle' and it needed to be made meaningful in order to justify

49. Sharpe, 124.

happening."[50] Certainly, if the site of Mike Brown's body in the street was met with cold accusations of thuggishness and attempts to justify his death, and if the first autopsy report was employed to bolster these notions, it is unclear how a repetition of said autopsy report without any context would allow it to be "understood in a new light."[51] Interestingly enough, Goldsmith's piece seems to fall short even of the expectations that conceptual poetry sets for itself, considering Dworkin's claims that context "is everything" and that the "circumstance, as the adage has it, alters the case."[52] This inconsistency in the conceptualization of conceptual poetry—which, as the name suggests, is ironically all about the conceptual—belies the inattentiveness that undergirds Goldsmith's poem and performance. Given the stakes set up by his subject, this inattentiveness is not just sloppy, but unethical.

Case in Point: Blackness as Commodity

If all people and things are relational, or intercorporeal, then context is everything. Ironically, Dworkin himself upholds the importance of context in his defense of Goldsmith; but perhaps when he insists on "the importance of the institutions

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50. Steinhauer, "Kenneth Goldsmith Remixes Michael Brown Autopsy Report as Poetry."

51. Dworkin, "The Fate of Echo," xliv.

52. Dworkin, xliv.

within which a text is presented,"[53] he is not referring to social/historical institutions such as American slavery or modern-day policing systems, which would obviously frame Goldsmith's peculiar performance. Likewise, though I have attempted in the previous section to think outside of overly-identitarian terms, the concept and context of "appropriation" might have been given a bit more caution and thought, instead of being touted by Goldsmith as a harmless activity—one where no harm was done because the "found text" he used in his poem was publicly available. In response to numerous critiques, Goldsmith wrote on Twitter: "In the tradition of my previous book *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, I took a publicly available document from an American tragedy that was witnessed first-hand (in this case by the doctor performing the autopsy) and simply read it."[54] While *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* might certainly come with its own set of ethical questions, it is not necessary to weigh these two projects side-by-side but to instead notice how "publicly available" comes to signify "free for anyone and everyone's use, without any repercussions." Consideration is taken completely out of the equation; the artist has no obligation to think about his actions or anticipate how it might register to others.

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53. Dworkin, "The Fate of Echo," xliv.

54. Steinhauer, "Kenneth Goldsmith Remixes Michael Brown Autopsy Report as Poetry."

Inescapably, "appropriation" takes on a nefarious signification when it reinscribes the Black body (even in its mediated form) as property/commodity, available for any and all use. Appropriation itself raises two interconnected issues: entitlement and profit, where the former is a license and the latter is a material gain. Poet Jacqueline Valencia speaks to the former: "As a mixed woman with a Black father who has had his rights (and life) questioned because of the colour of his skin, we both grew up subtly being told that our bodies belonged for appropriation."[55] It is perhaps impossible to separate conceptual poetry's explicit appropriation of text/language from this more insidious appropriation of bodies when both are collapsed in Goldsmith's reading. To quote Twitter user Kima Jones, "Forget it bc Kenneth Goldsmith did a thing . . . made a thing . . .for a crowd . . . out of a black boy's dead body . . . he performed . . . and was paid well."[56] That the profit is made at another's expense (i.e., off someone's death and off the grief of a larger community) is especially troubling, because it (re)establishes a dichotomy wherein "white" and "living" are set in direct opposition to "black" and "dead." It belies the "constant production of Black death" rendered "necessary."[57]

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55. King, "Why Are People So Invested in Kenneth Goldsmith?"

56. Steinhauer, "Kenneth Goldsmith Remixes Michael Brown Autopsy Report as Poetry."

57. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 124.

Tracking back to the Middle Passage, where insurance originated to balance the risk of losing slaves at sea, Sharpe shows that Black death is expected, prepared for, and endorsed—always to the benefit of whiteness.[58] We might add the homophone "ensured." Bringing this necroeconomics into the present, Sharpe draws attention to the growing "list of nonindictments"—of Black people murdered at the hands of police—written with an asterisk at the end to anticipate the next name. She writes, "Again, Black being appears in the space of the asterisked human as the insurance for, as that which underwrites, white circulation as the human. Always, Black being seems lodged between cargo and being."[59] This echoes de Lima's point, mentioned earlier, that Goldsmith's "embodiment" of the avant-garde's colonialist fantasy "required Michael Brown's disembodiment."[60] In contrast to Mike Brown as a dead, dissected body, Goldsmith the poet was living, whole, and human. Goldsmith's appropriation reifies the Black body as not just property, but *insured* property—conveniently valuable even in death.

While these issues of appropriation, especially as they relate to the (dead) Black body, are historically rooted, they take on new life and language in the Digital Age. After all, conceptual poetry was conceived through and in reaction to the Internet, and it

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58. Sharpe, 29.

59. Sharpe, 110-111.

60. CAConrad, "Kenneth Goldsmith Says He Is an Outlaw."

operates along the assumption that since nearly everything is "sharable" it is therefore fair game and reframable as the poet's "own." Poet Oliver Strand writes: "Privilege commodifying murder, brutal and systematically racist state power as shareable content—Goldsmith's conceptualism is late capitalist poetry, American imperialist poetry that believes it owns whatever it wants."[61] Still rooted in the notion of Black people as property, the digital transmutes the historical master-slave relation to more "sophisticated" forms of ownership, less obvious and more diffuse. In his chapter "Between Now and Yet," Anthony Reed describes how the modern-day music industry has facilitated the use of Black expressions by white suburbanites. He writes, "Blackness and black culture become abstract and alienable—mere signs of commodity—separate from black people."[62] While Black people themselves are no longer counted as property in America (setting aside police brutality and prison labor, which disproportionately victimize Black Americans), "blackness and black culture" are, and the commodification of these latter two becomes a sort of fetishism. Reed continues: "In this case, fetishism implies that the extent to which the producers (and the conditions and relations of production) remain out of sight secures a certain social relation and self-understanding. One wants access to the 'soul' and is either indifferent to or anxious about the fate of the

61. CAConrad.

62. Anthony Reed, "Between Now and Yet: Postlyric Poetry and the Moment of Expression," in *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2014), 103.

body."[63] Notice that the "soul"—so often aligned with the innermost parts of the human, the deepest subjectivity—has been emptied of that meaning and is instead rendered "other than" the self. Reed means it in the sense that is often applied to Black music, to describe Black feeling or affect as it is imagined by white culture. It is an "unfaithful . . . copy," built again on the "opposition" between black and white, that serves as a "mask of rebellion and self-difference for a disaffected bourgeoisie."[64]

In short, Reed's argument implicates a capitalist system that commodifies Blackness and profits the more-or-less wealthy white. To bring this to bear on Goldsmith's case—we may not generally think of poets as privileged money-makers, but Goldsmith's position as a professor with tenure casts the situation in a very different light. While it is unlikely that his performance made money directly, it brought Goldsmith attention (a form of social and cultural capital) even if it turned out to be notoriety; and he was certainly protected from any real, material consequence since his tenure gives him job security and his actions were not illegal. As a result, though there is certainly a difference in scale between the multi-billion dollar industry that Reed is describing and Goldsmith's relatively modest circumstances, I argue that the rule still applies: Goldsmith traded in Blackness to increase his capital, and did not wish to be accountable.

63. Reed, 106.

64. Reed, 106.

The Gimmick

Goldsmith's piece is not quite the blackface that Reed describes, in that he does not assume Blackness but instead frames himself against it; even so, since the "effect" of his poem relies so heavily on this oppositional framing, we might understand it as a form of gimmick. Cultural theorist and literary critic Sianne Ngai describes the gimmick as a "specifically capitalist aesthetic phenomenon" that is "both a wonder *and* a trick."[65] Goldsmith's use of appropriation for profit is inextricably tied to capitalism, as both Reed and Strand have helped to demonstrate. As for it being "both a wonder *and* a trick"—it seems to fulfill this paradox in that it rides on the "raw emotion" (Dworkin's words) of Michael Brown's body and death without performing any emotional labor itself. Pulling from the work of Sontag, Hartman, and Sharpe, this chapter has already discussed the layers of signification inscribed upon the Black body in pain, which give it social, psychological, and pornographic appeal. Blackness and Black pain become gimmicks in Goldsmith's reading in that he is able to use them as "artistic" shortcuts.

But Blackness is not the first gimmick that Goldsmith has employed. Noting the decline of conceptual poetry in recent years, Wilkinson says of Goldsmith: "He wanted to hold the stage a bit longer. What would help, he thought, was to find 'a hot text.'"[66] Moving away from more mundane materials, Goldsmith's "Seven American Deaths and

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65. Sianne Ngai, "Theory of the Gimmick," *Critical Inquiry* 43 (2017): 468-9.

66. Wilkinson, "Something Borrowed."

Disasters" included "eyewitness and reporters' accounts, taken from radio and television broadcasts, of the deaths of John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, John Lennon, and Michael Jackson, and from accounts of the Challenger explosion, the Columbine school shooting, and 9/11."[67] His reading of Mike Brown's first autopsy report marks a transition from broader American trauma to specifically Black American trauma. Afterwards, he admitted: "I'm still interested in strong material that may provoke. I don't want to shy away from it. I tried. I'm an experimental artist, and I failed, on a very big stage. I wanted to work with hotter material, and this was so hot it blew up in my face."[68]

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67. Wilkinson.

68. I first associated "hot text" and "hotter material" with the concept of the "hot take," which Merriam-Webster defines as "a quickly produced, strongly worded, and often deliberately provocative or sensational opinion or reaction (as in response to current news)." (Anyone familiar with angry tweets by a former president or sitting Republican congressman should recognize the concept.) The "hot" in "hot text" seems, then, to signify the recency or cultural relevance of the subject, as well as the quickness and thoughtlessness of Goldsmith's use of or response to it. This reading might be fortified, however, by considering Marshall McLuhan's concept of "hot media" in *Understanding Media*, especially since Goldsmith's poem is (supposedly) an aesthetic/mediated object. In the chapter "Media Hot and Cold," McLuhan defines a hot medium as "one that extends one single sense in 'high definition,'" which means that a great amount of data/detail is provided. It does not generally engage other senses but rather over-stimulates one, and it involves relatively little active participation on the part of the receiver, since so much detail is given that it need not be supplied. This complements my earlier point about passive consumption vs. active labor, and I think it can be applied to both Goldsmith's process of writing the poem and what he is asking of/allowing the audience. As a performed piece, Goldsmith's poem is a hot medium in that it overstimulates the ear with graphic detail—designed to shock when consumed,

The difference, then, is that while the gimmick described by Ngai is merely "irritating," the gimmick built around Blackness and trauma in America was received as grossly offensive. Furthermore, Ngai theorizes the gimmick as a device that saves labor in a mostly economic sense; Goldsmith's gimmick is, of course, partly economic in that he accrues wealth and notoriety through his publications/performances, but it is more considerably the labor of care that is bypassed. Goldsmith's own admission of interest in using "hotter materials" makes it clear that the very *idea*—that most crucial component of conceptual art and poetry—was gimmicky; the "poem" was not just poorly executed, but poorly conceived. It was a cheap attempt to "hold the stage" by restaging someone else's grief. However, Goldsmith's was not the first conceptual poem to use trauma in this way, though it might be the one to have received the most attention and provoked the most outrage. Sueyeun Juliette Lee's "Shock and Blah: Offensive Postures in 'Conceptual' Poetry and the Traumatic Stuplime" shows that this gimmicking of trauma was already a trend of the genre in 2013.[69] She writes, "Would this work acquire the

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rather than to actively engage listeners' faculties and leave room for some new revelation or interpretation (as Sharpe's work, by contrast, does). Goldsmith's performance involves the listener, against their will, in a lack of care that does not actively witness to but merely tropes on Black pain. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Signet Books, 1964), 36.

69. "Stuplimity" is a word formulated by Sianne Ngai in a 2000 essay and later extended in her 2005 book *Ugly Feelings*. Combining the word "sublimity" with

same interest if it didn't invoke or ride upon trauma's wake? I can't help but see how these provocations—these offensive gestures—can be seen as cynical means for drawing attention to work that might otherwise not spawn much debate."[70] So while Goldsmith attempts to frame his appropriation of the "hot text" as art that "pushes boundaries," it is more like a ploy to draw a crowd in what might be the only way he knows how.

But if Goldsmith's conceptualization of his reading was gimmicky, his multiple defenses of his work and the ways he describes himself as an artist are perhaps even more so; these become "paratexts" that "suggest a perspective from which to read."[71] In particular, it is offensive *and* "irritating" (to repeat Ngai's word) when Goldsmith deflects criticism of his privilege, carelessness, or offensiveness by: making himself a martyr for free speech; or, implying that his critics simply don't "get art." In their blog post, CAConrad derides Goldsmith's attempts to "appear edgy" by calling himself an "outlaw" when he is obviously one of the best-known conceptual poets and has even

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"stupefaction," Ngai describes the stuplime as "a syncretism of boredom and astonishment, of what 'dulls' with what 'irritates' or agitates, of excessive excitation with extreme desensitization or fatigue." Sianne Ngai, "Stuplimity: Shock and Boredom in Twentieth-Century Aesthetics," *Postmodern Culture* 10, no. 2 (2000), doi: 10.1353/pmc.2000.0013.

70. Lee, "Shock and Blah."

71. Dworkin, "The Fate of Echo," xxiv.

been “granted an audience with the president of the United States.”[72] It is ironic that Goldsmith would label himself with a word that could mean “a fugitive” or one who is “excluded from the benefits and protections of the law,”[73] when those meanings are painfully apt descriptions of Mike Brown and Black people through history. That Goldsmith does not share these vulnerabilities, yet restages and profits from them, is precisely why people were angry.

Moreover, whether intentional or not, Goldsmith’s use of the term “outlaw” is resonant with the heroization of the cowboy in American culture—a heroization that became especially prominent in post-Civil War society as part of a nationalist project, and one that still persists today. In his article “The ‘Wild West’: The Life and Death of a Myth,” Paul Christensen writes that the popularity of the evolving “frontier myth” since the 1860s reveals much about “our national character” and “its essentially conservative bias as a glorification of European racial stock encountering primitive indigenes and an anarchic wilderness.”[74] He characterizes the myth as such: “Male traditions are idealized and the Enlightenment rationality of Paris and London are compacted into the hero’s self-reliance, superior logic, and desire to break nature and rule over it as the

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72. CAConrad, “Kenneth Goldsmith Says He Is an Outlaw.”

73. “outlaw,” Dictionary, last modified 2021, https://www.dictionary.com/browse/outlaw?s=t.

74. Paul Christensen, “The ‘Wild West’: The Life and Death of a Myth,” *Southwest Review* 93, no. 3 (2008): 313.

apostle of reason."[75] According to Christensen, the figure of the cowboy that emerged from this myth was a "lone individual out on the raw edge" and a man of "macho hubris."[76] Meanwhile, in his book *The Creation of the Cowboy Hero: Fiction, Film and Fact*, Jeremy Agnew sheds light on Hollywood storylines where the hero was specifically an outlaw. Agnew writes: "The classic hero . . . is a man from whom something has been taken. He becomes involved in extraordinary adventures to resolve the situation through his superior skills, then reverts to his original status at the end. . . . He may play the part of an outlaw who is really a lawman as he works undercover or in disguise as one of the crooks to expose the villain's dastardly plot."[77] This description helps in unpacking Goldsmith's decision to align himself with this archetype: he is really the hero, though initially framed (by liberals on Twitter) as the villain; and though he is wounded, and wants that woundedness to be seen and sympathized with, he aims to be powerful, strong, or smart enough to ultimately emerge from the conflict victorious. His hero storyline depends on him reverting to the highly-regarded self he would like to be perceived as—the white, male author with the last laugh and the final say.

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75. Christensen, 313.

76. Christensen, 317-8.

77. Jeremy Agnew, *The Creation of the Cowboy Hero: Fiction, Film and Fact* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2014), 15.

While the choice of the term "outlaw" aligns Goldsmith's actions and persona with the cowboy movie archetype, the posture he is adopting is generalizable beyond the genre of Westerns. Ultimately, he means to establish himself as a "rebel" or "nonconformist"—a notion that dates back to the very inception of conceptual poetry.

Trolling Vulnerability

Returning to Jasper Bernes' essay, conceptual poetry's supposed "nonconformity" is intimately tied to "trolling." While Flarf, which developed in parallel with conceptual poetry, is more commonly "un-P.C.," the latter has its own, less comedic version of trolling.[78] Bernes writes, "Conceptualists are often trolls, but usually humorless or at best deadpan ones, engaging in jokeless provocation or exercises in which the joke is conceptual, a blank humor that unfolds as a function of setting or frame."[79] Poet Travis A. Sharp applied this definition when he tweeted in response to Goldsmith's reading: "Kenneth Goldsmith appropriates Michael Brown's murdered body, reframed as his poetry, & retweets the angry reactions. A troll with tenure."[80]

Goldsmith achieves nonconformity, perhaps, in refusing to abide by social standards of behavior that would demand a baseline consideration for others, let alone

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78. Jasper Bernes, "Art, Work, Endlessness," 772.

79. Bernes, 778.

80. Steinhauer, "Kenneth Goldsmith Remixes Michael Brown Autopsy Report as Poetry."

the form of care that I have been elaborating throughout this chapter. Responsibility does not disappear but is merely shifted to others, usually those who must care because they do not have the privilege of remaining unaffected. The claim to carelessness begins to eerily resemble victim-blaming, faulting the vulnerable for being vulnerable. Through a process of deception and distortion, Goldsmith claims all sympathy for himself, "hash-tagging Michael Brown's name and saying that 'the left is the new right.' Hash-tagging 'pen,' hash-tagging 'freespeech,' spinning himself into the victim like a Bush administration Neocon deflecting attention from his actions and branding all who opposed his racist 'art' enemy combatant censors."[81] But his pretense of being an "outlaw," in the fugitive sense of the word, "is a fidelity to a set of significations with no political obligations beyond that mode of self-fashioning."[82] It is an appropriation of the "oppressed" status that relies on real oppression for its weight, yet does nothing to combat it.

The power of language, and who gets to control its uses, reveals itself: paradoxically, while Goldsmith is "not responsible" for his words or anyone's feelings, he blames "the left" for their angry tweets because they make him feel oppressed; "freedom of speech" is a lopsided entitlement, a one-way right to speak. On this point,

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81. CAConrad, "Kenneth Goldsmith Says He Is an Outlaw."

82. Reed, "Between Now and Yet," 106.

poet Cathy Park Hong connects Goldsmith's case to other forms of language appropriation:

> No matter how insignificant the property or word (including, yes, the "n" word), white people love to demand their right to it if they are feeling denied. They say it's a matter of freedom of speech. They say, are we not *allowed* to appropriate Gone with the Wind? Are we not *allowed* to say what is and what isn't racist? We feel restricted! We are being policed! Why can't we write about race? (And to answer your question, of course you can write about it! As a friend Roger Reeves once said, "You invented it! Write about it!"). Then they dismiss us as an "outraged mob."[83]

The claim by certain white people that they are being "policed," that Black people are policing *them*, as CAConrad describes it, is particularly unnerving, given the extreme rates at which Black bodies are literally (and often fatally) policed. Mike Brown's death at the hands of a white police officer brings Goldsmith's performance sharply into focus; that Goldsmith would read Brown's autopsy report and then enter into a national debate around free speech, placing himself (albeit indirectly) on the same side as people who see Blackness as a commodity, is a level of distortion that leaves one at a loss for words. And of course, that is the point. The banner of "free speech" has become a way to silence, to dismiss outrage when it becomes uncontained and unprofitable. It is yet another way of policing non-whiteness while simultaneously excusing white violence. Books such as Robin Diangelo's *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk*

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83. CAConrad, "Kenneth Goldsmith Says He Is an Outlaw."

About Racism, as well as Carol Anderson's *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide*, discuss and critique this tendency at length.[84]

But while Goldsmith's careless entitlement might sound like right-wing America (without coming right out and saying that "safe spaces are for snowflake liberals"), Goldsmith is quite certain that his art has nothing to do with ethics or politics. In her article, King links to a 2009 interview where Goldsmith states: "I really have trouble with poethics. In fact, I think one of the most beautiful, free and expansive ideas about art is that it — unlike just about everything else in our culture — doesn't have to partake in an ethical discourse."[85] Art is relegated to a separate sphere, no longer in and of the world, according to this logic. Lee also seems to sense an elitist attitude in conceptual poetry, which defends itself by insinuating that "if we are offended, it's because we just aren't sophisticated."[86] But if we recognize care as a necessary form of labor, then the gimmicky attempt to eschew it makes art look easy. Moreover, art begins to look *un*sophisticated, if it is so perverse in profiting off pain, so regressive in its championing of violence, and so unwise to the world that it feigns complete asociality (and not in the radical queer theory sense). Is art above the masses, or beneath them?

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84. Robin Diangelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018); Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2016).

85. King, "Why Are People So Invested in Kenneth Goldsmith?"

86. Lee, "Shock and Blah."

Perhaps this is not just a question for art, but academia as well (especially since conceptual poetry so resolutely entwines the two). A statement issued by The Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo (MCAG) screams in all caps:

> KENNIE G AND HIS CREW CIRCULATE THE IDEA THAT WE DON'T NEED TO WRITE OR READ (CUZ WHITE CISHET MALE NARRATIVES HAVE EXHAUSTED ITSELF, SCREW ALL NARRATIVES THAT RESIST AND DREAM OTHERWISE), ALSO SCREW CITATIONS (PATCH FUCKEN WORK!) EVERYTHING BELONGS TO THE WHITE MALE ACADEMIC AND THEIR ANOINTIES INCLUDING IDENTITIES DON'T YOU DARE SUGGEST OTHERWISE[87]

For context, MCAG had an active Twitter presence and used this social media platform to criticize Goldsmith's performance specifically and conceptual poetry in general. In a Poetry Foundation blog post, poet Carmen Giménez Smith describes the group as "an anonymous (and now defunct) collective that defiantly called out the poetry world's systemic white supremacy and marginalization of poetry written by people of color, specifically the dearth of criticism existing in response to poetry by writers of color and non-binary poets (a condition or process MCAG termed Gringpo)."[88] Writer and editor Molly McArdle's interview with the coalition provides more information about their

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87. Lucas de Lima, "The Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo Responds to the Links Between Conceptual Art and Conceptual Poetry," Montevidayo, January 22, 2015, www.montevidayo.com/2015/01/the-mongrel-coalition-against-gringpo-responds-to-the-links-between-conceptual-art-and-conceptual-poetry/.

88. Carmen Giménez Smith, "Make American Mongrel Again," Poetry Foundation, blog post, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet-books/2018/04/make-america-mongrel-again.

aims and aesthetics, though they resist easy identification and definition.[89] In the quote above, MCAG calls out the racial and patriarchal hegemony found in academia and the poetry world—two domains which, according to MCAG, not only center the work of writers like Kenneth Goldsmith, but then refuse to hold them accountable for unethical practices, like failing to cite sources. MCAG attributes the lack of citation to a sense of entitlement, wherein writers like Goldsmith feel they have (or should have) unfettered access to the work of others (especially those they consider Other with a capital "O," like women writers, queer writers, and/or writers of color). In doing so, they appropriate others' work (and often their pain and identities) without giving them credit or making them a part of the community and conversation.

In keeping with MCAG's reading, I find Goldsmith's claim that "an artist's right to make a mistake is much more sacred than anyone's feelings" unsettling because it sanctifies this unchecked privilege, granting the artist the right to offend but denying the audience any right to protest.[90] Like the claim to "free speech," the conceptualization of the artist and the academic as other-worldly only shuts down conversation. Both are refusals to listen. Of course, people make mistakes. But to even conceive of Goldsmith as

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89. Molly McArdle, "'I ARRIVED AT THE REVOLUTION VIA POETRY: AN INTERVIEW WITH THE MONGREL COALITION AGAINST GRINGPO," Brooklyn Magazine, https://www.bkmag.com/2015/07/22/i-arrived-at-the-revolution-via-poetry-an-interview-with-the-mongrel-coalition-against-gringpo/.

90. Wilkinson, "Something Borrowed."

someone who might "make a mistake," we must first re-embody the artist—that is, we must admit that artists are people who are present in their work and in the world. On the one hand, this exposes art to critique, which is probably why conceptual poets insist on their own absence/irrelevance. Poet Julia Bloch writes, "But poiesis, making, happens by someone's hand, and that hand is structured by multiple ideological systems of meaning. Isn't it imperative to acknowledge how power inheres in the author's making?"[91] That poets might be "structured" (dare we say "affected") by society makes them imperfect, culpable, and finally vulnerable. But while the body is the site of vulnerability, it can also be the site of rehumanization, as Hartman and Sharpe have already shown. In this case, it brings the artist back down to Earth and allows him to be seen through human eyes, which recognize and understand shortcomings. Poet Juliana Spahr writes, "I keep having these moments where I want not to forgive it really, but to see it all as a mistake, as a sort of blindness that we can all learn from. Or to say, but he didn't really mean to do it. But then KG reminds again that it was written to troll the left. And instead of seeing it as a mistake, I'm forced back to seeing it as aggressive. Again."[92] In not owning up to his mistake, Goldsmith remains "above critique" and therefore outside of the human—superhuman. In an apostrophe to Goldsmith, poet and Black studies scholar Fred Moten adds his voice to the list of poets who back CAConrad

91. CAConrad, "Kenneth Goldsmith Says He Is an Outlaw."

92. CAConrad.

in denouncing Goldsmith's performance, writing: "I think you know you fucked up. But do you know why you fucked up? And do you know how you fucked up? . . . I wish I could convince you that the continued existence of human life on this earth depends upon you thinking about why and how you fucked up."[93] Moten's inclusion in CAConrad's article is of particular importance given the scope and depth of Moten's writings on Black life, Black death, and Black being;[94] and his statement has resonance in that "human life" as it exists in society *does* depend upon a recognition of the responsibilities that people owe to one another.

Given the many criticisms I have cited in this chapter, it might seem as though the whole Internet "ganged up" on Goldsmith, incessantly telling him how much he had "fucked up." But in truth, he was framed with much more sympathy than a Black body is usually able to garner. After all, Wilkinson's *New Yorker* article opened with: "To appreciate the beleaguered position that Kenneth Goldsmith finds himself in . . . ."[95] He

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93. CAConrad.

94. I have previously cited Moten for his work on Black mysticism and the paraontological; but regarding Goldsmith's (mis)appropriation of Michael Brown's death, Moten's chapter "Visible Music" from *In the Break* is particularly relevant, in that a significant portion of it is given to reading the murder of Emmett Till and the photograph of his body that was widely circulated after, as his mother insisted on an open casket so that the world could see what had been done. Fred Moten, "Visible Music," *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 171-231.

95. Wilkinson, "Something Borrowed."

then spends more than two-thirds of his roughly-6000-word article discussing Goldsmith as an eccentric person and conceptual poetry as a movement before there is any mention of Mike Brown. Every attempt is made to understand Goldsmith, even if it means delaying the details of the case or temporarily obscuring the scandal in question. Meanwhile, Mike Brown was not shown the same privilege even in death, despite the otherwise-tendency to sentimentalize the dead; initial media reports labeled him a "thug" though he was innocent. Undeniably, the media's framing of white vs. Black subjects is often dichotomous in nature, privileging whiteness. Anthea Butler says in the title of her *Washington Post* article: "Shooters of color are called 'terrorists' and 'thugs.' Why are white shooters called 'mentally ill'?"[96] Again, there is an attempt to understand whiteness while pathologizing non-whiteness, and language is utilized to draw distinctions between who is worthy of understanding and who is not. Language in the mainstream media is most understanding of cisgender, heterosexual white men, in particular; this can be seen in headlines regarding accusations of sexual assault, in addition to mass shootings. One notable instance involves Brock Turner's rape case. Naomi LaChance from *The Intercept* writes, "*TIME* referred to Turner as a swimmer and didn't note that he had committed a sexual assault until the third line of the story. The

96. Anthea Butler, "Shooters of color are called 'terrorists' and 'thugs.' Why are white shooters called 'mentally ill'?" The Washington Post, June 18, 2015, www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/06/18/call-the-charleston-church-shooting-what-it-is-terrorism/?utm_term=.0b275b2546bb.

magazine called him a 'former Stanford student and star swimmer.'"[97] (The *TIME* article was edited days later, but it had already helped to solidify this sympathetic reading of Turner.) To be clear, these examples are cited here not to place Goldsmith's poem on the same level as either murder or sexual assault, but rather to point out the consistent defense of "bad behavior" when the accused happens to be a white man.

In these cases, the defense of white men is a distancing, a distinction between "the person" and the accusations leveled against them, an abstraction that places the individual in so large a context that it clouds the specific harm committed. Here is where the tenets of conceptual poetry merge so strikingly and distressingly with society's special affordances to white men. Conceptual poetry touts the "irrelevance" of the artist—but then, when Goldsmith finds himself under fire, roughly 4000 words are needed to bring in his biography, his personality, and the progression of his life's work.[98] Included are descriptions that might even render him charming. But why are these details now granted relevance, if "art should not depend for its effect on explanations"?[99] And why does the sudden move to humanize the artist not coincide

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97. Naomi LaChance, "Media Continues to Refer to Brock Turner as a 'Stanford Swimmer' Rather than a Rapist," The Intercept, September 2, 2016, www.theintercept.com/2016/09/02/media-continues-to-refer-to-brock-turner-as-a-stanford-swimmer-rather-than-a-rapist/.

98. Wilkinson, "Something Borrowed."

99. Wilkinson.

with a discussion of privilege as it is tied to the body? It seems that the "white male" artist of conceptual poetry is only embodied when it suits him, whereas women writers and writers of color remain hyper-embodied, in art as in daily life. Wilkinson gives this account of critiques made by poets of color, in response to Goldsmith's piece: "Only a white person . . . has the ability to shed his or her identity or to wear it casually. Their experience is that to be a person of color in America is to be constantly reminded of who you are."[100] Whether victim or perpetrator, the media rarely cares what a white man "was wearing," and rarely is he made to "fit the description" in our minds.[101]

Through the abstraction of the artist, Blackness as commodity, the gimmick of the "hot text," and the trolling of pain, conceptual poetry as exemplified by Goldsmith is indeed "nothing new"—in that it merely repeats and reifies racial hierarchies and patriarchal notions of authorial unimpeachability. "'Whiteness' doesn't have to care" as Lee reminds us.[102] Goldsmith's attempts to "hold the stage" show that conceptual poetry (at least as it exists under this particular paradigm) is already on its way out the door;[103] and perhaps that is when we are in the best position to critique it. In his essay

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100. Wilkinson.

101. Rankine, *Citizen*, 105.

102. Lee, "Shock and Blah: Offensive Postures in 'Conceptual' Poetry and the Traumatic Stuplime."

103. Again, this is not to say that conceptual poetry as "systematic or procedurally based approaches" inherently or necessarily has the same pitfalls. Lee

"Obsolescence," Mark Goble points out that "we are constantly failing to pay attention to the things we use until the moment when their brokenness throws us into an existential awareness of them, an awareness that we know, at some level, we should have had already in the past."[104] The "hot text" that blew up in Goldsmith's face also called attention to the ideologies and processes that allowed for it to happen, exposing the "tools" of conceptual poetry as those of white supremacy and patriarchy. Hindsight is 20/20, but perhaps the present "wakefulness" that Sharpe calls for is the better and pressing alternative. Both art and academia cannot remove themselves completely from the social and political, nor should they desire to. Art is part of the world, and this is the world we live in. Of course, "the work of restoration or recompense is inevitably incomplete."[105] But the care given in the act/art of redressing is the care that needs demanding.

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applies the above definition to "writers of difference" like "Craig Santos Perez, Myung Mi Kim, and Dawn Lundy Martin," and I add M. NourbeSe Philip to this list. But these writers are often omitted from the canon of "conceptual poetry" as such, and they are removed enough from Dworkin and Goldsmith's understanding of the genre that this essay does not treat them specifically. By that same token, my critiques of "conceptual poetry" are not critiques of these other poets' work.

104. Mark Goble, "Obsolescence," in *A New Vocabulary for Global Modernism*, eds. Eric Hayot and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 157.

105. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 77.

Interlude

Black Will Be the Loud Thing

Whether you're at Starbucks or the gym
Wal-Mart or your own backyard—
your neighborhood,
asking for directions;
whether you are
customer, member, citizen;
whether you are young or old,
whether they shout or shoot at you:
black will be the loud thing.

In fact
black will be louder than your voice asking, "What have I done?"
loud with all the ways they claim
to feel afraid of you.

loud with *Get out of our store*
loud with *Stop resisting*
loud with police sirens, loud with paramedics
who are called only after you've stopped breathing
loud with the click of cameras with newscasters asking and asking

with the word "thug"
flung with a familiar force, tongue between teeth
ending with this guttural sound
so similar to "thing"

loud with the loved ones
who call you by your real names,
all that you are or were:
father person mother person sister brother friend neighbor human person

loud like the president on the news
talking for the umpteenth time about "Chicago"
which is code for something

loud with yesterday, today

and the tomorrow we're headed to
like raising your voice to argue
that yes, race has
everything to do with it.
But black is so loud that whiteness will be silent,
or will mutter something about
why didn't they just go quietly?[1]

A Close-Reading: Racialized Violence and Gendered Care

I wrote the above poem in April 2018, following a week of headlines underscoring the many ways in which the lives and quotidian experiences of Black people in the United States can be interrupted or tragically curtailed at the hands of police and white civilians.[2] The news stories demonstrated that anti-Blackness, and the police brutality/white violence that wields it, can erupt in public spaces, during everyday activities, and regardless of age. Moreover, these stories broke amidst ongoing

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1. Previously published online and nominated for the 2020 Best of the Net. Jessica Covil, "Black Will Be the Loud Thing," *Rise Up Review* (Spring 2020), https://riseupreview.org/jessica-covil.

2. "Black teen misses bus, gets shot at after asking for directions in Rochester Hills," Fox2Detroit, April 13, 2018, https://www.fox2detroit.com/news/black-teen-misses-bus-gets-shot-at-after-asking-for-directions-in-rochester-hills; Emily Stewart, "Two black men were arrested in a Philadelphia Starbucks for doing nothing," Vox, April 15, 2018, https://www.vox.com/identities/2018/4/14/17238494/what-happened-at-starbucks-black-men-arrested-philadelphia; Sam Levin, "Diante Yarber: Police kill black father with barrage of bullets in Walmart parking lot," The Guardian, April 17, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/apr/17/diante-yarber-police-fatal-shooting-barstow-california; Rachel Siegel, "LA Fitness employees called 911 on two black men they said didn't pay. They had," The Washington Post, April 20, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/business/wp/2018/04/20/la-fitness-employees-called-911-on-two-black-men-they-said-didnt-pay-they-had/.

protests demanding justice for Stephon Clark, who had been murdered by Sacramento police in the previous month.[3] But the collective outrage resulted from the wary recognition that this was not a temporary, localized barrage of incidents, but an ongoing system of routinized death, felt and remembered through a series of shocking events that spanned years instead of weeks. The events themselves are remembered through a litany of names, spoken and repeated to demand justice and restore dignity to the victims. A running list of these names appears in Claudia Rankine's poetry book *Citizen*, which likewise heavily influenced my poem and my interrogation of what it means to be a "citizen," if national citizenship does not guarantee the (basic) right to exist in said nation.[4]

I wrote this poem because it felt necessary for my own emotional processing of the news, and because it felt more pressing than the graduate seminar paper I had opened my laptop to work on. Even then, I didn't leave scholarship behind, but took up the poem as a different way of reflecting on and applying the work of so many thinkers who have theorized race in America and the impact of anti-Blackness at multiple

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3. Josiah Bates, "The death of Stephon Clark: What we know about the Sacramento police shooting," ABC News, March 29, 2018, https://abcnews.go.com/US/death-stephon-clark-police-shooting/story?id=54039443.

4. In the eBook version of *Citizen*, this "In Memory of . . ." section is regularly updated, and now includes Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Rayshard Brooks. Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014), 125-126, retrieved from https://duke.overdrive.com/media/1903693#.

levels—interpersonal, psychical, systemic. And I felt that, in the face of so many cold, familiar arguments wielded by conservatives—assessing criminality vs. “innocence” of the victims, defending the intentions of aggressors, posing hypotheticals and distracting with whataboutism—that a method/genre of writing that took feeling into account, and embraced it, was what the moment called for. This belief is what carries my next dissertation chapter as well—the belief that the act and expression of caring, with vulnerability and emotion, is a way of asserting the grievability of the dead.

Internalized racism is not reasonable; it's a faith-based belief system (institutionally ingrained) and therefore cannot be combatted with facts and logic alone. I am reminded of the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown hashtag that went viral following the police murder of Michael Brown, combatting the initial portrayals of Brown as “thuggish” (and therefore deserving of death, according to their “reasoning”) in mainstream media not so much through logic-based discourse but through carefully curated self-representations.[5] A study by three researchers at the Maybourn School of Journalism indicates the meaningful impact the hashtag had on a younger generation

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5. Logan Rhoades and Adrian Carrasquillo, “How The Powerful #IfTheyGunnedMeDown Movement Changed The Conversation About Michael Brown's Death,” BuzzFeed News, August 13, 2014, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/mrloganrhoades/how-the-powerful-iftheygunnedmedown-movement-changed-the-con.

that is more attuned to social media.[6] These young Twitter users substituted the circulating photographs of Brown with pictures of themselves—one highly respectable (according to sociocultural mores that privilege capital, military service, and advanced education) and the other seemingly more prone to distortions and assassinations of character. Placing themselves, virtually, in the position of Brown, they drew parallels between themselves and the dead; they urged a more humanizing portrayal of the teenager through an emotional appeal to their viewers who might then see him as similarly multifaceted and even relatable—not just "worthy" of life, in the moralizing sense, but fundamentally made of and belonging to it. The hashtag users projected the horrible, mournable potential of their own deaths in order to demonstrate this.

In this same spirit, and building upon the work of my previous two chapters, my third chapter takes up emotion—expressions of mourning and grief, in particular—as viable, necessary, and political, especially in situations where the violent loss of life would otherwise go unremarked, unchallenged, and forgotten. This third chapter seeks to depathologize mourning through a feminist and antiracist lens. I read the political act of mourning in these contexts as counteracting the systematized disposability of Black life. I perform my own counteraction by offering counternarratives, exploring and

6. Tracy Everbach, Meredith Clark, and Gwendelyn S. Nisbett, "#IfTheyGunnedMeDown: An Analysis of Mainstream and Social Media in the Ferguson, Missouri, Shooting of Michael Brown," *Electronic News* 12, no. 1 (2018): 23-41.

amplifying the immense amount of conscientious care that must go into rendering Black death grievable within societies that hegemonically accept/expect it as the norm. I recognize that the bulk of this "care work" (which I introduced in my previous chapter) is led by women generally, and by women of color in particular. This leads me to explore, in an interwoven way, the pathologization of both Blackness and the "emotionality" of women, especially as both are rendered "excessive" (in a derogatory sense) through the white male gaze. This careful re-reading is begun in this Interlude's poem, where I call out the stereotyping of Blackness as being "excessive" through my title and repeated refrain, "Black will be the loud thing." By "loud thing" I mean both: the aspect/figure that people notice; and the person dehumanized and reduced to a "thing," perceived as loud/untamed and therefore in need of possessing and controlling (a.k.a., policing).[7] My refrain calls out the hypocrisy in stereotyping Black people as "aggressive," even as police or white aggressors are given immunity to "shout and

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7. The reduction of Black being/bodies into "things" was famously discussed by Black feminist scholar Hortense Spillers in her groundbreaking essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe." Spillers' theorization draws from *Discourse on Colonialism*, where Aimé Césaire first coined the term "thingification" in describing colonization. The "thingification" of Black bodies has since been taken up by a number of scholars (most prominently in Afropessimism) to describe anti-Black violence both during slavery and in its "afterlife," as Saidiya Hartman has popularly termed it. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 64-81; Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000); Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Trade Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 6.

shoot" at them. Resisting this pathologization of Blackness, I conclude my poem by calling for an interrogation of whiteness—and, in particular, "white silence."[8] The point is not to reinscribe pathology, but to examine history, to assess present needs, and to imagine a better way forward—insisting upon *life*, in place of death, by naming and advocating for our social responsibilities towards each other. This is the work of care.

In the previous chapter, I examined the limits of conceptual poetry in cases where the poet denies the relevance of the social, the ethical, and the political in both the production and reception of their art—a denial that downplays and reproduces harm. In my third chapter, I turn to examples of poetry, poetics, and poiesis (a term I will soon explain) that, by contrast, demonstrate an awareness that these realms (social, ethical, political) are inextricably linked; these examples seek to reinstate dignity, defend life, and grieve death in ways that can be seen/heard, and they harness creativity and ritual in order to accomplish this. I aim to combat pathologizing narratives and language, to expand our ideas of the poetic and poietic, and to reclaim persistent mourning—even "madness"—as the political work of care.

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8. In an article for *Literary Hub*, and building on the work of critical race theorists, film and media doctoral student Kelly Coyne explores the damaging effects of "white silence" around issues of racism, particularly in a society that associates Blackness with noise. Kelly Coyne, "White Noise, White Silence: Who Gets to Be Loud in Today's America?" Literary Hub, December 17, 2020, https://lithub.com/white-noise-white-silence-who-gets-to-be-loud-in-todays-america/.

At the same time, I analyze the ways in which mourning is traditionally (and most often) the work of women, especially women in the role of Mother. This configuration is a paradoxical one: women are denigrated and policed for their "excessive" emotionality, due to patriarchal norms that devalue their labor; and yet, this affective work is simultaneously assumed and even required of them (us), if they are to be seen as "good women" or "good mothers." (My first chapter's reading of womanhood, and the made-ness of what "woman" means through how she is represented, will be helpful here.) Moreover, motherhood is in many ways a respectable (if not always respected) and privileged role for women.[9] As such, occupying the role of mother can be not only personally desirable, but also politically/socially legitimating.

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9. This is not to say that women, and some women more than others, have not had to fight for the opportunity to mother or ultimately been deprived of that right. Historically, motherhood was legally denied to enslaved women; and more recently, cases of forced sterilizations, separation of families at border crossings, incarceration, poverty, and the vilification of queer and trans bodies have also been used to deny women the ability to mother. The selection or privileging of certain women for motherhood is one of the reasons that Black feminist scholar Alexis Pauline Gumbs and her coeditors title their anthology *Revolutionary Mothering*: to assert the *radicalness* of insisting on an expanded and more inclusive definition of motherhood, both in how its practiced and who can occupy the role. (This also includes thinking of mothering beyond the biological.) Marlo D. David, too, offers a way of rethinking the maternal in nontraditional—and indeed, intentionally subversive—ways, examining objects of popular culture (both literature and film) through a queer and postcolonial lens, with an attention to what the mother figure might open up. Alexis Pauline Gumbs, China Martens, and Mai'a Williams, eds., *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines* (Oakland: PM Press, 2016); Marlo D. David, *Mama's Gun: Black Maternal Figures and the Politics of Transgression* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2016).

My chapter looks at this intersection of motherhood and mourning as generative terrain for thinking about care—and for undoing assumptions about who should be embodying or performing it. I take seriously the magnitude of loss—particularly the loss of children, and the routine loss of particular children.[10] In the face of apathy towards the dead, I call attention to poetic—and *poietic*—work that asserts the power/necessity of care in counterhegemonic, subversive, transgressive ways, urging us all to take it up.

My use of "poiesis" or the "poietic" is partially indebted to the centuries-long making (and remaking) of the term. Expressing it in this way seems appropriate, since—to quote Craig Calhoun, Richard Sennett, and Harel Shapira in their introduction to *Public Culture*'s special issue on the subject—"Poiesis Means Making."[11] I came to this word through the anthropological work of Robert Desjarlais in *Subject to Death: Life and Loss in a Buddhist World*. In a chapter called "A Good Death, Recorded," which was also

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10. In the conclusion to her debut novel, *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison uses the word "certain" in much the same way as I use "particular" here: to emphasize the systematized death/precarity that marginalized people routinely face. Mourning the unhappy fate of the novel's protagonist, Pecola—who, after much social and familial abuse, descends into madness—her neighborhood friend Claudia offers some social commentary through metaphor: "This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late. At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it's much, much, much too late." Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Vintage International, 2007), 206.

11. Craig Calhoun, Richard Sennett, and Harel Shapira, "Poiesis Means Making," *Public Culture* 25, no. 2 (March 2013): 195-200, doi: 10.1215/08992363-2020539.

included in the collection *Living and Dying in the Contemporary World,* Desjarlais finds poiesis at work in the funerary rites of Nepal's Yolmo people, and in their Buddhist practices and attitudes towards death. In this context, Desjarlais' describes "poiesis" as something encompassing, but not limited to, "poetry" as a particular medium/genre, and "poetics" as the practice or study of writing. Desjarlais gives a brief history and thus situates his own rendering of the term as such:

> *Poiesis* implies a begetting, a fabrication and bringing forth, of some new form or reality; something that was not present is made present. The concept first took form in Greek philosophy, most significantly in the writings of Plato and Aristotle. It has subsequently been adopted by modern philosophers such as Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt, as well as some anthropologists. Taken from the Greek *poiein,* "to act, to do, or to make," and related to the words *poetics* and *poetry*, the term *poiesis* has come to designate any making or doing beyond purely practical efforts. *Poiesis* is involved in the crafting of poems and in the art of shipbuilding.[12]

While Desjarlais' definition of "poiesis" is certainly useful in its expansiveness, I find even more compelling the ways in which his definition is developed in proximity to—and in contemplation of—the dead and dying. In his chapter, Desjarlais looks at "modalities of cessation, ritual, and mourning" that surround what Buddhists understand to be "a good death"—one that involves the dying "preparing for their deaths," "giving a last testament in their final days," or "forging a calm and peaceful

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12. Robert Desjarlais, "A Good Death, Recorded," in *Living and Dying in the Contemporary World: A Compendium*, eds. Veena Das and Clara Han (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 652.

state of mind in the hours of their demise" in order to dissolve their attachments to the world and exert some level of control over their own passing.[13] Before and after the moment of death, according to Desjarlais, "mourners, in turn, try to facilitate these endeavors on behalf of lost loved ones, while trying to abate their own attachments to them."[14] What transpires is a poietic process of letting go, on the part of both the dying and those who mourn them. If successful, these poietic rituals constitute a collaborative, thoughtful, re-formative, and care-driven process.

Thinking about what the poietic can look like in the case of a "good death," I am interested throughout my next chapter in seeking and naming the poietic in cases where death is not peaceful; when, in the face of the abrupt and the violent, the beginnings and endings of mourning are not so cleanly laid out; when detachment is, perhaps, neither possible nor desirable. In the case of "a good death," Desjarlais writes that "there is caring comfort in the face of death, but there is also a sense of quiet restraint and 'practices of undoing.'"[15] But how might the "making" that poiesis entails show up differently in the face of a terrible unmaking? How might the process of death and mourning be haunted by historical, social, political forces that dictate who dies and

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13. Desjarlais, 648, 651.

14. Desjarlais, 654.

15. Desjarlais, 657.

when, and how might our understandings and uses of the poietic be altered in order to register that?

If Desjarlais' ideas of poiesis are centered on death, there is a satisfying (and necessary) symmetry in locating poiesis as a mode of radical survival as well. Although "poiesis" belongs to a particular tradition (usually beginning with Aristotle, as Desjarlais points out, and continuing along a trajectory dominated by white men), I find that much of what draws me in about poiesis is also present in Audre Lorde's theorization of poetry. In her imaginative essay "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," first published in 1977 and reprinted in her collection *Sister Outsider*, Lorde writes about poetry "as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are—until the poem—nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt."[16] Poetry under this definition *is* an act of birth, one of the oldest symbols we have of "making;" one might therefore say that it is the epitome of poiesis. Moreover, Lorde's poetry-as-survival can help us extend Desjarlais' theorization of poiesis by looking at moments of rupture that are significantly louder—that is, more unsettling to current social and political orders—than the "good death," which is characterized largely by quiet and stillness. Lorde conceives of poetry as a way to resist and overturn systems of oppression, including racism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity. She sees it as a means of channeling

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16. Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom: Crossing Press, 1984), 36.

untapped “places of power” within women in order to imagine and achieve more liberated forms of living.[17] For Lorde, poetry is able to do this in part because it radically combines logic and feeling, thus overturning an old philosophical tradition that privileges emotionless, disembodied reason as the sole method of knowledge formation. Finally, poetry makes room for the new and emergent—an excellent tool for revolution. Lorde writes:

> Poetry . . . forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. . . . Where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it.[18]

For my purposes, the poietic/poetic forms the language necessary to reckon with death that is violent, and to perform care in ways that are not quiet or restrained—in ways that are as loud as they need to be in order to register amidst the brutality of anti-Blackness as well as misogyny. Indeed, in a world where Blackness is so often read as “loud” (see my poem), then perhaps mourning for Black death, if it is to be heard, must carry that same loudness.

Like both Desjarlais’ and Lorde’s definitions, my own understanding of the poietic both involves and goes beyond the poetic, and it is not limited to a specific genre, aesthetic, or mode of writing; indeed, it is not even limited to writing. It seeks to be

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17. Lorde, 36-7.

18. Lorde, 37-8.

expansive, and includes the moment/act of making, the praxis, and the state of being receptive to the world as it is and could be. I use poiesis to imagine and lay out a way of being in the world—an ethical standpoint from which action flows. It is not my intention to quibble over the distinctions between "poetry" and "poiesis," but rather, to recognize their overlap and adopt all useful definitions. Indeed, I take poiesis as a framework that allows for flexibility, since—as Desjarlais points out—it is "tentative" and "given to impermanence," meaning that it is dynamic and evolving.[19] And, much like the "open field" discussed in my first chapter, poiesis moves us outside of hegemonic, oppositional framings that do not allow for nuance, simultaneity, and multiplicity. Desjarlais writes: "Ideas of poiesis skirt dichotomies problematically common to Western thought, such as art and deed, virtuality and actuality, and idea and matter."[20] Extending this idea, my chapter also invokes poiesis as a way to resist the supposed dichotomy between "emotion" and "reason," and the resultant denigration of "excess" that is associated with the former.

I opened this dissertation with an extensive close reading of a poetic intervention made in the field of poetry; in the following chapter, I seek to name and analyze a *poietic* intervention made in the contemporary social realm, through gestures and acts that move contrary to the normalized agony of state violence, anti-Blackness, and

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19. Desjarlais, "A Good Death," 655.

20. Desjarlais, 652.

misogyny—movements that are an intentional refusal to be still or to let go quietly. These gestures are largely symbolic, but no less practical, tangible, and real.[21] As Desjarlais writes, they work "to transform situations, consciousnesses, relations, and the phenomenal grounds of people's lives."[22] In turn, they urge us to adopt a new method of looking, listening, feeling, and doing—to incorporate the poietic into our own ways of being.

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21. Although he does not take up poetry or poiesis, Chris Ingraham offers a useful and thought-provoking framework for thinking about such "gestures" in his book *Gestures of Concern*. He writes: "gestures of concern" names a way to distinguish another kind of gestural action, one that is . . . primarily *an expression into form of an affective relation*. Such gestures might involve language, gifts, artworks, and more, but what they share is an expressive concern that acts as both a means and as an end because their most instrumental effects are exhausted in their expressivity" (emphasis his). Some of his examples include sending a "Get Well" card or liking something on social media. Even though they are not "effective" in the most practical sense, Ingraham maintains that "the impact of concerned gestures is rather to spread an affectability, begetting new capacities for what can be or be done." They are powerful in that they "help to build our affective commonwealth" and "orient us to one another with an imaginable future in mind." Chris Ingraham, *Gestures of Concern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 5-7.

The examples I take up in this chapter are more specific, but I like the premise of Ingraham's book for giving us a way to think about what we as social actors might be accomplishing, politically, even when we cannot see an immediate, tangible impact. It is refreshingly more optimistic/generous than labeling seemingly small acts/gestures as "performative" in a way that implies either laziness, triviality, or inauthenticity, depending on the context.

22. Desjarlais, "A Good Death," 657.

Chapter 3: Revisiting Mother's Madness: Counternarratives of Mourning and Grief

Is there a right way to mourn? From a white Western standpoint, especially, mourning is often treated like an event—something with a start and end time. Or, sometimes it is imagined as a process, which perhaps gives more of a sense of a prolonged labor, of the ups and downs that accompany a loss. But even then, the process implies a "working through" of emotions that is moving towards something like closure. A letting-go. But how does one let go of a child lost? Is there an "appropriate" response, contained within a certain number of days, after which it is time to lay the dead to rest and move on with life? So that the social can be made whole again; the world made right. For the mother who has lost a child—especially to racist acts of violence, to the state's military projects, to the continual precarity born from a lack of resources that is as present as it his historical—perhaps it cannot be made right.

The "end" of mourning is supposed to be a return of sorts; the course of mourning is one of catharsis, alleviating some of the pain and bringing one's sense of reality back into balance. In his famous essay "Mourning and Melancholia," Sigmund Freud takes it for granted that "when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again."[1] For the melancholic, on the other hand, those

1. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of*

affective responses normally associated with mourning are more persistent, to the extent that "we cannot see what it is that is absorbing him so entirely."[2] But the "free and uninhibited" state to which Freud refers does not always apply, before or after the loss of a loved one. In *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories, A Memorial*, Karla Holloway writes about the "anticipation of death and dying" that accompanies Black life in the United States, ingrained into African American memory and cultural production. Holloway lists "several measures of mortality (childhood morbidity, maternal death in childbearing, cardiac-related deaths of elders, suicide, death at the hands of police, and other violent deaths of youth)" that prove that the "anticipation" of death begins before birth and extends across one's lifetime.[3] In this context, it seems one is never truly safe; it is therefore tragically and hauntingly fitting that Holloway, witnessing to the criminalization of people of color, describes the death of her own son in a section titled

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the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 245.

2. Freud, 246.

3. Karla F.C. Holloway, *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories, A Memorial* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 6

"Fate."[4] Though legally "free" in the present day, Black life continues to be far from uninhibited.

Holloway's writing gives us a framework for thinking about other temporalities for mourning—temporalities that do not follow Desjarlais' examination of a "good death" nor Freud's understanding of a timely return to an uninhibited ego. Indeed, *Passed On* is dedicated to those cases where, as Desjarlais would say, "a person is stuck between lives" and "the tempo of a good death is obstructed."[5] Desjarlais describes this "obstructed tempo" in the context of the Yolmo people's attitudes towards medical life support, which can keep a patient alive even when brain dead, so that they are in between the routines of life and the funerary rites that would normally replace them. However, the "anticipation of death and dying" that Holloway describes is, I argue, another kind of "obstructed tempo" that fundamentally alters the way we think about

4. Holloway, 12. When I drafted this dissertation chapter, I omitted the circumstances of Holloway's son's death; once this was pointed out to me, I realized the omission was partly motivated by the tragedy surrounding the death and the author's indirect, careful, and melancholic way of inscribing it. Believing that the telling of such a story is and should be sacred, and therefore ventured into cautiously, I've chosen to leave it untold here. I'm mindful of Saidiya Hartman's decision, in her own work, "not to reproduce Douglass's account of the beating of Aunt Hester in order to call attention to the ease with which such scenes are usually reiterated . . . and especially because they reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering." Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3.

5. Robert Desjarlais, "A Good Death, Recorded," in *Living and Dying in the Contemporary World: A Compendium*, eds. Veena Das and Clara Han (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 656.

death, as well as the mourning that precedes, accompanies, and follows it. I argue that Holloway both calls for and performs that poetic/poietic work that this obstructed tempo renders necessary.

Both in the statistics she references and by her own personal account of loss, Holloway emphasizes the ways in which the Back maternal, especially, is marked by an extended kind of mourning. She highlights the "childless mother" as an oft-represented figure throughout the history of African American cultural production. One prominent example she gives is Du Bois' chapter "Of the Passing of the First Born" from *The Souls of Black Folk*.[6] In reality, the childless mother as a staple of African American life goes back even further, as a result and a requirement of slavery. In "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Hortense Spillers paints motherhood as a fraught and worrisome space for the enslaved, who at any moment could have her child taken and sold away from her. Spillers writes that in American slavery, "the offspring of the female does not 'belong' to the Mother," though it was her condition that determined the enslavement of her children. In other words, her maternity was restricted to that reproductive force that served to supply more slaves.[7] As a result of this history, the

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6. W.E.B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, unabridged ed. (New York: Dover Publications, 1994), 5.

7. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 74.

fraught conditions of Black motherhood have featured prominently in the early African American literary canon especially, which often registers even the *presence* of the Black mother as an absence—a haunting reminder of a state of unfreedom; that is, a denial of full citizenship and human "being" in the ontological sense.[8] Scholars Alys Eve Weinbaum and Alexander G. Weheliye have meticulously explored how the "slave episteme" and "racializing assemblages," respectively, continue to shape reproduction and notions of the human in today's world; Jennifer L. Morgan has recently extended this scholarship, exploring the role that kinship played in—and how it was affected by—racial commodification during and beyond the Middle Passage.[9]

And yet, even as early American Black motherhood was recorded as an absence, a lack, or a lock on the door to freedom, Black women simultaneously wrote themselves into another narrative, one that redefined their mothering as an active struggle against

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8. This is especially true in passing narratives, wherein the protagonist navigates their world by being perceived as white, though they are Black (which is sometimes unbeknownst to them). The sudden reveal of their Blackness, or the threat of that "unveiling," is the central drama (or one of the central dramas) of the narrative. Some examples are William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter* (1853); Pauline Hopkins' *Of One Blood: or, The Hidden Self* (1903); James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912); select poems in Countee Cullen's *Color* (1925); and Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929).

9. Alys Eve Weinbaum, *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery: Biocapitalism and Black Feminism's Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019); Alexander G. Weheliye, *Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

oppressions (of all sorts) and reframed their reproductive capacities. Instead of reproducing the status quo, Black women expressed their desire to mother their children into a world radically different from the one they had known. Antebellum slave narratives such as Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) showed the great lengths to which a mother might go in order to see her children free. Likewise, Black women writing at the turn of the twentieth century, such as Anna J. Cooper and Frances Harper, placed great stock in mothers as a means of producing true citizenship once slavery had ended.[10] Through an attention to children's education, religious or spiritual well-being, and professional/economic prospects, Black women imagined a different future and set a new paradigm for "inheritance" for their children.

I include this discussion because it is important to acknowledge that mourning is not the sole experience/affect attached to Black motherhood, which can also be a space of vitality, striving, and hope.[11] However, the presence of hope perhaps clarifies why loss

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10. These themes are explored in Anna Julia Cooper's *A Voice from the South* (1892) and Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (1892).

11. In her most recent book, *Birthing Black Mothers*, Black feminist scholar Jennifer C. Nash offers a helpful critique of the equation between Black motherhood and mourning. She writes: "Black mothers become political currency when the category 'Black mother' comes to refer not to a form of relationality, a set of practices, a form of labor, or an embodied experience, but instead to a political category that is a synonym for pain." I am trying to take up the former while being cognizant not to slip into the latter, even as some of the sources I am using perhaps suggest the equation that Nash critiques. Jennifer C. Nash, *Birthing Black Mothers* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 4.

is felt so keenly, and why mourning cannot (or should not) be bound by any timeline that distinguishes between "good" and "excessive" grief. For this reason, I have no intention in my chapter of following Freud in distinguishing between mourning and melancholia. Instead, I hope to push back against the pathologization that normally accompanies the latter, which Freud notes has a "tendency to turn round into mania."[12] I follow historian and theorist Anne A. Cheng in her call for a new "political vocabulary" that registers extended mourning, which she explores at length in her book *The Melancholy of Race*.[13] Through an examination of writings sampled from the fields of cultural anthropology, sociology, theory, and poetry, this chapter interrogates the "madness" often attributed to the mother who, having lost a child, refuses to let go. If mourning usually terminates in closure, implying a return to the previous or "normal" state of affairs, it is incumbent upon us to question whether mourning under this definition is possible or even desirable for the mother whose loss is evidence of gross injustice. Responses otherwise labeled as madness will be taken as legitimate (and politically legitimating) forms of grief, refusing complete closure and performing instead some other work of care and community-building; in this context, I read madness as a

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12. Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 253.

13. Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 21.

poietic making that transforms how we see and understand the loss of life, especially devalued Black life.

Looking at this madness as something "poietic" (a term defined in my Interlude) allows us to see the acts and rituals involved as compositions—as "made things" that are not given, but constituted through conscientious effort, the ability to question how things are, and the desire/need to imagine something new. This is an extension of the work of my first two chapters—the open field and my proposed framework of care. My third chapter asks: if the "normal" rules around mourning involve a devaluation of certain lives and the grounds for their loss, then why return to them? Indeed, letting go might serve as an admission that some lives are disposable because their deaths are so easily woven back into the fabric of the social, allowing for a smooth transition. Holding on allows death to *threaten* the social, disrupting the status quo by refusing to permit a stitching together after the fact. In the examples I provide, mothers take on the full weight of grief; for otherwise, would there by anyone or any way to grieve them?

The role of the mother in mourning is an interesting object of analysis in part because of the gendered implications that it already carries, regardless of the child. That is to say, the mother's "madness" in response to a child's death speaks to how women are characterized more broadly and how masculine forms of mourning are often granted more legitimacy. This reading of women's mourning practices as "illegitimate" is apparent in Jonathan Parry's *Death in Banaras*, where he writes:

> The point I hope will be obvious: the legitimate expression of grief is structured by gender. Women weep. They refuse to bow to the inevitable separation of death. Like the *pret*-ghost itself, they try to hang on to the corpse. But however deep their personal anguish, the close male mourners are enjoined to show restraint, to accept what is inevitable, and to get on with the serious business of begetting an ancestor.[14]

Contrasting women's weeping with the "serious business" that occupies their male counterparts, Parry represents the Hindu women he observes as infantile, or at least inferior to men, in their responses to death; in fact, he argues that it is this disparity in mourning practices that works to reinforce the society's gendered hierarchies. However, Parry himself is perhaps responsible for the narrative of gendered differentiation he provides and the particular meaning he ascribes to it (or reinscribes). I contend that clinging to the corpse is not so much a blind denial of death, but rather a way of recognizing the deceased person's worth—the value or meaning their existence held for their loved ones or for the community at large. If we do not assume that the ultimate goal of a funeral is to move on, then mourning might be understood as something more than placing a body in a grave, more than a dance in somebody's name, more even that the care practiced in corpse washing. Some mourning simply cannot be contained. To recognize and authorize the value of such mourning, we must be open to excess.[15]

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14. Jonathan P. Parry, *Death in Banaras* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 156.

15. This returns us, conceptually, to my opening chapter, and my analysis of open field poetry's embrace of excess—most relevantly in di Prima's *Loba*. There as well

Clinging to Disposable Life

What happens when grief lingers long after the funeral? If the weeping of women in general is delegitimized, it is no surprise that mothers who continue to mourn—to hang on to the corpse—are seen as deviants. And the bodies they refuse to relinquish reflect in death what was true in life: they do not register. Rendered valueless in the eyes of larger society, the bodies of undesirable subjects are placed in graves that only sustain the hierarchized classifications of the living. But in some cases, physically or metaphorically, they fall into the hands of mothers who refuse to play along—or to bow "to what is inevitable," as Parry puts it. They just keep weeping. "Madness," then, is situated at the intersection of seemingly "illegitimate" mourning and the "disposable" life it holds dear. And just as the dead continue to be classified, "madness" itself is a gendered, racialized, and class-related labeling.

Melancholia, because of the way it keeps its grip on a person, might be thought of as paralyzing; likewise, "madness" is often immediately associated with an incapacitating illness. However, recent work across disciplines offers an opportunity to rename the apparent madness of a grieving mother as a mobilizing force. In an article

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as here, I assert that "excess" is both gendered and racialized, and that it is often used to further marginalize Blackness and womanhood/the feminine. My call to be receptive to and accepting of excess is an extension of the feminist, "open field" poetic praxis that I have outlined.

titled "Becoming Aggrieved: An Alternative Framework of Care in Black Chicago," Laurence Ralph describes a mother whose son was killed by a gunshot wound to the head. Witnessing this gruesome death in person, the mother was there to cling to her son's body when it fell to the pavement; but even after they buried him, her horror and grief did not cease. Ralph writes, "After Jo Jo's death, Mrs. Lana kept screaming."[16] Frequently, Mrs. Lana believed she saw bullets lodging in the heads of others in her neighborhood. She would attempt to save them by desperately applying duct tape to their heads or insisting they wear hats as protection. But Ralph argues that her madness "had as much to do with anger as apparitions."[17] How could she not be angry at the senselessness of her loss, or at the way it gets repeated so often in a low-income neighborhood like Eastwood, where death by gunfire is commonplace? Like Holloway's son, Jo Jo's life ended in a "fate" preordained by statistics showing high youth mortality rates: a known peril, but one that remains unchanged.

I read Mrs. Lana's screams as an example of women's weeping that fights white, patriarchal society's acceptance of certain deaths.[18] Mrs. Lana is able to register a

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16. Laurence Ralph, "Becoming Aggrieved: An Alternative Framework of Care in Black Chicago," in *Unfinished: The Anthropology of Becoming*, eds. João Biehl and Peter Locke (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 94.

17. Ralph, 93.

18. See footnote #10 in the Interlude to this chapter for an exploration of "certain" deaths.

habitual loss and render it audible through her expressive grief; and, in the process, she transforms what would otherwise be considered a private grief into a collective concern—one that must be acknowledged and dealt with communally. Her loss resonates with the mother's neighbors, who have known a similar grief, even if they have not yet found the sound to express it themselves. Ralph affirms that in Eastwood, "a mother's madness is not merely her own. It signifies the grief that all residents may express for the many devalued Black lives that have also been prematurely extinguished."[19] Mrs. Lana's grief is not a "temporary sadness" limited to her own individual loss but is instead a "perpetual condition" that reaches out in concern for her neighbors, marking their bodies (even with duct tape) as those worth caring about.[20] It bridges the personal with the political. Rather than seeing Mrs. Lana's madness as illegitimate, Ralph proposes "a concept of 'becoming aggrieved' that does not merely lament death but also affirms life" and names this as a communal strategy, which undoubtedly has a sense of aggression to it.[21] Indeed, aggrievement, as Mrs. Lana demonstrates it, is a holding on to the past while demanding a different kind of future—one where children can walk through their neighborhoods safe from violence.

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19. Ralph, "Becoming Aggrieved," 95.

20. Ralph, 95.

21. Ralph, 96.

Building on Ralph's reading, I argue that such aggrievement is not just a "communal strategy," but a sacred ritual that transforms our understanding of the world, our values, and what we consider "essential to life itself."[22] This transformative potential is demonstrated in the power Mrs. Lana's grief holds for her neighbors, who recognize and give space to her "madness" to the point that they come to "understand their own lives and losses—their own grief—in relation to it."[23] Her neighborhood, more than just a collection of streets, is brought together into a moral community, organized around Black life as its sacred object.[24] This life is inscribed with inherent and inalienable value, and so its loss is regarded with deep sadness, madness, and fervent protest—a legitimate, human response whenever something sacred is violated. This aggrievement

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22. In *On the Sacred*, Gordon Lynch conceptualizes the idea of the sacred "beyond religion" and as something experienced by people as "essential to life itself." Moreover, he argues, something that is considered sacred commands certain behaviors around and towards it; when this conduct is breached, it "elicits a powerful response." Gordon Lynch, "The Idea of the Sacred," in *On the Sacred* (Durham: Acumen, 2012), 24-5

23. Ralph, "Becoming Aggrieved," 106.

24. Building on David Émile Durkheim's more limited understanding of the sacred, Gordon Lynch writes: "We can identify forms of the sacred by the way in which they involve symbol, thought and powerful emotion, expressed through particular kinds of action, to generate moral communities. . . . Sacred rituals are not necessarily formal or traditional rituals but actions that draw us into contact with sacred realities." He adds that the sacred creates "a sense of the boundaries of humane society—and is a potent source of meaning that legitimizes ways of treating people that would not be acceptable in mundane, social interaction." Lynch, "The Idea of the Sacred," 32-3.

radiates out, shouts that Black Lives Matter, and demands that they be treated differently. It is no longer a private grief, but a poetic/poietic (re)imagining.

Valuing Madness

Ralph's concept of aggrievement gives us another way of assessing "madness" apart from pathologizing it—and it does so by emphasizing, and weaving together, two seemingly separate meanings of the word "mad." First, it means that which is opposed to Reason (or "reason" as it has been hegemonically defined by white male authority, which devalues Black life as well as all things deemed "feminine," including the work of care);[25] additionally, and importantly, it means angry or enraged. This duality might go some way in addressing a crucial concern raised by Black feminist scholar Jennifer C. Nash in her book *Birthing Black Mothers*, in which she "consider[s] the Black maternal affects that are culturally authorized—grief, sorrow, mourning—and those that remain

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25. In his book *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind*, cultural and literary theorist La Marr Jurelle Bruce offers a useful commentary on "Reason," building on the work of political theorist Achille Mbembe. Bruce writes: "I distinguish *reason* (lowercase) from *Reason* (uppercase). The former, *reason*, signifies a generic process of cognition within a given system of logic and the 'mental powers concerned with forming conclusions, judgments, or inferences.' Meanwhile, *Reason* is a proper noun denoting a positivist, secularist, Enlightenment-rooted episteme purported to uphold objective 'truth' while mapping and mastering the world. In normative Western philosophy since the Age of Enlightenment, Reason and rationality are believed essential for achieving modern personhood, joining civil society, and participating in liberal politics. However, Reason has been entangled, from those very Enlightenment roots, with misogynist, colonialist, ableist, antiblack, and other pernicious ideologies." La Marr Jurelle Bruce, *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 4.

relegated to the periphery, including Black maternal rage."[26] While I agree with Nash that these affects are generally understood as being in opposition to each other, I propose that madness gives us a way to think of mourning and rage not as mutually exclusive, but as coexistent and possibly mutually *constitutive*; thus, there is no inherent need to privilege one at the expense of the other. As I asserted in my previous chapter, I am interested in a politics that holds space for anger as well as care and imagination. I say this not in contradiction to Nash, but in consensus with her, since she likewise celebrates the work of imagination in all three of her books, including *The Black Body in Ecstasy* and *Black Feminism Reimagined*.[27] In fact, in the last-mentioned of these, she affirms the "visionary world-making capacities" of the Black feminist canon and sees this as one of its greatest strengths, especially in a time when Black studies, she argues, is overly-fixated on death and trapped by a defensive affect.[28] Moreover, just as she does not wish to see imagination sacrificed to death, Nash also wants to tease out "care" in relation to Black feminist projects and affects. She points to Christina Sharpe's "wake

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26. Jennifer C. Nash, *Birthing Black Mothers*, 9.

27. Jennifer Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); Jennifer Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

28. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined*, 3.

work," which I have discussed in a previous chapter,[29] as an example of the way that "care and death are entangled in the black feminist theoretical imagination."[30] I argue that, by sitting with madness, we resist familiar dichotomies that presuppose a necessary choice between mourning and rage, imagination and morbidity, care and death.

In his book *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind* (noted earlier), cultural and literary theorist La Marr Jurelle Bruce offers an evocative and in-depth look at madness in relation to Blackness, categorizing it into "at least four overlapping entities;" the third (and most relevant to this chapter) mode is rage, which he defines as "an affective state of intense and aggressive displeasure."[31] Since Black people are excluded from Enlightenment-informed Reason, most violently (but not solely) through the Atlantic slave trade, Black people are framed "as always already wild, subrational, pathological, mentally unsound, mad," and this puts them at risk of violence especially from law

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29. I summarize "wake work" in my second chapter, on page 111. I write that Sharpe "poetically plays on the word 'wake,' employing its various meanings to firmly connect her own being 'in the wake' of the past to a 'wakefulness' or vigilance towards the ongoing present." I will add that Sharpe also draws on the definition of "wake" as a vigil held beside someone who has died—an occasion that includes various rituals (like eating and drinking) which emphasize the importance of care/sustenance even (or especially) in the presence of death.

30. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined*, 79.

31. Bruce, *How to Go Mad*, 6.

enforcement.[32] Furthermore, Bruce writes, "when black people get mad (as in *angry*), antiblack logics tend to presume they've gone mad (as in *crazy*)."[33] In other words, the presumption of madness both endangers Black folk in the first place, and then obfuscates the violence enacted against them and the injuries they have endured—a circular logic that impedes justice/recourse. I have demonstrated in this chapter how Freudian and other patriarchal understandings of emotion (specifically in opposition to Reason) have characterized women as predisposed to melancholy and the "madness" it subtends. Black women, standing at the intersection of these ideological exclusions and distortions, are thus much more likely to be labelled as "mad"—and this labelling includes, but is not limited to, the much-studied and still-prevalent stereotype of the "Angry Black Woman."[34]

Bruce's book also provides some helpful qualifications and objectives to the study of madness, which I would like to keep in mind here. He writes: "I propose a mad methodology that neither vilifies the madperson as evil incarnate, nor romanticizes the

32. Bruce, 4, 34.

33. Bruce, 8.

34. In her article on Maxine Waters, sociologist Crystal Marie Fleming explores the immense Republican backlash the congresswoman faced for supposedly "inciting hatred and violence," as a result of this "angry black woman" stereotyping. The article's tagline sums it up nicely: "Black women have always been accused of 'incivility' when expressing political critique." Crystal Marie Fleming, "Maxine Waters and the Trope of the 'Angry Black woman,'" Vox, June 29, 2018, https://www.vox.com/first-person/2018/6/29/17515192/maxine-waters-sarah-sanders-red-hen-restaurant-trump.

madperson as resistance personified, nor patronizes the madperson as helpless ward awaiting aid. Rather, mad methodology engages the complexity and variability of mad subjects."[35] Taking this seriously, it is not my intention in this chapter to fetishize madness or madpeople, but rather to challenge the ideologies that ontologically create and mischaracterize a host of social categories (Black people, women, etc.) and pathologize certain modes of being and expression. By rethinking what it means to be mad, and by being cognizant of who is most likely to be labeled as such, we can imagine new ways of being present, engaged, and caring citizens of the world. I proceed with Bruce's same goal in mind: "to extend *radical compassion* to the madpersons, queer personae, ghosts, freaks, weirdos, imaginary friends, disembodied voices, unvoiced bodies, and unReasonable others, who trespass, like stowaways or fugitives, in Reasonable modernity."[36] However, it is not just that we have something to offer madpeople, but also that madpeople, and a theory of madness, have something to offer us. Madness pushes us beyond the bounds of Reason—or, beyond the Reason that binds us.

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35. Bruce, *How to Go Mad*, 9.

36. Bruce, 10.

The Personal and Political, and the Haunting of History

While the hegemonic framework of Reason produces ostracized, mad, "unReasonable others" (to quote Bruce again), a care-centered, counter-hegemonic reading of melancholia/madness (or mourning more generally) provides a way of thinking more deeply and empathetically about togetherness or collectivity, against the isolation and confinement that it otherwise implies. The well-known philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler offers this radical potential in her book *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. She writes: "Many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticizing. But I think it furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility."[37] Feminist scholar Erica S. Lawson takes up this evocative quote as an epigraph to her article, "Bereaved Black Mothers and Maternal Activism in the Racial State," in which she presents the concept of "public motherhood" to describe the political nature of Black mothers' "grief over the violent and unexpected death of their child"—an externalized, social grieving that is more than "a private

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37. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Brooklyn: Verso Books, 2020), 22-3.

expression of pain."[38] She analyzes the U.S.-based organization Mothers of the Movement to demonstrate this "maternal activism," which calls attention to and protests racist violence resulting in the death of young people. She provides an illustrative definition of Black maternal politics as such:

> Black women's maternal politics implicates their bodies at the intersection of the physical and the emotional to form the basis of political subjectivity. . . . Black mothers are charged both with grieving the deaths of their children as well as confronting the tropes that position them as deserving to die. The epistemological foundations of bereaved maternal politics are reflective of a Black feminist praxis whereby Black women identify structural and intersecting forms of violence and devise ways to challenge them. . . . Both Black and Indigenous women's expressions of maternal activism respond to the legacies of colonial violence to press for some form of collective justice.[39]

The invocation of "legacies" weaves together the past and the present, just as Black mothers' "bodies" (or, their embodied existence, along with their performative acts) weave together the personal and the political.[40]

Holloway, as has been previously discussed, likewise weaves together the personal and the political, pressing for collective justice even as she recounts something as private as the death of her son. But more than that, she demonstrates that such a

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38. Erica S. Lawson, "Bereaved Black Mothers and Maternal Activism in the Racial State," *Feminist Studies* 44, no. 3 (2018): 713.

39. Lawson, 725-6.

40. I mean "performative" in the Butlerian sense, as famously laid out in *Gender Trouble* and expounded by a number of scholars. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge Classics, 1990).

perspective is necessary to understand the history of African American death, since it has so often been a result (direct or indirect) of racialized violence, which is committed by and against opposing social groupings (collectives). Opening a chapter titled "Mortifications: How *We* Die," Holloway writes:

> Black folk died in mournful collectives and in disconcerting circumstances. We died in riots and rebellions, as victims of lynching, from executions, murders, police violence, suicides, and untreated or undertreated diseases. In such deaths, being black selected the victim into a macabre fraternity. Certainly, there were innumerable personal stories and discrete situations, both noble and ignoble. But, collectively, the story of how we died shaped a tragic community narrative.[41]

Holloway's haunting, poetic account reveals that Black death, particularly when it results from racialized violence, is never just a personal/familial tragedy (though it certainly is that), but also a communal one—hence the use of the word "we." Just as unsettling is the tense change that takes place between this passage and the title's chapter, showing a poignant continuity between the past and present. The grief is lingering, melancholic.

Moreover, the sense of interwoven temporalities in Holloway's passage finds echo in Sharpe's *In the Wake,* where she writes that "the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present."[42] In other words, the present is haunted by the past.

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41. Holloway, *Passed On*, 57.

42. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 9.

Cheng uses this concept of haunting in her work as well, offering it in explanation for her turn to psychoanalysis. She writes that "the psychoanalytic subject . . . posits every subjective being as historical beings, embedded in time, family, and sociality," and it "teaches us to be attentive to . . . the haunted of that history within the subject." In sum, she adds: "Haunted history alerts us to context."[43]

Sharpe, like Holloway, also includes in her book a personal/familial account of loss, which she aligns with the work of Saidiya Hartman, who uses the autobiographical to connect the individual with the social/historical.[44] There is something poetically profound about this shared practice weaving together the scholarly work of these three Black women researchers—not all of them mothers, but certainly all writing in some way about motherhood in relation to Black death. By merging their individual/familial stories with a common methodology, they form a community/collective among themselves.

More on "Weaving" and Other Poietic Gestures

In explaining these numerous connections (between past and present, personal and political, and the individual contributions of fellow researchers), I have chosen to use this word "weaving"—perhaps because it is so readily associated with a mother's

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43. Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 28.

44. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 8.

care, wanting to keep her children warm and safe.[45] The metaphor that a scarf provides (literally protecting one's neck) is perhaps too fitting to ignore. The figure of the mother in our cultural imaginary assumes and subsumes nearly all emotional and physical forms of labor required to give and sustain life. This is the reproductive function. But the figure of the mother looms (I'll note the pun) just as heavily over death. Her grief is the most palpable and the most sought-after. In his account, Ralph reminds us that Mrs. Lana's "role as a mother" was "at least part of the reason that people were willing to make room for her madness."[46] The mother's place at the grave of her own child is a perversion of the "natural order," where children outlive their parents and mothers breed life, not death.

The image of a mother weeping over her child's corpse is a heartrending one; and yet, for Black mothers especially, the scene is both familiar and widely circulated. Though the labor of mourning is expected (even demanded) of the mother, how often can it appear before it no longer elicits sympathy, but apathy? Disdain, even? Like the lives and deaths of the disposable, it threatens to be woven permanently into the fabric of the social. Even as a mother clings to her child's body, she cannot possess it entirely. In the opening of *Passed On*'s first chapter, Holloway writes, "Quiet as it's kept, if the

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45. In her biomythography, Audre Lorde says of her mother: "She knew about bundling up against the wicked cold." Audre Lorde, *Zami, a New Spelling of My Name: A Biomythography* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1982), 10.

46. Ralph, "Becoming Aggrieved," 101.

question ‘Who’s got the body?’ had been asked very early in the twentieth century, the answer could have been white folk.”[47] In the present day, the question remains just as relevant. As videos of Black teens gunned down by police have increasingly circulated via social media, they have failed to shock some—becoming, instead, normalizing (even naturalizing) forces in our culture.

This perhaps changed with the video recording of George Floyd in his final moments, calling out for his mother as a white police officer kneeled on his neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds—a number that transformed into a symbol as cities across the nation erupted in protest, and university presidents issued letters about anti-racism. In an essay for *National Geographic*, author and columnist Lonnae O’Neal identifies herself as a Black mother and offers a reading of George Floyd’s final words. She writes: “A call to your mother is a prayer to be seen. Floyd’s mother died two years ago, but he used her as a sacred invocation.”[48] Citing reports of dying soldiers calling for their mothers, O’Neal recognizes mothers, in general, as “the ballast. The anchors. A way for those who are close to the edge to find their way back.” She then makes a specific case for Black mothers, adding: “For black people who feel they are about to be

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47. Holloway, *Passed On*, 15.

48. Lonnae O’Neal, “George Floyd’s Mother Was Not There, but He Used Her as a Sacred Invocation,” National Geographic, May 30, 2020, https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/george-floyds-mother-not-there-he-used-her-as-sacred-invocation.

taken from themselves, we are the assurance of memory, of justice, of 10-hour waits to cast our ballots at polling places. We will not be moved." A few days later, a picture uploaded to Reddit featured a woman protestor holding a sign that read: "ALL Mothers were Summoned when George Floyd Called out for His MOMMA."[49] The powerful slogan took off from there, finding its way into Mommy blogs, Etsy T-shirt shops, and a beautiful mural on the side of a Portland building, with colorful flowers drawn around it.[50] It soon adorned the yellow T-shirts worn by the first Wall of Moms (WOM) chapter in Portland, Oregon—an organization that quickly opened additional chapters in "at least 22 cities and states across the U.S."[51] The viral spread of mother-led sensitivity to

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49. u/cooperbradon, "What a powerful sign... It says: 'ALL mothers were summoned when George Floyd called out for his momma,'" Reddit, June 3, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/Bad_Cop_No_Donut/comments/gw0x6s/what_a_powerful_sign_it_says_all_mothers_were/.

50. Diana Spalding, "When George Floyd Called Out for His Mama, Mothers Everywhere Answered," Motherly, June 4, 2020, https://www.mother.ly/george-floyd-called-for-mothers-everywhere; Larissa Marulli, "George Floyd's Last Word Shows the Importance of a Motherly Compassion," Moms, June 8, 2020, https://www.moms.com/george-floyd-last-words/; Xochitl Ruvalcaba, "All Mothers Were Summoned When He Called Out To His MAMA," George Floyd & Anti-Racist Street Art, accessed July 24, 2021, https://georgefloydstreetart.omeka.net/items/show/1390.

51. Marissa J. Lang, "'What Choice Do We Have?': Portland's 'Wall of Moms' Faces off with Federal Officers at Tense Protests," The Washington Post, July 22, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/07/22/portland-moms-protests/; Jocelyn Grzeszczak, "The 'Wall of Moms' Protecting Protestors Are Spreading Beyond Portland," Newsweek, July 23, 2020, https://www.newsweek.com/wall-moms-protesters-are-spreading-beyond-portland-1520004.

and outrage over George Floyd's death goes to demonstrate that mothers perform a unique kind of work when they add their voices and bodies to public protest, even (or especially) when society at large begins to accept, and become numb to, the banality of violence.

Without the work of these mothers, and still in spite of it, a staggering number of people find excuses for murder, siding with what posits itself as law and order. The apathy towards death (murder) is induced not just by familiarity of racialized violence, but also the ubiquity of convenient narratives that serve to justify it. It is through acts of loving care—poietic gestures—that a movement begins to stir a population that has become desensitized and apathetic. Without naming it as such, Sharpe explores and employs the poietic through her concept of "annotation"—a process by which the families of those lost try to counteract the master('s) narrative through their own words and actions. Sharpe writes:

> The second autopsy performed on Michael Brown was requested by his family and their legal team in order to show injury. In other words, that second autopsy was ordered to show the harm done to Michael Brown, who was shot at least six times, including two times in the head. . . . By securing that second autopsy, his family tried to disrupt the dysgraphia that wrote a version of events that was riven with antiblackness. It was not enough to see Michael Brown's body uncovered in the street for hours on a hot August day, his mother and stepfather prevented from going to his side. It was not enough to see his mother's distress, to see and hear her scream and fall into the arms of family members…and so his family added their own annotations; they tried to come up with his body's harms as seen through their eyes in order to contest that body

> drawn by antiblackness. And, of course, even then, it is not enough. It cannot be enough. They cannot recuperate his body.[52]

In the face of a distorting and dehumanizing narrative, Brown's family called for and insisted on a re-narrativization. Sharpe, too, re-narrativized not only Brown's death, but also those subsequent actions of his family. Reading these as poietic gestures, I add my own annotations—and realize there must be, still, so much left that can be said.

Many have drawn a comparison between Mike Brown and Emmet Till, whose lynching occurred almost 60 years before Brown was similarly executed for no crimes committed and in the absence of a trial. But there is a striking resemblance as well between Brown's mother (Latasha Brown) and Mamie Till, whose distress over the gruesome killing of her son was likewise caught on camera. The image of her anguish at the side of Emmett's coffin is already so widely known that there is no need to reproduce it here. Like the story of the lynching itself, her tears have "lingered like melancholy in the memory of black folk."[53] However, it is also common knowledge that the grieving mother insisted upon an open casket so that all could see the brutality inflicted upon her son.[54] This is the aggressive, rage-filled side of aggrievement, the

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52. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 124.

53. Holloway, *Passed On*, 7.

54. Indeed, Lawson cites Mamie Till's decision to display her son in an open casket as "an example of maternal politics." Lawson, "Bereaved Black Mothers and Maternal Activism in the Racial State," 724.

personal that reaches out forcefully towards the political. Its affective, poietic dimensions form the basis of its collective resonance and thus its political effectiveness.[55] It is crucial that "Emmett is remembered by still-aggrieved generations of black folk, grandparents, parents, and their children"[56]—proving that a response to death that refuses to forget is not confined to the mother, though it might begin with her. Mamie Till's stimulation of collective feeling aligns her with Mrs. Lana, whose process of transforming a personal loss into a collective grief I have called a sacred ritual. These mothers, too, in granting sacred value to personal losses that would otherwise be considered mundane, come to occupy their own sacred space. As Ralph says of Mrs. Lana, the particular role of the mother in mourning for her child (and enabling others to

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55. Moten's chapter "Visible Music" from *In the Break*, footnoted in the previous chapter, offers a sonic, poetic reading of this displaying of the body and the circulated photograph. Like Sharpe, he "annotates" it, naming what he hears there "black mo'nin'." He writes: "An image from which one turns is immediately caught in the production of its memorialized, re-membered reproduction. You lean into it but you can't; the aesthetic and philosophical arrangements of the photograph—some organizations of and for light—anticipate a looking that cannot be sustained as unalloyed looking but must be accompanied by listening and this, even though what is listened to—echo of a whistle or a phrase, moaning, mourning, desperate testimony and flight—is also unbearable. These are the complex musics of the photograph." Fred Moten, "Visible Music," in *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 200.

56. Holloway, *Passed On*, 7.

mourn too) might even elevate her "to the ranks of respectability," however mad her grief.[57]

Nevertheless, by extending our framework of care beyond the work of mothers, we might avoid certain conservative assumptions that they alone are responsible for caring, that motherhood is the most sacred or otherwise legitimate role that a woman can occupy, or that women are "natural" caregivers in contrast to men and therefore destined for the role. Quite the opposite, my point is that the work of care can and must radiate out and involve a larger collective; moreover, this shift to the communal work of care requires that we depathologize forms of mourning that tend, in today's world, to accuse some mothers of "madness"—a phenomenon I have previously taken up and endeavored to reevaluate. While the mothers of Emmett Till and Mike Brown are, at last, somewhat legitimated in their mourning, mothers who are read as truly "mad" are more difficult to contend for. Standing in this illegitimated space is Aeriele Jackson, whom Christina Sharpe argues is given airtime but no real sympathy in Allan Sekula and Noël Burch's *The Forgotten Space—A Film Essay Seeking to Understand the Contemporary Maritime World in Relation to the Symbolic Legacy of the Sea.* Sharpe offers her own counternarrative even so:

> In my theoretical terms, she speaks in the film from the position of the wake: from a position of deep hurt and of deep knowledge. . . . She is

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57. Ralph, "Becoming Aggrieved," 107.

> pained as she talks about her children who have been taken from her and about the cruelty of the state that cast her into this position. She talks, too, about being overweight and about her hair, and she says she wears a wig because her hair is falling out in chunks. These are symptoms of her distress. She's not mentally ill, she tells the filmmakers—she knows she is holding baby dolls in her arms, but those dolls are placeholders for her children, who were taken from her and whom she has not seen in six years. She is identified in the end credits as a 'former mother.'[58]

Jackson's grief, evidenced through her very body, is an indictment against "the cruelty of the state" which she names as the party responsible for her loss. Again, we are aware of a nexus between the personal and the political made audible. Jackson's substitutions, made legible in Sharpe's passage, are striking: weight *gain* coincides with hair *loss* while the *absence* of children is registered by the *presence* of baby dolls. Mournful as it is, there is something artistically resonant in the way Jackson makes a presentation of the injustice and the hurt is has caused. It exemplifies what I mean by "poietic."

Indeed, I argue that all these mothers' actions—the duct taping of heads, the refusal to close the casket, the demand for a second autopsy, and the carrying of baby dolls as placeholders for children—demonstrate several elements of poiesis as Desjarlais describes it. He writes, "Poiesis is found in moments of joy and suffering, and of life and death. It is inscribed in the very fact of rituals. Something is made present when

58. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 27.

something else is no longer present."[59] The mothers exemplified in this chapter, in grieving over the death or absence of their children, make present a collective damage as well as the possibility for collective resistance. The substitution of children with dolls, especially, recalls the "transmutation" whereby "consciousness is transformed" according to Desjarlais' framework.[60] Of course, I want to make clear that mine are examples of poiesis wherein the creator's intention is not to make a death (or loss) more beautiful, but to recognize the beauty in the life rendered disposable or out-of-reach. It is not a closure, but a willful non-closure. Likewise, the mothers' grief is not just a clinging to the past born out of desperation, but a laboring for a different future as well. Desjarlais affirms that poiesis is, indeed, inspirational as well as aspirational when he writes: "People create and fashion, most often, within situations of struggle, denial, want, and the wastages of time. There is a recurrent tension between what people aspire to in their lives and the forces that shape and constrain those lives."[61] What constrains the lives I have been attending to here is the pervasiveness of Black pain and death.

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59. Robert Desjarlais, "A Good Death, Recorded," 653. Desjarlais' concept of poiesis is discussed in detail in the Interlude preceding this chapter.

60. Desjarlais, 652.

61. Desjarlais, 653.

Who's Got the Body?

This chapter has been largely focused on mourning and care in relation to Blackness and death in the United States; however, we might zoom out for a moment to examine state-sanctioned violence, and the gestures of care that oppose it, as global phenomena. This, I hope, will work against essentializing narratives that render "the category 'Black mother' . . . a synonym for pain" and demonstrate how women-as-mothers participate in (and become the focal point of) poietic protest in other political contexts.[62] First, I will turn to Adam Rosenblatt's *Digging for the Disappeared: Forensic Science After Atrocity*—and, in particular, his reading of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo and the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo. Not only do I argue that these mothers and grandmothers perform a poietic kind of work through their protest, but I also argue that Rosenblatt himself performs another layer of poietic work through his careful interpretation of these acts, both extending and sensitizing their audience. Next, I turn to M. NourbeSe Philip, whose book-length poem *Zong!* wrestles with a question that likewise occupies the Madres: *Who's got the body?*[63] This question, I argue, demands an accounting of those in power and their ability to disappear certain bodies—sometimes

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62. This quotation is a repetition (abbreviated) of one found in an earlier footnote. Nash, *Birthing Black Mothers*, 4.

63. This question, previously referenced, is borrowed from Holloway. Holloway, *Passed On*, 15.

beyond retrievability. Together, these examples push us towards a deeper understanding of mourning and the political work it might accomplish.

In his book's second chapter, "The Politics of Grief," Rosenblatt gives an account of some organized responses to state violence in Argentina, which left a staggering number of mothers searching and grieving for their children. Rosenblatt writes:

> A central, and now infamous, feature of the 1976-83 military junta's rule in Argentina was the "disappearance" of somewhere between ten and thirty thousand of its citizens" leftist militants, university students and professors, journalists, psychiatrists, Jews, social workers, unionists, rural activists, and many others who did not fit into the ruling junta's semifascist conception of a purer, "reorganized" Argentina. . . . They were raped, drugged, and in most cases murdered. Their bodies were sometimes dumped into the sea from airplanes, sometimes buried in graves registered as "N.N."—"ningún nombre" or "no name."[64]

Rosenblatt then focuses his attention on the Madres de Plaza de Mayo and the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, women's organizations which "first served to support the search for individuals, but ultimately also took on the broader—and quite dangerous—task of documenting and denouncing the junta's human rights violations."[65] Rosenblatt explains that over time (and especially when the dictatorship was officially overthrown) factions emerged which presented competing notions of motherhood, the political, and

64. Adam Rosenblatt, *Digging for the Disappeared: Forensic Science after Atrocity* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2015), 84.

65. Rosenblatt, 88. This is an interesting parallel to my earlier discussion of Mothers of the Movement, as analyzed by Erica S. Lawson.

the uses of grief. Undoubtedly, the most polarizing question involves the harms or benefits of the exhumation of corpses from their unmarked or misidentified graves.

Despite their differences, however, the Asosiación Madres who vehemently oppose exhumations, as well as other Madres who encourage them, all demonstrate madness or other forms of sustained aggrievement. Moreover, the Madres (and Abuelas) have performed acts of poiesis which have earned them international attention. Originally recognized by the white handkerchiefs tied around their heads, their methods of resistance have continued to rely "on ritual, repetition, symbolism, and visibility."[66] The very issue that divides the Madres has elicited some of the most creative and mobilizing responses from both sides of the debate, though they have also drawn contempt. For example, the Asosiación Madres have the reputation of having gone "mad with grief" for refusing exhumations in favor of the slogan "aparición con vida," which in English means "let them appear alive."[67] If taken literally, this demand seems like a denial of reality, a desperate clinging to some wild hope that their children are still living. But Rosenblatt explains that the message has more of a rhetorical/metaphorical valence. He writes, "Far from crazy or unrealistic in this sense, 'aparición con vida'

66. Rosenblatt, 89.

67. Rosenblatt, 93.

reminds us of the scope of grief, the permanence of some injustices, and the limits of forgiveness."[68]

Unlike the other mothers mentioned in this chapter, the Madres are divided over whether to "hang on to the corpse" or to decide that their children have become something else entirely, like a revolutionary ideal. The Asosiación Madres claim they are "fighting for life," and so they no longer want the bodies of their dead.[69] Instead, they form new kinships with youth whom they hope will one day replace them as leaders of a political movement. To them, exhumation means a "false closure" that fails to hold the state accountable for past wrongs or ensure that similar violence will not be reenacted.[70] But according to Rosenblatt, the Madres attempt to separate the individual from the collective by rejecting or downplaying personal grief.[71]

This anxiety that a collective movement might be clouded by expressions of personal grief perhaps falls in line with Cheng's warning in *The Melancholy of Race* "that grievance, which has the guise of agency, in fact does not guarantee political action."[72] However, in line with my earlier arguments, I maintain that there is a productive

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68. Rosenblatt, 94.

69. Rosenblatt, 98.

70. Rosenblatt, 95.

71. Rosenblatt, 99.

72. Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 172.

connection between the personal and the political, which has been held as feminist praxis for decades. Not only is the delegitimizing of personal grief counter-productive—reestablishing a patriarchal framework which diminishes the crucial role of emotion—but it might actually be a hindrance to the formation of communities along the lines of genuine, shared feeling. And on a material level, as Rosenblatt points out, choosing to hold onto the body by supporting exhumations can "provide the evidence that will make a full accounting possible" and might further "the search for living children."[73] Even so, the legitimacy of a decision cannot always be determined by its material outcomes, and Rosenblatt's care in weighing these concerns surrounding exhumation serves as an important model. Indeed, more interesting than the question of whether to dig up the bodies is the question of who holds power over those same bodies—both in life and in death. That is: Who's got the body? This question unites the Madres, regardless of their position on exhumation, against the State, and it fuels their collective aggrievement. In this way, the Madres and Abuelas resist the logics and projects of the State, even if that means (for some of them, at least) a purposeful forfeiting of personal closure.

This resistance to the logics of the State finds an echo in Philip's *Zong!*, which aptly shows how logic is, itself, defined by hegemonic forces—necessitating alternative

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73. Rosenblatt, *Digging for the Disappeared*, 107-9.

modes of listening/reading and speaking/writing. As part of her research for the project, Philip traveled in search of an archive and found only a recording of a court document—evidence of the ruling that considered the throwing overboard of nearly 150 Africans an insurable loss of cargo. Philip writes in her "Notanda": "The poems resist my attempts at meaning or coherence and, at times, I too approach the irrationality and confusion, if not madness (madness is outside of the box of order), of a system that could enable, encourage even, a man to drown 150 people as a way to maximize profits—the material and the nonmaterial."[74] Philip aptly acknowledges that, as violent as state systems are, they can never truly be rendered "mad" since they control the terms of both madness and legitimacy. Likewise, my own attempts to legitimize a mother's madness have mostly symbolic weight, since I carry none of the actual authority of the state; who it chooses to kill, let die, or maim is beyond my power.[75] But Philip's hope, no doubt, is that her counter-narrative surfaces somewhere, after trying to retrieve so many bodies from the ocean, so many years later. She, too, must push back against Reason and

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74. M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 195.

75. In *The Right to Maim*, queer theorist Jasbir K. Puar extends the concept of Foucauldian biopolitics to include a military state's (specifically Israel's) power not only to decide who lives and dies, but also to mark (and thus control) populations through imposed debility/disability. I likewise recognize both killing and maiming as forms of systematized state violence. Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

coherence, occupying the space of illegitimacy in order to be standing on the same (non)ground as the corpses she is claiming.

Philip's trouble, and the troubling nature of *Zong!*, has everything to do with the ocean-as-metaphor for the limitlessness of dehumanization that Black being has been subjected to, as well as the erasure that has followed such tragedy. After attending a talk by Clea Koff in 2005, Philip carries a desire for the body into her work. She writes:

> Months later I do an Internet search for a word or phrase for bringing someone back from underwater that has as precise a meaning as the unearthing contained within the word exhume. I find words like resurrect and subaquatic but not "exaqua." Does that mean that unlike being interred, once you're underwater there is no retrieval—that you can never [be] "exhumed" from water? The gravestone or tombstone marks the spot of interment, whether of ashes or the body. What marks the spot of subaquatic death? Families need proof, Koff says—they come looking for recognizable clothing and say, "I want the bones."[76]

Philip is caught between wanting the bones and the impossibility of retrieving them.[77] She is likewise torn between restrictions and allowances for simultaneously telling and

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76. Philip, *Zong!*, 201.

77. Literary scholar Charlotte Sussman, co-convener of the Representing Migration Humanities Lab at Duke, shares the desire to "mark the spot of subaquatic death" with not only Philip, but with a number of academics who study the Middle Passage and who are currently pushing for memorials to slavery. Sussman voices the problems inherent in registering these losses when she says, "The whole point of putting bodies into the sea was that nobody would find them. It poses a particular problem when what you're trying to commemorate are people who were deliberately lost." Helen Scales, "Drexciya: How Afrofuturism Is Inspiring Calls for an Ocean Memorial to Slavery," The Guardian, January 25, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/jan/25/drexciya-how-afrofuturism-

not telling the story; her work is filled with contradicting aims and methods. In the book's opening poem, "Zong #1," repetitions of the letter "w" look/sound like someone drowning.[78] Language continues to collapse through the final section, "Ebora," where a printer apparently stuttered as it spit out the story, resulting in words superimposed onto each other.[79] This "stuttering" through the poem, especially when Philip reads it aloud herself, quite physically embodies the human struggle to reach the surface—to rise above the water that pushed so many enslaved people down. It likewise represents the difficulty in representing "disposable humanity" as anything legible, when these would seem to be (in human rights discourse, at the very least) contradicting terms. Philip writes, "In *Zong!*, the African, transformed into a thing by the law, is re-transformed, miraculously, back into human. Through oath and through moan, through mutter, chant and babble, through babble and curse, through chortle and ululation to not-tell the story."[80] We might go further and say that the stutter of *Zong!* reflects the desire to recognize the humanity of those thrown overboard, while refusing to attribute

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inspired-calls-for-an-ocean-memorial-to-slavery?CMP=share_btn_fb&fbclid=IwAR2LiPOMuSsNr122S5IDWGwlqhkOT4KvnmZmYiwzHVkJPk9vsUKsgb3PLdg.

78. Philip, *Zong!*, 3.

79. Philip, 176-82.

80. Philip, 196.

that recognition to the systems that permitted the throwing. Fully realized humanity would mean closure, but it might also mean absolution.

Though Philip does not position herself as a "mother" in *Zong!*, she finds herself in the same dilemma as the Madres in relation to the bones and to the state violence/legal processes that have placed them out of reach. I, too, want to hold on to the bodies. But how to allow that same system which claimed them, even in death, from possessing them yet again? Slave insurance finds its analogue in the multiple ways that nation-states continue to thrive off Black disposability; poverty, gun violence, military and police brutality, the prison system do not *i*nsure but rather *e*nsure Black death. There is a desire to relinquish the corpse—to let go of the past and move forward, perhaps proclaiming the beginning of a truly humanitarian world. But the question remains: Who's got the body? We are left with this struggle to annotate, to articulate, to render legible and audible; to organize around something like madness. It began with mothers, perhaps, but the labor is all of ours, and so is the poetry.

Melancholic Hope

I end this chapter, which has sought to theorize mourning and madness, with a section on hope—a *melancholic hope*, in keeping with the spirit of being open to seeming paradoxes and countering damaging dichotomies. Feminist scholar Clare Hemmings has emphasized the importance of "the stories we tell"—particularly the histories we give of our fields and movements; Nash, too, has extended Hemmings' inquiry,

exploring the ways in which storytelling can enable or disable possibilities for understanding, alliance, and solidarity.[81] With this in mind, I want the story I am telling about mourning to incorporate hope, and to thereby include the possibility of joy, celebration, and futurity. I am reminded of Nash's hopeful turn, in the Coda to *Black Feminism Reimagined*, towards "rich new debates about eroticism, reproduction, visual culture, maternity, and surveillance" that prove Black feminism is "alive and vibrant," as opposed to totally fixated on death.[82] While I see her point, and while I share her misgivings about any movement or field organized solely around woundedness,[83] I feel the need to push back as well. I am not convinced that Black feminist scholars today are as fixated on death *as opposed* to life as one might imagine, especially since they are regularly involved in contesting assumed binaries between life and death, future and past, optimism and pessimism. Moreover, several writers describe their projects as acts of "love"—the same word that Nash chooses for herself—even as they seek to redress the wound and claim the dead. To further interrogate the role that hope might play in

81. Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Jennifer C. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined*.

82. Nash, 137.

83. In "Wounded Attachments," feminist scholar Wendy Brown famously critiques politicized identity's self-narrated "incapacity, powerlessness, and rejection" and its "foreclosure of its own freedom, its impulse to inscribe in the law and in other political registers its historical and present pain rather than conjure an imagined future of power to make itself." Wendy Brown, "Wounded Attachments," *Political Theory* 21, no. 3 (1993): 400-2.

the context of mourning/melancholia, I turn to the work of Joseph Winters, scholar of Black studies and religious studies. In a book aptly titled *Hope Draped in Black*, Winters advocates for a melancholic kind of hope, quite different from the optimism prescribed by American progress narratives.

Hope Draped in Black clearly articulates my own belief in ambiguity, and in simultaneous, if paradoxical, impulses towards tragedy and hope. Winters' project argues for "conceptions of hope and futurity that are mediated by melancholy," and that are not conflated with optimism or the Protestant progress narrative.[84] This hope is "draped in black" in the sense that it is committed, first and foremost, to Black people and their struggle for freedom; and also in the sense that it builds on scholarship around Du Bois' notion of the Veil and its multiple significations throughout African-American literature, sometimes indicating "double-consciousness" or a sense of a split self, and other times resembling a shroud, marking Black life with mourning and death. While he critiques some of Du Bois' limitations, Winters upholds and borrows from Du Bois' "refusal to absorb black strivings into a triumphant account of history."[85] Reading this work, one can imagine that, if Black studies is presently fixated on death, it occupies that fixated position out of protest to the way the world is, and the ways in which "certain

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84. Joseph R. Winters, *Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy, and the Agony of Progress* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 6.

85. Winters, 42.

subjects and bodies become more 'worthy' of life than others and therefore more worthy of compassion, care, protection, and lament."[86] The attention to death is a work of love and care, as well as an affirmation of life that is too often devalued and cut short.

Just as I maintain an interest in the importance of "the stories we tell" about history, so too does Winters emphasize the crucial role of what we might understand as myth or storytelling; more specifically, Winters demonstrates a wariness towards processes by which a horrible past can be subsumed within a narrative of present progress and optimism. To clarify the difference between progress and his preferred melancholic hope, Winters writes: "I am primarily concerned with progress as a triumphant category, as a tool that helps to reinforce, affirm, and justify the order of things (and conceal the nasty aspects of the existing state of affairs)."[87] This type of progress narrative could be used to invisibilize, normalize, or downplay past instances of Black death and suffering and to enable their continuation, as long as it can be said that there is still some glimmer of a possible future good. Winters' book calls for a disavowal of such a narrative—not to get rid of possibility or hope, but in order to dispel illusions and insist on the real thing, now. Moreover, this insistence is not just for the purposes of uncovering "the truth" and acknowledging wrongs done, but also for the purposes of claiming the humanity and empathy that is possible in all of us. He writes:

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86. Winters, 28.

87. Winters, 15.

"But this book is also motivated by a sense that what is admirable about us is our capacity to be moved, affected, and transformed by others. Melancholy names one way that we are undone by the sufferings and struggles of others. . . . A less violent and cruel world depends, in large part, on our capacity to be figuratively wounded and opened."[88] His vision of hope, like mine, rests on insisting on care and vulnerability, and not allowing ourselves to become cold or immune to the suffering of others, no matter how often it is normalized and justified in our society and through the media.

As "melancholic" as his vision of hope might be, Winters also seeks an affirmation of life; moreover, he presents these two impulses as actually compatible, which might allow us to complicate the prevalent dichotomy that exists in scholarly fields between "optimism" and "pessimism." Citing Cheng's *The Melancholy of Race* to support his argument, Winters understands Cheng to be suggesting that "melancholy is a strategy that involves wrestling with death, suffering, and absurdity while also affirming moments of freedom, joy, and pleasure."[89] I offer the poet and essayist June Jordan as another compelling example: she attempts to emphasize "affirming moments" and locate herself within a hopeful framework, even as she speaks out of a place that is clearly vulnerable to and sensitively aware of suffering. The title of her book of essays, *Some of Us Did Not Die*, is haunted by a "but" that is felt (though absent) at the beginning

88. Winters, 29.

89. Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 20.

of that very phrase; it attests to the proximity to death, dehumanization, and assault that people of color and women, and especially individuals who are both, often occupy. Jordan's Introduction, an essay that shares the book's title, is an embrace of difference and an exploration of what it means to survive violence of multiple stripes, asking how the experience of having survived can be converted into radical acts of resistance against the ongoing death and suffering of self and others. It's about "the power we might possess" and a longing for the world to not "lose joy, and rational justice, as a global experiment to be pursued and fiercely protected."[90] However, it is also about the struggle of speaking out when one is simultaneously attempting to heal from one's own trauma, such as rape, and the ever-remaining knowledge that "he or she has been violated and debased."[91] We can understand Jordan's hope as one "draped in black"—haunted by trauma, but actually insistent on the memory of suffering as that which enables resistance and survival, as that which is fundamental to rendering struggles for life and freedom legible.

Jordan continues her two-toned approach in "I Am Seeking an Attitude," in which she establishes point-blank that "We women . . . are, everywhere, subject to

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90. June Jordan, *Some of Us Did Not Die: New and Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 3-4.

91. Jordan, 7.

physical and social violence."[92] She questions why there is not a stronger, more insistent, and more international women's movement, if women's subjugation is in fact so universal. I think that women, in multiple feminist circles and across generations, have done an incredible amount of thinking and organizing; and in the present wake of #MeToo, I see no need to argue that people operating under the sign of "woman" are unaware of women's social condition or some of the threats posed against our bodily autonomy/existence. But I do admire and echo the fierce kind of love, for oneself and one's communities, that Jordan advocates for—a love that deems it worthwhile and necessary to fight for each other. Drawing from the assertiveness of the Black Power movement, Jordan calls for a similar feminist "attitude" when she writes: "I am a woman. And I am seeking an attitude. I am trying to find reasons for pride."[93] And this pride, this self-affirming and communal love, calls into being a "righteous rage," by which "rights" are named and maintained through "the power of deterrence and the power of retaliation and the power to transform our societies."[94] But just as there is sometimes the need for rage, as Brittney Cooper beautifully puts it in *Eloquent Rage*, Jordan points to this rage as a demonstration that there is life and joy in being a woman, in calling women the people you belong to and claim. It is pride, love, and joy that

92. Jordan, 95.

93. Jordan, 98.

94. Jordan, 99.

compels June Jordan to claim women, Black women, and especially Black women poets whom she takes as models for her own hopes and sense of self. This can be seen from the very title of her essay, "The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America or Something Like a Sonnet for Phillis Wheatley." Jordan is interested, fundamentally, in the survival of the death-prone, in the hopes made visible through individuals' resistance against their oppression, and in the impossible made possible.

In wanting to locate good feelings even in the midst of grief, I take my cue from *Pleasure Activism*, wherein writer, activist, and doula adrienne maree brown asks: "How would we organize and move our communities if we shifted to focus on what we long for and love rather than what we are negatively reacting to?"[95] Like Nash, Brown draws attention to affect, and to the possibilities that might emerge if we were to center ways of being through love, trust (with accountability), and intimacy instead of building around a sense of injury. Indeed, Nash advocates for a process of "letting go" in order to do this work of reimagining;[96] and Brown is attuned to the ways in which trauma is carried in the body, needing to be faced but then "set down" in order for transformation and healing to take place.[97]

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95. adrienne maree brown, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* (Chico: AK Press, 2019), 23.

96. brown, 114.

97. brown, 49.

I do not advocate a complete "letting go" of injury, of the acknowledgement of suffering, or of the grieving process that I think is so central to activist and scholarly work—and to just *being* in the world, as engaged public citizens and as mutually vulnerable human beings. In this last section, I have attempted to trace a melancholic hope that undoes the dichotomies often created between pessimism and optimism, past and present/future, death and life, mourning and joy. While I remain forever questioning the role of woundedness and pleasure in all my engagements with social justice issues, I think it is important to acknowledge it *as* a question—not just for me, but for multiple writers in fields pejoratively known as "grievance studies." Because they involve real people—real lives and real deaths—the stakes are always high; and perhaps if we worried too much about how pessimistically or optimistically to present ourselves, we might not find the time to get anywhere at all. But perhaps acknowledging that these positionings are often highly *rhetorical*, and not fundamentally incompatible, we can continue to speak with and to each other, imagining ourselves in community along all kinds of wayward lines.

Interlude

For Ethel Trew Dunlap, and Other Black Women Poets

Poet! There is no way to begin
except in exclamations,
how you reach out through the print.

You make your truth known,
amidst every lie; the ink dries
and there you are, speaking.

You are brazen as any man,
but with a twist—
a militant with hips,
birthing new wor(l)ds like
God Herself turning the lights on.
Electric.

Like when Carita Collins spoke
"Enough" into existence,
her resistance penned with
"This must not be!"
and Black folks the world over
agreed.

Or "Miss" Ethel Trew Dunlap,
whose poems stoked the freedom fight—
"Four Million Strong" and growing.
She dreamed of dying one night,
but kept going.

I can see how you grew
your own garden,
a community of poets
calling out each other's names
like so many women before you,
dedicating a line or two
to those you truly cherished.

I know poetry has a spirit—
is spirit—
a growing from the earth
with some heaven in mind.
It takes weeding through the dirt
to rise up, bravely,
towards the open sky.

Poetry for the People, Then and Now

I wrote this poem in Spring 2018 as part of a research fellowship with the Representing Migration Humanities Lab, housed in Duke's English department.[1] The stream I was working in, headed by Professor Jarvis McInnis, was conducting archival research related to Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association. Browsing through the Robert A. Hill Collection in Duke's Rubenstein Library, I came across copies of *The Negro World* newspaper—and, in particular, the "Poetry for the People" section that appeared in 1920-1921. I became especially interested in Ethel Trew Dunlap, whose name I had previously never heard, but who was the newspaper section's "most prolific" contributor.[2] My poem (above) sings in celebration of Dunlap

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1. For more information about this lab's former activities, see the "About" and "Collaborative Streams" pages on the lab's website, https://sites.duke.edu/representingmigration/about/.

2. Tony Martin, *Literary Garveyism: Garvey, Black Arts and the Harlem Renaissance* (Dover: The Majority Press, 1983), 50.

and other Black women, like Carita Collins, and the impact they made in spreading Garvey's Black nationalist message through their poetry.[3]

I position the poem here, as the gateway to my dissertation's final chapter, to underscore a Black feminist tradition that ties political movement with communal sharing and creative expression. Throughout this dissertation, I have explored poetry as genre, method, ethical orientation, and political praxis. I have looked to poetry, and the related concept of poiesis, as a way to ground theory within the social world as we know and live it, especially as it is shaped by gender, race, and class. I continue these explorations in this final chapter, centering Black women artists in that creative "open field" that this dissertation, as a whole, is dedicated to defining and exploring. Turning to Chicago artist and educator Jamila Woods and her album *HEAVN*, my fourth chapter

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3. For more information on this poem and its larger project, see my Scalar website that includes the digitized images of "Poetry for the People" pages, the originals of which can be found in the Robert A. Hill Collection in Duke University's Rubenstein Library. This website also features a selection of poems that I have personally annotated to offer historical context and explanations of poetic devices. Finally, this website is home to a handful of my own original poems, written in response to this archive and available as text and audio. These latter poems are steeped in the language, images, themes, and affective underpinnings of those primary poems that they aim to speak alongside. Jessica Covil, *"Poetry for the People": Reading Garveyism through Poetry*, last modified May 31, 2019, https://scalar.usc.edu/works/poetry-for-the-people-reading-garveyism-through-poetry/index.

brings the study of poetry to contemporary music, analyzing Black feminist popular culture as a medium for Black women's political power and personal voices.[4]

Looking at their creative work within their social and political contexts, Jamila Woods and Ethel Trew Dunlap have a great deal in common. Much like Dunlap and other Black women who regularly contributed to *The Negro World*'s "Poetry for the People" section, Woods uses poetry to galvanize affective community and political movement, positioning herself and fellow Black girls/women as inherently valuable beings as well as social leaders. Moreover, the album, like the newspaper section, is "for the people" in that it is made to be accessible, both in terms of its style/content and its distribution: as pop music, it speaks to a broad public, communicating complex social issues through pleasurable rhythms and compelling refrains (much like poetry in the 1920s); and, since the album is available for free on the artist's SoundCloud, one need not even buy the CD or pay for a streaming service subscription to listen.[5]

Furthermore, just as Ethel Trew Dunlap's poetry was inspired by the Pan-African Black nationalist movement known as Garveyism, Jamila Woods' album connects to and

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4. Fittingly, this chapter was born from a paper I wrote for Professor Tsitsi Jaji's English course on Black Women's Poetry and later presented in the Black Popular Culture section of the Popular Culture Association's 2019 National Conference. I explored similar themes in a Writing 101 class on Black Feminism in Popular Culture, which I taught in Fall 2019.

5. Jamila Woods, *HEAVN*, Jagjaguwar, 2016, compact disc; Woods, *HEAVN*, 2017, streaming audio, SoundCloud, https://soundcloud.com/jamilawoods/sets/heavn-3.

reflects on the project of Black Liberation today. Woods dropped *HEAVN*, her first solo album, in July 2016—just as the Black Lives Matter movement continued to gain new steam on a national scale. (According to BuzzFeed Global Managing Editor Susie Armitage, this was also "the year Black Lives Matter went global."[6]) A study by the Pew Research Center shows a spike in Twitter use of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter in February 2016, amidst controversy surrounding the Oscars and their dearth of Black nominees.[7] There had been previous spikes in 2015, corresponding to major race-related events: the deaths of Freddie Gray and Sandra Bland while they were in police custody; the mass shooting, motivated by white supremacy, at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina; and Bernie Sanders' defense of #BlackLivesMatter in a debate for the notorious 2016 U.S. presidential election.

This charged social atmosphere sets the stage for Woods' album, which does not shy away from political issues but directly engages them. This, again, is something that Woods has in common with Dunlap: both contemplate and reach towards a "heaven" (fittingly the title of Woods' album, more or less)—offering a vision of a better future,

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6. Susie Armitage, "2016 Was The Year Black Lives Matter Went Global," BuzzFeed News, December 8, 2016, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/susiearmitage/2016-was-the-year-black-lives-matter-went-global.

7. Monica Anderson, "The Hashtag #BlackLives Matter Emerges: Social Activism on Twitter," Pew Research Center, August 15, 2016, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2016/08/15/the-hashtag-blacklivesmatter-emerges-social-activism-on-twitter/.

premised on political action now. Both depict Black women leading the world towards that goal, often naming predecessors (and contemporaries) whose labors and insights have made their own work possible. This vision is not difficult to glean from Woods' album: not only do several tracks allude to protest, but the album as a whole is dedicated specifically to Black women and girls, which is itself a powerful political act. In fact, the first words Woods sings on the opening track are "Black girl." She backs her intentions in an interview with *The Chicago Tribune*, stating: "I really think about young Black girls, especially with this project; I'm really thinking of my former self, or my sisters, as my audience."[8] By addressing herself—and, by extension, Black girls like her—first and foremost, Woods challenges the regular erasures that are characteristic of both American history and our contemporary, mainstream culture, wherein Black women are often sidelined in discussions about prominent social concerns. It is telling that one of the first self-proclaimed Black feminist anthologies was titled *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*.[9] In a world where even "revolutionary" politics (feminism, Black Power movements, Marxism, etc.) have often invisibilized Black women, Black feminism performs the otherwise unimaginable.

8. Josh Terry, "Interview: Jamila Woods Is One of Chicago's Most Multifaceted Musicians," Chicago Tribune, June 20, 2016, www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/music/redeye-jamila-woods-interview-heavn-chicago-20160619-story.html.

9. Eds. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (New York: Feminist Press, 1982).

In this respect, Woods' *HEAVN* speaks from that impossible space. But to say that *HEAVN* is bold, or radical, does not mean that it is singular or that it is the only album to chart this territory in Black popular music. To my ear, Woods' album sits alongside Nao's *Saturn*, Noname's *Room 25*, Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer*, SZA's *Ctrl*, Solange's *A Seat at the Table*, and Beyoncé's *Lemonade*—all albums that were released within two years of *HEAVN*.[10] Traversing a variety of genres, styles, emotional registers, and vocabularies, they seem to share in the project (not a necessarily unitary or cohesive one) of creating and claiming a space for Black women in popular music, and in the world more broadly. As such, I argue, Black feminist popular music is a medium/genre currently being utilized to position Black women and girls as authors, subjects, and primary audiences of cultural narratives, as well as central figures in social movements.

The Made-ness of HEAVN

Much like *Loba*, *HEAVN* embraces multiplicity even in trying to find and commune around some felt singularity; its variety of themes, tones, and messages reflects the variety apparent in the Black women and girls whom it takes as its primary

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10. Nao, *Saturn*, Little Tokyo Recordings and RCS Records, October 2018, compact disc; Noname, *Room 25*, Phoelix and Noname, September 2018, streaming audio, SoundCloud, https://soundcloud.com/noname/sets/room-25; Janelle Monáe, *Dirty Computer*, Wondaland Arts Society, Bad Boy Records, and Atlantic Records, April 2018, compact disc; SZA, *Ctrl*, Top Daw Entertainment and RCS Records, June 2017, compact disc; Solange, *A Seat at the Table*, Saint Records and Columbia Records, September 2016, compact disc; Beyoncé, *Lemonade*, Parkwood Entertainment and Columbia Records, April 2016, compact disc.

audience. It borrows from and speaks back against given myths and constructs its own in the process. This creative endeavor to explore all that Black women and girls can be, and to encourage their own perpetual self-definition, is, moreover, a poietic gesture to imagine a world where they can thrive. As discussed in my third chapter, such a poietic gesture is necessarily political and calls for the listener's careful and care-filled attention.

Chapter 4: Tracing *HEAVN's* Black Feminist Traditions: From Sojourner Truth to #BlackGirlMagic

This final chapter examines Woods' album as a musical collection of poems, foregrounding that reading within the lineage of Black women artists and activists whom Woods' work echoes directly or indirectly. As the track "Blk Girl Soldier" in particular makes clear, the album takes its inheritance from activism as old as Sojourner Truth and as new as the contemporary hashtag #BlackGirlMagic. In so doing, Woods insists upon the existence and importance of tradition in revolutionary politics—that is, preserving and carrying forward the freedom work of the past into the present day and towards an altered future. I argue that Woods' intergenerational approach to Black feminism echoes the radical praxis of the 1970s and 80s, when Black feminism emerged out of (and in tension with) Black nationalism and second-wave feminism, establishing creative, intellectual, and political foremothers as they forged a movement tailored to their own needs and desires. This callback to prior decades is, in this sense, a *renewed* call to place Black girls and women front and center, a call to remember and reassert that radical impetus. It argues that the temporality of Black feminism is not so much linear (as even the word "lineage" implies), but much more malleable. To return to the very building blocks of this dissertation, we could say that Black feminist history itself becomes an open field—a world prone to myth and mythmaking that allows contemporary artists, like Jamila Woods, to select, decipher, rearrange, and reinvent. But

I am not interested solely in the artist's objectives; I am also interested in how we, as listeners, hear and engage with such an album. I argue that, by listening with an ear attuned to Black feminist traditions, we gain insight into how the past can be utilized, flexibly and imaginatively, to assert agency in one's present political moment. In this case, specifically, we learn how contemporary popular music can harness past traditions—in a way that speaks to today's world—to establish a revolutionary love for and among Black women.

Background on Jamila Woods and HEAVN

While she takes Black girls/women as her album's primary audience, Woods gives voice to a variety of themes, tones, and musical styles. She also speaks to Black girls/women both as a collective and as individuals—an approach that leaves room for conflicting affects and a productive ambivalence around identity and belonging. That is, Woods sounds a desire to be a unique "one," while at the same time feeling and understanding oneself as part of a larger whole. Fittingly, at its release the album garnered the most attention for the singles "HEAVN" and "Blk Girl Soldier," which are two quite different tracks.[1] The former is one of the album's more personal and intimate tracks, taking the search for love as its theme; the latter is a political anthem, steeped in the rhetoric of protest and of "Black girl magic." Together, these songs represent the

1. Jamila Woods, "HEAVN" and "Blk Girl Soldier," tracks 5 and 9 on *HEAVN*, 2017, streaming audio, SoundCloud, https://soundcloud.com/jamilawoods/sets/heavn-3.

concurrent tendencies of Woods' project: inward reflection and social action, defined around a desire for acceptance and fulfillment that is both individual *and* collective, personal *and* political.

This tendency reflects Woods' musical career as a whole, which initially sprang out of the communities she was a part of before it became a solo venture. She sang in her church choir, later formed a soul-pop band called Milo and Otis with college friends, and famously collaborated with Chance the Rapper after meeting him at a poetry open mic.[2] But along with being a singer and songwriter, Woods is also a poet and educator, with long-time roots in Chicago's Spoken Word scene. She currently serves as Associate Artistic Director of Young Chicago Authors, a non-profit that organizes workshops, open mics, and competitive slams. YCA's mission, as stated in the "About" section of their website, is to create "a space dedicated to the voices of young people who face violence and segregation on a daily basis, a safe place that provides a platform for youth expression and celebrates the narratives of teens from every corner of the city."[3] But in coming together as a YCA community, these teens nevertheless embrace their individual differences—something Woods values and carries into her own artistic work. In her

2. Jenny Gathright, "Jamila Woods and the Poetry of Black Love," NPR, November 22, 2017, www.npr.org/2017/11/22/565382283/jamila-woods-and-the-poetry-of-Black-love.

3. "About," Young Chicago Authors, accessed July 26, 2021, https://youngchicagoauthors.org/about.

interview with *The Chicago Tribune*, Woods says: "YCA was where I found people who are weird and cool with themselves and cool with being around people who are different from them. I learned a lot about myself and about being creative."[4]

This interest in creating space for oneself, and in forming that "self" through an understanding of community that is open to difference, clearly defines the project of *HEAVN*. Indeed, the desire for space resonates throughout the album, but that space is sometimes one's individual haven and other times a shared space for neighbors. In both cases, the album seeks and establishes a revolutionary love for and among Black women, repeatedly envisioning "a planet" where they can flourish. Ambitious and nuanced, *HEAVN* mixes joy and loneliness, quietness and strength, vulnerability and resilience; and it highlights both history and the present, likewise prioritizing both community and the self. It is the active harmonization of seeming dichotomies that both expands definitions of protest and reaffirms the role of art in social activism. Like the Sorrow Songs or the Blues signifying, Woods' *HEAVN* presents pain overlaid with celebration. In doing so, it creates a space for healing, a returning to old and present

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4. Josh Terry, "Interview: Jamila Woods Is One of Chicago's Most Multifaceted Musicians," Chicago Tribune, June 20, 2016, www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/music/redeye-jamila-woods-interview-heavn-chicago-20160619-story.html.

wounds in an "endeavor to heal the flesh and redress the pained body."[5] But the joy is not mere cover; it is as real as the social antagonisms and self-doubts with which it coexists. This nuance, and the space it allows for contradiction, is part of what makes poetry (at least potentially) so compelling and so conducive to radical creativity; this qualifies *HEAVN* for serious scholarly attention and positioning alongside other canonical Black feminist thought and expression, which I lay out in this chapter.

A note: in my close reading of Woods' album, I will sometimes refer to "the subject" of a song or simply "the singer," which I do not wish to conflate with Woods herself—just as we often refer to "the speaker" of a poem, without making assumptions about the author. This differentiation is especially important in regard to personal matters of desire and mental health; I am interested in interpreting message and form, not in diagnosing the artist.

Self and Community: A Side-by-Side of Two Tracks

Let us return to the album's two most popular tracks, "HEAVN" and "Blk Girl Soldier," which might seem at first to move in opposite directions—but which actually foreground the dual nature of Woods' project. In the first verse of "HEAVN," Woods sings:

> Show me, show me, show me how you do that trick

5. Saidiya Hartman, "Redressing the Pained Body: Toward a Theory of Practice," in *Scenes of Subjection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 75.

> The one that makes you love someone
> The world wants us so numb and alone
> Show me, show me, show me how you do it
> The one that makes the winters warm
> The one where summer never comes[6]

The singer sets herself apart from "the world," whose desires for her are so counter to her own. She prefers "us" to "alone," imagining the sensation of warmth in place of numbness. These soothing images are matched by the gentle sound of her voice, which lilts on "*that* trick." Emphasizing the demonstrative adjective, she indicates the love she wants. The pronoun "me," given early in the song, places the singer-as-individual front-and-center; and although rendered in soft tones, the imperative "show me" is an active appeal whose repetition is an insistence that her desire be fulfilled. This balance between "me" and "us" is continued in the following lines: "I don't wanna run away with you / I wanna live our lives right here / I just wanna fall asleep by you." While "I" begins the lines, the "you" at the end brings the self and other together in blissful harmony, represented in the "da-da-da" that follows.

That the self does not collapse completely inward, but instead reaches for "you," emphasizes that the desire for "that trick" is not a retreat from the world, but a hopeful re-imagining—not a shrinking, but a growth. And in this respect, "Blk Girl Soldier" is a perfect parallel to "HEAVN," though in many ways it might seem like its opposite: it

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6. Woods, "HEAVN", track 5 on *HEAVN*, https://soundcloud.com/jamilawoods/sets/heavn-3.

does not retreat from the world even when calamity hits, but instead hits back in protest. This track pairs politically-attuned lyrics with sounds of urgency/insurgency, rendering the album's connection to Black Feminism and community activism boldly apparent. The track begins with a bass synthesizer, followed by a drawn-out "ooo" that puts the listener in a state of readiness. Opening on the chorus, the singer immediately places the Black girl front-and-center, declaring: "See she's telepathic / call it Black girl magic."[7] The invocation of "Black girl magic" places the song in direct conversation with the hashtag by the same name, which went viral in 2013. Julee Wilson of *HuffPost* offers one definition: "Black Girl Magic is a term used to illustrate the universal awesomeness of Black women. It's about celebrating anything we deem particularly dope, inspiring, or mind-blowing about ourselves."[8] This definition—true to the various uses of the hashtag across social media—is one that opens up more than it nails down; while some have criticized the hashtag, it is perhaps most effective in that it offers plenty of space for users to create their own meanings and apply it to a wide variety of contexts, from the most mundane to the most exceptional. It is a way to showcase the achievements of

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7. Woods, "Blk Girl Soldier," track 9 on *HEAVN*, https://soundcloud.com/jamilawoods/sets/heavn-3.

8. Julee Wilson, "The Meaning of #BlackGirlMagic, and How You Can Get Some of It," HuffPost, January 13, 2016, www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/what-is-Black-girl-magic-video_us_5694dad4e4b086bc1cd517f4.

Black girls and women, filling the gap in positive media representation and creating a sense of solidarity in the face of larger society's regular devaluations.

Like the hashtag, the "she" in the song has space enough for a variety of Black women; it broadly refers to any "blk girl soldier" who "scares the gov'ment / Déjà vu of Tubman" or who is made to "hate her own skin" due to internalized racism.[9] This shift in scale from being a literal fugitive of the state to being metaphorically outcast demonstrates that violence comes in a variety of forms. The following lines, "We go missing by the hundreds / *Ain't nobody checkin' for us*," show violence in the form of apathy. While this undoubtedly refers to the thousands of Black girls and women currently missing in America, it could also refer to the kidnapping of 276 Black girls from a Chibok school in Nigeria in April 2014—which, after failing to garner much coverage in mainstream news, finally prompted the hashtag movement #BringBackOurGirls.[10] Again, "Blk Girl Soldier" incorporates social media activism, and also shows that violence against Black girls and women is a broader, international issue. Just as this violence is everywhere, it is all the time—and across time periods. Woods croons:

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9. Woods, "Blk Girl Soldier."

10. Litoff, Alyssa, "'Bring Back Our Girls' Becomes Rallying Cry for Kidnapped Nigerian Schoolgirls," ABC News, May 6, 2014, www.abcnews.go.com/International/bring-back-girls-rallying-cry-kidnapped-nigerian-schoolgirls/story?id=23611012.

Look at what they did to my sisters
Last century last week
They put her body in a jar and forget her
They love how it repeats.[11]

The alternating lines (italicized) are sung as harmonized vocals, given in response to the initial call to "look." These vocals inflect the haunting tone of the lyrics, which show (to borrow from contemporary Black feminist scholar Christina Sharpe) that "the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present."[12]

But just as violence is and has been a continuous factor in the lives of Black girls and women, resistance to that violence has always been powerfully present. Beginning with "Rosa was a freedom fighter / and she taught us how to fight," the song's "she" transforms into prominent Black women activists Ella Baker, Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, Sojourner Truth, and Assata Shakur. The way that Woods catalogues these leaders is perhaps reminiscent of the rallying cry #SayHerName; but instead of mourning lives lost to police brutality, the catalogue here becomes a celebration of past

11. Woods, "Blk Girl Soldier." In a profile of Woods, *Noisey* writer Tara Mahadevan explains the particular significance of "jar" in Woods' line. She writes: "The song references different things that have been on Woods's mind, like Saartjie Baartman, the African woman who was discovered by European explorers fascinated with her large bottom and skin color. Baartman was exhibited as part of a freak show in Europe until she died, when she was dissected and parts of her body—specifically her brain and genitals—were placed in jars." Tara Mahadevan, "Heavn Help Us: The Joyful Music of Jamila Woods," Noisey, July 13, 2016, https://www.vice.com/en/article/64yjkd/jamila-woods-heavn-interview-profile-2016.

12. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016), 9.

revolutionaries that fortifies present-day activists. This growing energy explodes in the lines:

> And she she she she she she
> Don't give up
> Yea yea yea yea yea yea
> She don't give up
> She doh doh doh doh doh doh don't give up
> No no no no no no
> She don't give up

In chanting rhythms, the singer uplifts the Black "she" and refuses surrender, the repetition like the jumping or fist-pumping one finds at rallies led by Black Lives Matter or Black Youth Project 100, which Woods herself has attended.[13] The interlude to the song, titled "Assata's Daughters," frames the necessity of and stakes for liberation:

> It is our duty to fight for our freedom
> It is our duty to win
> We must love each other and support each other
> We have nothing to lose but our chains[14]

Spoken and repeated in the style of call-and-response, each phrase becomes a mantra, taking on a collective responsibility and centering love for each other in the revolutionary endeavor. Black girlhood becomes a symbol of strength, built on the legacy of those who came before and continued through the constant reclaiming of freedom as a shared vision.

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13. Mahadevan, "Heavn Help Us."

14. Woods, "Assata's Daughters," track 8 on *HEAVN*, https://soundcloud.com/jamilawoods/sets/heavn-3.

Continuing Black Feminist Traditions: Self-Naming, Re-Narrativization, and Consciousness-Raising

Across her album, Woods employs several practices that were staples of Black feminist organizing in the 70s and 80s—specifically, self-naming, re-narrativization, and consciousness-raising. The notion of naming oneself, and the importance of naming in general, link Woods' *HEAVN* to the work of Audre Lorde and the Combahee River Collective, of which Lorde was a member. By turning to and analyzing the work of these earlier Black feminist writers/activists, we can better understand how Woods is drawing on prior traditions to assert power in her present moment and to explore agency through her own, created identity.

In *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, Lorde offers a detailed explanation of how she came to change her first name from "Audrey" to "Audre."[15] The story itself is less important than the choice to tell the story in the first place; likewise, the dropping of the "y" is but a small change when compared to the greater, symbolic action of taking one's name into one's own hands. Lorde also named a new genre when she characterized her book as a "biomythography"—thus creating a space for herself when the existing genres could not incorporate her. This new genre allows for a mixing of autobiography and creative storytelling, where the role of "myth" gives the writer the power to define

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15. Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Watertown: Persephone Press, 1982), 21-5.

themselves and their experiences while taking some freedoms.[16] While "myth" perhaps recalls the mythologies of various gods, the authority to name is also directly tied to God in the Bible: "He determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names."[17] Perhaps it is no accident that Audre's last name is "Lorde."

Likewise, *HEAVN* and the art of storytelling allow Woods to become lord of herself. In "Eve (Interlude)," Woods repeats the story of how she got her name, as told by her mother.[18] Notably, "Eve" is one of the album's several "spoken" tracks—all roughly around thirty seconds, and all serving as an interlude to the next track. This in itself is a way of creating space for the most intimate thoughts and confessions, pausing the music to interject something more vulnerable/bare. It also grants more power for Woods to frame the next song (and the album as a whole) as she desires. Woods shares the following with tenderness:

> I love my name. My mother thought of that name—the story that she tells is that she was walking down Belmont Avenue, and it was the middle of the day, she was by herself, and she was pregnant with me. And she said that she just heard a voice in her head and, um, . . . it was just, I guess, me talking before I was born and telling her that that's what my name was,

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16. This use of myth as open-ended, capacious, and generative is in keeping with Diane di Prima's use of myth in *Loba*, discussed in this dissertation's first chapter.

17. Ps. 147:4 ESV.

18. Woods, "Eve (Interlude)," track 6 on *HEAVN*, https://soundcloud.com/jamilawoods/sets/heavn-3.

> so. . . . Sometimes I like to think that I named myself. (laughs) It's the name that I—I signaled to her that that was what my name already was.[19]

Woods' interruption of "My mother thought of that name" with "the story that she tells is . . . " centers the role of storytelling in the track. It does not matter so much whether or not her mother actually "heard" her daughter speaking to her; the choice to make this a part of the story imbues it with significance. Woods honors the story by noting all the specifics—like "Belmont Avenue," which locates the story in Chicago, increasing its sentimental value through its association with "home." Her own love for the story, and thus for her name, is apparent not only by her explicit admission, but also in the way she smiles and laughs through the telling.

Furthermore, the track's title alone is highly significant in regards to the act/art of storytelling. In one sense, it points to a re-narrativization of the Biblical Genesis story; instead of being named by another, as Eve was named by Adam, Woods powerfully names herself.[20] In another sense, it locates Woods' self-naming on the "eve" of something: her birth, or perhaps her "consciousness" as taken on a more metaphorical level. Indeed, Woods' claiming of her name as her own invention on "Eve" ushers in the next track's demand that her name be pronounced correctly. In the first verse of "In My Name," Woods sings:

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19. Woods, "Eve (Interlude)."

20. Gen. 3:20.

> I like to make you wash your mouth before you talk about me
> Keep my name out your mouth cause you can't handle the fleek
> Don't cut your tongue on my syllables
> Betcha need a syllabus to teach ya how my vowels sound
> It's a long "i" baby, but your tongue too lazy
> Needa fix your face and say your grace
> Before you pray to me[21]

Woods' career as "educator" in addition to "poet" surfaces here, we might say, as she literally teaches listeners how to say her name. Since the verse conflates "talk[ing] about" Woods with the pronunciation of her name, one can potentially read mispronunciation or misnaming as a type of misrepresentation/mischaracterization of Woods as a person, especially since her ties to her name are so intimate. Woods' lively rejection of this misnaming seems to be predicated on the idea that she named herself—a narrative that emboldens her to stand up for herself. Indeed, here she becomes godlike, Creator of her own name/story and someone who might be prayed to.

However, delving further into Black feminist practices, the importance of naming is seen to extend beyond the self, taking on a profoundly collective dimension. These practices involve: naming experiences that are shared between individuals; and, naming other Black women as figures to be remembered and respected. The Combahee River Collective, established in 1974, provides a good example of both types of naming. In their famous statement, they describe the struggle of Black women "to define those

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21. Woods, "In My Name," track 7 of *HEAVN* https://soundcloud.com/jamilawoods/sets/heavn-3.

things that make [their] lives what they are."[22] The statement then continues: "In the process of consciousness-raising, actually life-sharing, we began to recognize the commonality of our experiences and, from the sharing and growing consciousness, to build a politics that will change our lives and inevitably end our oppression." In their understanding, individual sharing of struggles becomes a collective process of naming; liberation itself depends on this process and is its inevitable result. Much like Woods does in "Blk Girl Soldier," the Collective also names their heroes:

> There have always been Black women activists—some known, like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frances E.W. Harper, Ida B. Wells Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell, and thousands upon thousands unknown—who had a shared awareness of how their sexual identity combined with their racial identity to make their whole life situation and the focus of their political struggles unique. Contemporary Black feminism is the outgrowth of countless generations of personal sacrifice, militancy, and work by our mothers and sisters.[23]

The list begins with "Sojourner Truth" but concludes with "mothers and sisters," showing that the celebration of Black women can be both historical and familial, personal and political, just like Woods' *HEAVN*. And while the cataloguing is done to honor those who came before, it also serves to strengthen those who live on and are able

22. Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, eds. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (New York: Feminist Press, 1982), 15.

23. Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," 14.

to see resilience in its continuity. Cultural memory, and the assertion of tradition, becomes a mode of survival in the ongoing fight for freedom.

While Black feminists have given "naming" a political valence, they have also defined it as a poetic act—which reflects the deep connection between art and activism that becomes so apparent in Woods' album. In "Poetry Is Not a Luxury,"[24] Lorde writes, "Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives."[25] As in the Combahee River Collective's statement, naming is tied to consciousness—in this case, to the ability to even conceive of something. (And of course, Wood's "Eve" also connects naming to both consciousness and conceiving, in that it precedes Woods' birth.) The poet names, and in so doing, enables others to name themselves. Sonia Sanchez writes of fellow poet Margaret Walker: "her face. ordained with lines. confesses poems. hallelujas. choruses. she turns leans her crane like neck on the edge of the world, emphasizing us. in this

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24. It is perhaps worth noting Woods' feature on Macklemore and Ryan Lewis' 2016 single, "White Privilege II." In the hook, she sings, "Hip-hop is not a luxury," which quite clearly references Lorde's essay. The end of the hook ("What I got for me, it is for me / What we made, we made to set us free") further clarifies that Woods understands hip-hop, like poetry, to be a means towards Black liberation. Macklemore and Ryan Lewis, "White Privilege II," track 13 on *This Unruly Mess I've Made*, Macklemore LLC, 2016, compact disc.

25. Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), 37.

hotel/village/room. heavy with women. our names become known to us."[26] The poet Walker is not attributed with naming the other women, but is the inspiration by which their names "become known" to them, as if by magic. Indeed, Lorde regards magic as the poet's art, which is increasingly mastered as "we learn more and more to cherish our feelings, and to respect those hidden sources of our power from where true knowledge and, therefore, lasting action comes."[27] The emotion inherent in "hallelujas" and something "confesse[d]" no doubt provide the environment for this magic, endowing the women listening with holy visions of their own.

Failed Dreams, Missed Love: The Blues and Black Power

The tension between self and community, or between the individual and the world, is an underlying theme throughout *HEAVN*. This, too, connects Woods' album to earlier Black feminist work that voiced a sense of alienation from and distrust in existing social systems. In particular, Black women's Blues music, along with their (conflicted) role in the Black Power and Black Arts movements, expressed a similar tension; reading these together with Woods' album sheds light on *HEAVN*'s frustrated and ambivalent tones, as this section will later describe.

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26. Sonia Sanchez, "From a Black Feminist Conference Reflections on Margaret Walker: Poet," in *Homegirls and Handgrenades* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1984), 60-1.

27. Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," 37.

Woods' song "Holy," true to its title, speaks to something sacred and worthy of protecting, valuing, and maintaining: one's inner self.[28] The singer seeks love and affirmation not from the world, but from within. A quiet and gentle song, "Holy" sounds at first listen like an ode to being at perfect peace with oneself, but it proves more complicated and open to interpretation—Woods' poetry at work again. The song opens with the line, "Give me today my daily bread," which is a reference to the Lord's Prayer, taken from Matthew 6:11. Notably, the "us" from the Lord's Prayer has been replaced with "me," and this singular/single status is confirmed in the line that follows: "Help me to walk alone ahead." The next line is a reference to another scripture, Psalm 23:4, but again one word has been changed. Woods replaces "evil" with "love," singing, "Though I walk through the darkest valley I will fear no love." While this might seem like a positive switch, it proves to be more complicated: in the Psalm, the speaker is evidently fearful of evil, but his faith in God (and his self-reassurances of that faith) help him overcome that fear as he "walks through the valley of the shadow of death;"[29] meanwhile, in "Holy," *love* is figured as the shadow which darkens her path, and she seems to be bolstering herself against it. The following line then reads as a less-than-

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28. Woods, "Holy," track 18 on *HEAVN*, https://soundcloud.com/jamilawoods/sets/heavn-3.

29. Ps. 23:4.

convincing mantra: "Oh my smile, my mind reassure me I don't need no one."[30] It is unclear if the singer is truly happy in her own company and enjoying her independence, or if she is merely shutting others out due to fear.

This conflicted tone permeates throughout "Holy;" the song is either an anthem of radical self-love or evidence of crippling denial. Lines like "Woke up this morning with my mind set on loving me" encourage a positive reading, but there is always an edge. For example, the repetition of "I'm not lonely, I'm alone / And I'm holy by my own" makes a fair distinction between loneliness and aloneness, but the singer's insistence that she is merely the latter seems unreliable. The assertion that she is holy in and of herself, however, is probably the single most uplifting line, and it reintroduces the notion of the poet as God. This notion is emphasized in later lines: "My cup is full up, what I got is enough / Nobody completes me, don't mess with my stuff." Woods again turns scripture on its head, altering Psalm 23:5 so that she no longer depends on a higher power to fill her cup. She is her own god. Woods' lines also push back against popular notions of romantic love, where two people "complete" each other. Again, these claims are truly revolutionary in one sense, but in another, they feed the growing suspicion that the singer has been hurt by a particular kind of love, and is now afraid to accept any kind—even if it comes from friends, family, or potential lovers with whom

30. Woods, "Holy."

she might flourish. There is no *need* to be in a relationship, of course, but one wonders if she is keeping herself from "HEAVN" (which transforms the "me" to an "us") simply because she cannot imagine any holy communion.

For better or worse, "Holy" can be summed up in the repeated line, "You're all that you've got," which grants some perspective;[31] these lyrics paint the portrait of someone who might actually crave companionship, though circumstance might not allow her to fully embrace the possibility of love. Perhaps total self-reliance is necessary, and so she sugar-coats it in "goodness and mercy" to make it more palatable. Lorde says of her mother in *Zami*: "She knew about bundling up against the wicked cold. She knew about Paradise Plums—hard, oval candies, cherry-red on one side, pineapple-yellow on the other. . . . She knew about mixing oils for bruises and rashes. . . . She knew about blessing the food and yourself before eating, and about saying prayers before going to sleep."[32] This knowledge, which includes religious ritual, kept her mother strong "as she faced some new crisis or disaster—the icebox door breaking, the electricity being shut off, my sister gashing open her mouth on borrowed skates." Ultimately, Lorde's mother "knew how to make virtues out of necessities."[33] Likewise, instead of continuing in search of a love that "makes the winters warm" (as in "HEAVN"), the singer in "Holy"

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31. Woods, "Holy."

32. Lorde, *Zami*, 10.

33. Lorde, 11.

readily admits that "the bad days may come / the lover may leave / the winter may not."[34] And to mitigate the pain of this absence, perhaps, Woods spins loneliness into a "full cup" and "bundles up" with the idea of holiness.

The double-edged lyrics of "Holy," and especially the express inability to count on love, connects the song to the Blues aesthetic and to the "failed dreams" communicated by singers like Bessie Smith. In an analysis of Smith's "Poor Man's Blues," Angela Davis writes: "The literal, semantic level of blues lyrics is often an invitation to misreading. When the washwoman in the song declares that she would rather be a scullion, these words do not affirm how welcome a cook's job would be to a Black washwoman. Instead, there is equivocation in these words, a light and scathing irony—a hint of protest."[35] Like "Holy," Smith's song has an underlying message that is easy to miss if one takes the lyrics at their word. Davis also argues that the Blues aesthetic connects the personal to the social, so that "the personal relationship stands both for itself and for unrealizable social aspirations and failed dreams."[36] In the same way, the personal distrust in "Holy," with its ready admission that "the lover may leave

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34. Woods, "Holy."

35. Angela Y. Davis, "Blame It on the Blues: Bessie Smith, Gertrude 'Ma' Rainey, and the Politics of Blues Protest," in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 100.

36. Davis, 106.

/ the winter may not," may signal a greater distrust in a society that so often fails to love Black women.

Indeed, the very issues that threatened Black lives during Smith's time, like poverty and incarceration, are some of the same issues that threaten Black lives today in increasing numbers. I offer that the point of "Holy" is not that the singer herself is unable to love, but that Black women cannot always afford to have hope in America's social systems. She transforms "individual emotions into collective responses to adversity," creating a space through her music which "forges a consciousness that imagines community among the people who share glimpses of the possibility of eventually moving beyond this oppression."[37] So while "Blk Girl Soldier" is the closest to an anthem, "Holy" can be understood as another form of protest—one that borrows from the Blues aesthetic to raise consciousness specifically for Black women.

But the "failed dreams" of the Blues find their echo in the "missed love" of the Black Arts Movement, which is closer in time (and in tone) to Woods' *HEAVN* and the current sociopolitical moment. In her essay on "Black Power and Black Poetry," Cheryl Clarke defines "missed love" as "the perpetration of racist policies, customs, and practices as endemic to U.S. culture as the stars and stripes sewn onto the fabric of Old Glory;" these perpetrations amount to "betrayals of the citizenship rights of Black

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37. Davis, 111.

people."[38] In particular, the string of murders in 1965—which victimized civil rights leaders and young Black church girls alike—turned the tide for many Black people who could no longer hold onto the hope of racial harmony and equality in America. As Black Power emerged and strengthened, the Black Arts Movement which it shaped and inspired was likewise less interested in themes of peace and love among all. It turned its back on the respectability politics of the Civil Rights Movement and the Harlem Renaissance. The initial "tone of resignation" produced by these deaths was soon replaced by a militant and revolutionary anger.[39] Nikki Giovanni writes in her poem "Adulthood":

> for a while progress was being made along with a certain
> degree
> of happiness cause i wrote a book and found a love
> and organized a theatre and even gave some lectures on
> Black history
> and began to believe all good people could get
> together and win without bloodshed[40]

But after listing the multiple deaths and arrests of Black leaders (and of Kennedy, who advocated for civil rights), Giovanni concludes her poem with the understanding that

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38. Cheryl Clarke, "'Missed Love': Black Power and Black Poetry," in *"After Mecca": Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 10.

39. Clarke, 8.

40. Nikki Giovanni, *Selected Poems* (New York: William Morrow and Company 1996), 50.

she is “a for real Black person who must now feel / and inflict / pain.” While Woods stops short of inflicting pain, she certainly feels it. To return to the line in “Holy” which states “Woke up this morning with my mind set on loving me”[41]: the very fact that she must repeatedly remind herself of so simple an action indicates the extent to which she has been undervalued and taught that she is unworthy of love. Instead of hoping/waiting for “good people,” the singer in “Holy” intends to depend fully on herself—to undo the self-hatred that others have created and the pain that they have inflicted.

Embracing Vulnerability, Seeking Community

Despite independence and resistance through self-love, *HEAVN*’s subject *is* sometimes lonely—and in fact, one of the tracks is dedicated explicitly to the feeling; this, too, gains more meaning when placed in conversation with the self-expressed struggles of an earlier generation of Black feminists. In “Lonely,” the singer is upfront about her emotions and vulnerabilities, opening the track with the lines: “Lonely, lonely how I be / Lonely, lonely cuts so deep.”[42] The fact that loneliness is a regular state of being for her (i.e., “how I be”) shows that this is not a mere, momentary sadness. As in “Holy,” the singer in “Lonely” needs constant reminders for her own self-love: “I put a

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41. Woods, “Holy.”

42. Woods, “Lonely (feat. Lorine Chia)” track 4 on *HEAVN*, https://soundcloud.com/jamilawoods/sets/heavn-3.

post-it note on my mirror / So I might love myself / So I might be enough today."[43] She also sings, "I put a sun in my lamp," which might refer to light therapy used to treat Seasonal Affective Disorder and other forms of depression. The importance of attending to and advocating for Black women's mental health echoes earlier Black feminist organizers. In fact, in their introduction to *But Some of Us Are Brave*, Gloria T. Hull and Barbara Smith explicitly call for a new field of Black Women's Studies that would include "the investigation of Black women's mental and physical health in a society whose 'final solution' for us and our children is death."[44] And death is a real concern in "Lonely," especially when the lyrics to Paula Cole's "I Don't Want to Wait" are slightly changed, so that Woods sings: "I don't wanna wait for my life to be over."[45] In a song about sadness and feeling low, the replacement of "our lives" with "my life" raises the question of suicidal thoughts.

While "Holy" championed being alone, it becomes clear in "Lonely" that the subject/singer does, in fact, crave other people; her search for companionship again echoes the Black feminist call for community. She sings, "I'm not OK, thanks for asking /

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43. Woods, "Lonely."

44. Gloria T. Hull and Barbara Smith, "Introduction: The Politics of Black Women's Studies," in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, eds. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (New York: Feminist Press, 1982), xxii.

45. Paula Cole, "I Don't Want to Wait," track 11 on *This Fire*, Imago and Warner Bros., 1996, compact disc.

I can tell I've said too much I'm out of touch / Guess no one ever really wants to know."[46] Her perception that others do not want to hear about her mental health issues comes with a feeling that no one else shares those same issues; she feels "out of touch" and removed from those around her. Lines like "I could be crazy" and "You think I'm crazy" have direct resonance with the Combahee River Collective's statement: "Black feminists often talk about their feelings of craziness before becoming conscious of the concepts of sexual politics, patriarchal rule, and, most importantly, feminism, the political analysis and practice that we women use to struggle against our oppression."[47] These feelings are then alleviated through the "process of consciousness-raising, actually life-sharing." But the singer in "Lonely" does not have this community, though she longs for one. As Woods continues to sing "I could be crazy," Lorine Chia emerges on the track, singing: "A place where I'm alone/Searching for a place where I belong / I get lost when I'm alone."[48] This search for belonging echoes Michele Wallace's "Search for Sisterhood," where she writes of her own feelings of isolation: "We exist as women who are Black who are feminists, each stranded for the moment, working independently because there is not yet an environment in this society remotely congenial to our

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46. Woods, "Lonely."

47. Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," 15.

48. Woods, "Lonely."

struggle—because, being on the bottom, we would have to do what no one else has done: we would have to fight the world."[49]

However, this feeling that one exists alone and must "fight the world" single-handedly can be confronted not only through community, but also through poetry—which may just be a specific *form* of community. Claudia Rankine writes in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*: "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 the solidity of presence with the offering of this same presence perhaps has everything to do with being alive."[50] Being "here" on this earth—and hence, "being alive"—depends on interactions with other people. And for the "Lonely" singer, certainly, the potential for suicide makes the stakes apparent: she needs someone to be "here" and to not let her be lonely, as Rankine's title commands. But being "here" is a shared effort: "In order for something to be handed over a hand must extend and a hand must receive. We must both be here in this world in this life in this place indicating the presence of."[51] Others must be willing to step in, just as the "Lonely" singer herself must

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49. Michele Wallace, "A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood," in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, eds. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (New York: Feminist Press, 1982), 12.

50. Claudia Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2004), 130.

51. Rankine, 131.

be willing to ask for help and admit the full extent of her loneliness. Again (and to repeat earlier portions of this chapter), she must share her feelings so that they can be named. Lorde writes: "Our poems formulate the implications of ourselves, what we feel within and dare make real (or bring action into accordance with), our fears, our hopes, our most cherished terrors."[52] Woods seems to sing in response:

> Say don't take from me my quiet
> Don't take from me my tears
> Don't take from me my trials
> Don't take from me my fears[53]

As with "Holy," this particular section allows for two readings: one suggests that the singer is embracing these feelings of pain as "hidden sources of power" by which she might revolutionize herself and her world;[54] the other reading suggests instead that she is holding onto fears and withholding them from any revolutionary project, thus not fully "owning" them. It perhaps is not necessary to decide on one particular reading, but to instead see the regular emergence of conflicted tones which present the singer as a layered, complicated human being. And Woods, the poet and creator of *HEAVN*, works her magic precisely by presenting these nuances to the listener.

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52. Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," 39.

53. Woods, "Lonely."

54. Lorde, *Zami*, 7.

More on Re-Narrativizing: Black Feminist Imagination

If the world, to quote Michele Wallace again, is not "remotely congenial to [the] struggle" of Black women, where can they go to find not only safety, but belonging?[55] Woods draws on Black feminist tradition once again to answer this quandary. Jennifer Nash has called the Black feminist canon "imaginative, restorative, world-making, generative, and politically necessary."[56] In *HEAVN*, imagination is geared towards reclaiming the past in order to assert present-day possibility—another way of re-narrativizing in service of liberation. In the album's title song, "HEAVN," Woods tells a story of agency and love, set against the horrors of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. In the song's second verse, she sings:

> My great, great, great, great, great, great grandma
> And your great, great, great, great, great, great grandpapa
> Didn't need a ring or a broom
> Didn't need a past or a bloom
> Nothing old, nothing new
> Nothing borrowed, nothing blue
> They're dancing in the deepest ocean
> See? Not even death could stop them

In this verse, love becomes stunningly possible, since it has somehow managed to exist after being subjected to the most insurmountable hardships. Through the repetition of "great," the singer seems to track her ancestral lineage despite the social death imposed

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55. Wallace, "A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood," 12.

56. Jennifer Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 58.

by slavery, which made marriage ("a ring") impossible, and also erased knowledge of one's family history ("a past") and withheld the rights of parents towards their children ("a bloom").[57] The sing-song narrative of "Something old, something new / something borrowed, something blue," which is taken for granted in many modern-day conceptions of love, must be negated here. That is, the script must be rewritten in order to apply. In an interview with *NPR*, Woods says of the two concluding lines: "Afrofuturism's not just about imagining people in the future but also reimagining Black history. . . . I remember reading a story about enslaved Black people who jumped off of the boats in the Middle Passage, but they didn't die. They created these underwater civilizations in the ocean."[58] This method of re-narrativizing the past may not be faithful to the facts, but it is faithful to the humanity of those lost at sea; it privileges the people themselves, calling (by extension) for a more complete humanization of contemporary Black lives. Moreover, it argues for love as a constant possibility despite oppressive social forces, providing some hope of love in the present day.

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57. Just as "a ring" refers to marriage, the lyric "a broom" refers to a plantation ritual that some enslaved people performed as part of a wedding ceremony, though marriages among the enslaved were not legally recognized. See Tyler D. Parry and Patrick W. O'Neil's detailed essays on broomstick weddings for more information. Tyler D. Parry, "Married in Slavery Time: Jumping the Broom in Atlantic Perspective," *Journal of Southern History* 81, no. 2 (May 2015): 273-312; Patrick W. O'Neil, "Bosses and Broomsticks: Ritual and Authority in Antebellum Slave Weddings," *Journal of Southern History* 75, no. 1 (February 2009): 29-48.

58. Gathright, "Jamila Woods and the Poetry of Black Love."

Claiming Space: “Elsewhere” and “Here”

As Woods imagines across time, she also attends to physical space—alternately imagining entirely new places and faithfully defending the ones she grew up in. Black feminist worldmaking is at work both in her desires for an “elsewhere” and in her resolve to stay rooted “here.” In “Breadcrumbs,” Woods reflects on her grandmother’s continued love for her grandfather, even as he suffered from dementia; unable to find a love like that for herself, she sings, “Where they do that at? / Guess we better find a new planet.”[59] She opens the track “Stellar” with a similar desire, singing: “Meet me in outer space, we could spend the night / I’ve grown tired of this place, we could start again.”[60] These extra-terrestrial visions extend even further in “Way Up,” where she describes herself as “an alien from inner space” who desires her own “private planet.”[61] These attempts to imagine alternative spaces through elements of science fiction are suggestive of Afrofuturism, especially since she has claimed that tradition as inspiration for the song “HEAVN.” But in “Stellar” especially, dreams of living on another planet have dark undertones. Woods sings quietly in the background during the outro: “I can’t

59. Woods, “Breadcrumbs (feat. Nico Segal)” track 15 on *HEAVN*, https://soundcloud.com/jamilawoods/sets/heavn-3.

60. Woods, “Stellar,” track 16 on *HEAVN*, https://soundcloud.com/jamilawoods/sets/heavn-3.

61. Woods, “Way Up,” track 19 on *HEAVN*, https://soundcloud.com/jamilawoods/sets/heavn-3.

breathe, I can't speak down here."[62] Repeating Eric Garner's last words, before he was killed in a chokehold by police, Woods reminds the listener of the life she would be escaping on Earth.[63] This reference creates an awareness that brings even the lightest, most subjective/private tracks sharply into the sociopolitical realm. Again, *HEAVN* reminds us that the personal is political; in this particular case, it exposes the social causes behind individual desires to escape.

By contrast, "LSD" emerges as a defiant determination to stay, and to remain steadfast in love with the city Woods calls home. In his verse, Chance the Rapper clarifies: "This here ain't for no Vice doc / This here ain't for no Spike op."[64] These lines refer to: *VICE Media*'s music channel, *Noisey*, which produced an 8-part documentary titled "Chiraq;" and to Spike Lee, who directed the 2015 film *Chi-raq*.[65] This popular misnomer for Chicago has helped solidify perceptions of the city as only and always

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62. Woods, "Stellar."

63. Wesley Lowery, "'I can't beathe': Five Years after Eric Garner Died in Struggle with New York Police, Resolution Still Elusive," The Washington Post, June 13, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/i-cant-breathe-five-years-after-eric-garner-died-in-struggle-with-new-york-police-resolution-still-elusive/2019/06/13/23d7fad8-78f5-11e9-bd25-c989555e7766_story.html.

64. Woods, "LSD," track 10 on *HEAVN*, https://soundcloud.com/jamilawoods/sets/heavn-3.

65. *Chiraq: A Documentary on Making Music in Chicago* (VICE Video, 2014), video.vice.com/en_us/show/chiraq; *Chi-Raq*, dir. Spike Lee (Amazon Studios, 2015), https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B08CS4HKHK/ref=atv_dp_share_cu_r.

violent. But for Woods, Chicago is the city that first gave her a taste of poetry, and it is where she chose to return to after college, when many artists were going to New York or Los Angeles.[66] The lake holds a particular magic for her, and she identifies strongly with it. She sings, "You gotta love me like I love the lake / You wanna love me, better love the lake."[67] Of course, just as *HEAVN* as a whole is rendered in conflicted tones, Woods' relationship to Chicago is a complicated one. She tells Mahadevan, "The water and the lake represent YCA, my students, my family, all the good, the joys I have in the city—and then just the complicated love that I have for the city. There's so many structural issues and so many terrible politicians and so many people who are dying. But that kind of tug of war, I guess, 'LSD' represents that kind of feeling."[68] The pain and disappointment she feels towards Chicago's larger structural issues coexist with her feelings of joy and love—feelings that are formed in community with people and in the sharing of positive spaces, like YCA or the lake. Ultimately, these positive attachments keep her rooted in the city. She sings: "I will never leave you, I'm everything you made me / Even when you break me down, the water always saves me."[69] That the city is essentially *who she is* finds echo in her defense of the city: "I won't let you criticize / My

66. Mahadevan, "Heavn Help Us."

67. Woods, "LSD."

68. Mahadevan, "Heavn Help Us."

69. Woods, "LSD."

city like my skin, it's so pretty / If you don't like it, just leave it alone." Critiques of Chicago are like critiques of Woods' very skin; and indeed, both media depictions and politicians' invocations of Chicago are often rooted in anti-Blackness. They see the city as a "problem" but do not acknowledge the histories of racialized violence that have shaped it.

Woods' "LSD" evokes what I would like to call "staying power"—that is, both lasting power (i.e., resilience) and the power of literally staying rooted somewhere. This power is also found in "HEAVN," when the singer proclaims: "I don't wanna run away with you / I just wanna live our lives right here."[70] These songs offer a counterbalance to tracks that dream of other planets, as opposed to claiming a space "right here." Again, Rankine's use of the word "here," which "has everything to do with being alive," finds resonance in the question of continued "life on Earth." It depends on the handshake, where "a hand must extend and a hand must receive."[71] It is a call for assistance, acceptance, friendship, acknowledgement, and community amidst an otherwise crushing environment. Woods' "Emerald Street" demonstrates this "staying power" through its sweet recollections of young friendship and young love that blossomed "on

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70. Woods, "HEAVN."

71. Rankine, 130.

Emerald Street where we used to meet."[72] The singer, adopting the perspective of her childhood self, sings that there are "not a lot of places we can go to be together / 'cause you know the city, how'd it get so cold?" And yet, between her and the friend she goes to meet, "it's a wonderful day in the hood." In floating harmonies, the hook rings: "Would you be mine, could you be mine / Won't you be my neighbor." These lines are pulled from the opening theme song on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, a PBS show hosted and created by Fred Rogers that was (and still is) beloved by many. The 2018 documentary *Won't You Be My Neighbor* elaborates on the impact the show made on millions of people by teaching love and acceptance in a socially-divided world. [73] In an interview reproduced in the film, Rogers expresses the conviction that drove his show: "Love is at the root of everything . . . love or the lack of it. And what we see and hear on the screen is part of who we become" (4:02-4:23). Woods' sampling of the show's theme song calls to mind not only the importance of love, then, but also an understanding of

72. Woods, "Emerald Street (feat. Saba)," track 12 on *HEAVN*, https://soundcloud.com/jamilawoods/sets/heavn-3.

73. The documentary also demonstrates how Mister Rogers' teachings about love and acceptance spoke back against the racial discrimination and hate happening around him, making *HEAVN*'s sampling of the theme even more resonant. As an example, the documentary highlights an episode where Mister Rogers invites his friend "Officer Clemmons," a character played by black actor and singer François Clemmons, to stick his feet in a kitty pool with him. In an interview for the documentary, Clemmons says of that moment: "Around the country, they didn't want black people to come and swim in their swimming pools. . . . My being on the program was a statement for Fred." *Won't You Be My Neighbor?*, dir. Morgan Neville (Focus Features, 2018), 41:35-42:07, https://www.hbo.com/documentaries/wont-you-be-my-neighbor.

the impact that shared media can have. Rogers says of his role on television: “It’s very, very personal—the space between the television screen and whoever happens to be receiving it. I consider that very holy ground” (22:07-22:20). *HEAVN*, true to its title, becomes holy ground—a space for love that speaks back against racial segregation and oppression, an opening between singer and listener. A way to show love and feel loved. A mediated neighborhood.

Despite this mediated sense of community, the invocation of the “hood” in the song “Emerald Street” reminds listeners of the implicit racism of how Chicago’s physical neighborhoods are drawn. As for the singer herself, Gathright tells us: “Jamila Woods grew up in Beverly, a neighborhood on Chicago's far South Side. She says it's more diverse now, but when her family moved there, they were the first Black family on their block.”[74] In her song, Woods retrospectively imagines the “neighborhood” through the lens of a very close friendship, which flourished despite the “cold” of Chicago and the lack of spaces for them to “be together.”[75] She seems to be constructing this image as a haven/heaven between two people who would otherwise feel isolated and alone. In this way, *HEAVN* reminds us that we still live in a divided world, but nevertheless offers hope. It offers a version of “heaven” that is not quite perfect—and perhaps this

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74. Gathright, “Jamila Woods and the Poetry of Black Love.”

75. Woods, “Emerald Street (feat. Saba).”

acknowledgement of reality, and a refusal to idealize too much, explains the dropping of the second "e" in the album's title.

Demarginalizing/Re-centering Black Girls and Women

While *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* offers a more universal call for love and togetherness, Woods' call to community is centered on one in particular, and that *one* is established in the very first words of the album: "Black girl." This again returns *HEAVN* to its Black feminist roots, re-sounding the desire to place Black girls/women front and center. When Black feminism was first emerging (at least, as a named movement), the Combahee River Collective noted: "In the case of Black women . . . it is obvious from looking at all the political movements that have preceded us that anyone is more worthy of liberation than ourselves."[76] Kimberlé Crenshaw and bell hooks have likewise theorized the marginal positioning of Black women in society, with bell hooks offering the term "white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" to critique oppressive social systems and Crenshaw coining the now-ubiquitous term "intersectionality" to define the need to consider multiple forms of oppression in order to achieve justice and equity.[77] (The title of this section is a nod to both of these pivotal Black feminist thinkers.) In the present-

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76. Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," 16.

77. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 139-67; bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: Sound End Press, 1984).

day, Black girls and women are still regularly targeted by social structures but left out of social movements. Even the hashtag #SayHerName was begun in response to the way that #BlackLivesMatter had "become especially focused on the lives of Black men, with women and girls seemingly an afterthought."[78]

HEAVN's first track, "Bubbles," confronts this secondary positioning and elevates Black girls to the level of the ethereal. Woods sings, "Black girl be in a bubble, bubble / floating quietly out of trouble, trouble."[79] The image of the "bubble" alone has layers of meaning. First, it has a magic quality to it, especially in that it allows the Black girl to evade harm. Furthermore, it imagines her in a safe space, though her position in society is often precarious. Indeed, as bubbles are generally easy to pop, perhaps it is meant to signify both power and vulnerability—two characteristics that regularly exist together throughout the album. The bubble also seems to signify one's own private space, where one can feel and think freely without being misunderstood or criticized. Of course, being "in a bubble" could, in some contexts, represent feelings of being removed or being trapped. However, the concluding lines of the song make it obvious that this bubble is, instead, a place of self-love and care that actually frees Black girls and

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78. Lilly Workneh, "#SayHerName: Why We Should Declare That Black Women and Girls Matter, Too," HuffPost, May 21, 2015, www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/21/Black-women-matter_n_7363064.html.

79. Woods, "Bubbles," track 1 on HEAVN, https://soundcloud.com/jamilawoods/sets/heavn-3.

emboldens them. Woods sings, "I've been picking my hair out and I know, now / How tall I really be."

Still

In the face of society's underestimations, *HEAVN* empowers Black girls to stand up and know their own stature/worth (i.e., "how tall I really be"). Furthermore, the album demonstrates that self-knowledge and self-love are both built in community with others, through the active sharing of joy, fear, and loneliness alike. From the vulnerabilities and denials of songs like "Lonely" and "Holy," to the more spirited and confident songs like "Blk Girl Soldier" and "HEAVN," Woods' album has space for the full spectrum of human emotion, with all its strengths and insecurities. Above all, perhaps, listeners are reminded of that resilience which has always existed. In "Still," one of the album's spoken tracks, Moriah Dowd says of her city: "Chicagoans create this sense of 'Heaven' in the midst of tragedy, in the midst of injustice, in the midst of pain—life goes on all of a sudden, because what else can we do but move forward?" She ends with: "The kids are still going to school, the kids are still playing outside. That just shows our resilience."[80] This sentiment seems to recall the poem "To Black Women" by Gwendolyn Brooks, who fittingly belongs to Chicago as well. She writes in the second stanza: "It has been a / hard trudge, with fainting, bandaging and death. / There have

80. Woods, "Still (Interlude)," track 11 on *HEAVN*, https://soundcloud.com/jamilawoods/sets/heavn-3.

been startling confrontations." She concludes: "And you create and train your flowers still."[81] While the word "still" is explicitly employed to mean "even so," implying resilience, it seems all too fitting that the word also means "at rest." Thus, *HEAVN* offers one more dichotomy, which is in fact a healthy equilibrium: moments for social revolution balanced with moments for rest, for self-reflection and self-care. With the "Black girl" always as her focus—and with the ideas and practices of former Black women artists and activists—Woods creates *HEAVN* for Black women here on Earth, insisting on and celebrating *life*, even in the face of death.

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81. Gwendolyn Brooks, "To Black Women," in *Blacks* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1987), 502.

Conclusion

Thank you, reader, for following me through to the end of this project—an end I feel so acutely as I write these pages. This dissertation has taken shape in "strange and difficult times," as the COVID saying goes. But I'm here, and you're here, and that's something sacred.

As I look around, I see a world that grows tired of making it through and keeping on, of finding the sunlight behind the shadow. Told to find and accept our "new normal," so many of us swallow grief and try to forget the bad things. I, for one, would rather be loved and at peace than "strong." I have been learning to let go of my many ways of saying "I'm being silly" when I'm actually sad. Or angry. Reader, how do you honor your feelings? Who or what in your life tells you to go ahead and feel them?

I will say that I'm a big fan of therapy. It has helped me to become acquainted with my own griefs, to re-meet myself at my hardest moments and *not* say "You're okay," but "I love you so much," "You deserved better," or "I wish that had gone differently." I think, collectively, we could use these phrases now more than ever. In holding space for sadness, there is room for joy, too. There is no scarcity of emotion; we are capable of abundance. This is the open field.

Part of my project in this dissertation has been to advocate for the validity and political relevance of emotion, especially in its ability to challenge the status quo and the racialized, patriarchal, and capitalistic modes of thinking that privilege Reason (with a

capital "r") above and in opposition to other ways of knowing and being. Emotion provides a form of intelligence, drives relationality, and is paramount to understanding and employing care; moreover, emotional expression is one language through which we articulate our desires, hopes, and fears, all of which work to shape the world as we know it.

In her essay "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," Audre Lorde understands feelings to be "hidden sources of our power from where true knowledge and therefore lasting action comes."[1] Poetry, she argues, is the way to harness that power towards imaginative, world-changing ends—in the service of movements for Black liberation and women's equality, for example. In my dissertation, I have similarly advocated for the emotional (and ethical) consciousness of those engaged in poetry, and I have argued for poetry/poiesis as carrying the potential for political change. Not all poetry must do this (in the same way that not all expressions of emotion are generative or healthy), but it is crucial to understand it as a possible (and possibly radical) way of knowing, being, and speaking.

To be happy, and whole, we must be honest. Collectively, we must reckon with the level of loss we have encountered in this pandemic, and in movements that have gained and lost momentum. As I was revising my fourth chapter, especially, it occurred

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1. Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), 36.

to me that Jamila Woods' album *HEAVN* might have spoken/sounded quite differently if it had been released in 2022 instead of July 2016. For one thing, Trump had not yet been elected, and we are now on the other side of his presidency, which he served full-term despite impeachment. We are now "on the other side" of a number of things that have come to characterize life in the U.S. over the last five years[2]—of 5,636 children being separated from their parents at the U.S.-Mexico border, under Trump's "zero-tolerance" policy;[3] of Brett Kavanaugh's appointment to the U.S. Supreme Court, despite Senate hearings following allegations of sexual assault; of certain defining (and definable) moments in the Me Too, Time's Up, and Black Lives Matter movements; of a "summer of protest" following the police killing of George Floyd; of five million COVID-19 deaths worldwide; of a multi-billionaire's self-funded trip to the moon, as global wealth inequality ever increases; of "unprecedented" and now "irreversible" climate change caused by humans, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.[4] In all

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2. The amount of time I have been in graduate school, which is not altogether unsignificant.

3. This tally is offered by the American Civil Liberties Union; the Biden administration's Family Reunification Task Force might reach this number as well, once they have reviewed all the cases, though their current tally is 3,900. Elliot Spagat, "US Identifies 3,900 Children Separated at Border Under Trump," AP News, June 8, 2021, https://apnews.com/article/az-state-wire-donald-trump-immigration-lifestyle-government-and-politics-54e2e5bbff270019d8bda3c81161c7c7.

4. Fiona Harvey, "Major Climate Changes Inevitable and Irreversible—IPCC's Starkest Warning Yet," The Guardian, August 9, 2021,

of these cases, being on the other side doesn't feel like an opportunity to celebrate. I don't feel like saying "we made it" but "look at what happened."

In these times, especially, and amidst necessary social distancing and the resultant feelings of isolation, we have an ethical responsibility to not let each other be lonely. To return to Claudia Rankine's book of poems, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, which I referenced in my fourth chapter, part of being "here" in the world lies in recognizing and—as I have argued throughout this dissertation—caring for each other. Rankine writes, "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 the solidity of presence with the offering of this same presence perhaps has everything to do with being alive."[5] I, likewise, have repeatedly turned to poetry as a way of staking my here-ness and putting it into practice. Indeed, in my Introduction, I asked you to imagine each of my poems as "my hand extending towards you." Moreover, I have insisted upon the role that the body (real or imagined) plays in understanding and connecting with each other.

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https://www.theguardian.com/science/2021/aug/09/humans-have-caused-unprecedented-and-irreversible-change-to-climate-scientists-warn.

5. Claudia Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2004), 130.

To think about the body, and our mutual presence here, involves being conscientious of life and death—of how our bodies exist or will exist in both states (living and dead), requiring various forms of care given by an incalculable number of people. None of us is an island.[6] And none of us can know just how far our hands extend. I think about: the Black Mountain poets, and how they likely could not have imagined that I would be using the fruits of the open field for a wholly feminist project; how Kenneth Goldsmith surely underestimated the afterlife of his poem; how Mrs. Lana may not know how much she touched—*moved*—people, from within and well beyond her neighborhood; how Black feminist "foremothers" could only dream of where the roads they laid might lead their progeny, or how many generations down. It is quite amazing, and humbling, to imagine how far we might extend ourselves, for better or for worse. The reach of a human being is perhaps no more apparent, unfortunately, than at the moment of their death—our loss. Still, our understanding of this renders death not so much a closing, but an opening. Its own sort of open field.

To that end, I want to leave you with a poem for a friend and colleague who died during the COVID lockdown. Her memory lives on in so many of us, but she—the kind and intelligent woman she was—is sorely missed.

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6. The adage "No man is an island" is attributed to English poet John Donne's "Meditation XVII" (1624) found in *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*.

In Memory, on Tense

Before her death,
she wrote that poetry is
"not being undone by the shock of absence"
and then, she was gone.
Left us
to be the poets.

In a queer theory class
we took together
I learned about the "future anterior"—
another subject she would write about
in the essays we dissect now.
In this tense, we imagine a future
looking back,
narrate what *will have* happened by then
given some action
we can take now.
Something we still, or might,
have the power to do.

"In [x remaining number of] years,
we will have finished the PhD"
was something I used to imagine
so casually
it didn't bear saying out loud.

The future anterior becomes
a conditional—
the past kind, where possibility
is no longer.
"We would have both finished
our PhDs, together,"
and I search for the ifs
as if the facts are changeable.

"If pandemic hadn't hit,
if she hadn't been alone…"
or "If she'd been told

while she was alive
how brilliant she was…"
and I wonder
if it would have mattered.

But as for matter: she wrote
it's not the end-all be-all.
She loved language as something surpassing
what we can hold,
that fills in the spaces
between "this" and "that,"
that exceeds our ability
to point.

She is no longer
something we can hold.
I search for a language
that surpasses that,
some future where we
will have made something
of her absence,
which unmade us.
I search for a way
to do something, to not be undone,
to fill in the spaces
between my pointing fingers.

I go to the tree planted
in her memory,
wondering if I have the right
to mourn, remembering
what she wrote about that, too.
How mourning was space-making;
self-changing; newness.

What to do with this,
together with her writing
on melancholy:
the haunting of old pain,
the wounds that won't heal.

How we mark each other
forever.

She marked me
in so many small ways,
so everyday
it bears saying out loud.

Alexa,
I didn't know you the best,
but I loved you, love you,
miss you—
the light and levity
you brought to a room,
the unfamiliar you made
familiar.
I know so many who
say the same,
forever grateful to
have had you in their lives.

And there you are—
there, in the space of our mourning—
not in the future anterior,
but in the present perfect.[7]

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7. Alexa's undergraduate thesis, "Poiesis and Death: Foucault's Chiastic Undoing of Life in *History of Sexuality Volume 1*" was published in 2016. Some of the language of my poem is inspired by her work; and, of course, her interests in poiesis and death find resonance throughout my dissertation. It feels only right that my project should end with/in her memory, and with a nod to her own writing. You can read Alexa Natalya Cucopulos' thesis here: https://etd.library.emory.edu/concern/etds/pg15bf06h?locale=en.

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Biography

Jessica Covil-Manset was born in Spartanburg, SC, and later moved to Pampa, TX, where she graduated high school. She attended the University of Chicago from 2012 to 2016 on a QuestBridge College Match scholarship; there, she earned bachelor's degrees in English and Spanish, receiving honors for her thesis, "'Outdoors Is Here to Stay': *The Bluest Eye* & the Black Feminist Movement," advised by Professor Sonali Thakkar. She became a Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellow in 2014 and was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa in 2015. In 2017, she began her PhD in English at Duke University, receiving the James B. Duke Fellowship and acceptance into the University Scholars Program upon admission. She wrote her dissertation, "Toward a Different Way of Knowing/Being/Speaking: Poetic Openings and Feminist Praxis in Contemporary Works," between 2019 and 2022, advised by Professor Tsitsi Jaji. She concurrently earned a master's degree in 2020 as well as graduate certificates in the Feminist Studies, African & African American Studies, and College Teaching programs. She was awarded the Summer Research Fellowship for Research on Women or Girls of Color in 2020 and the Gender and Race Research Award in 2021; she was also a Fellow in the Representing Migration Humanities Lab, the PhD Lab in Digital Knowledge, and the Kenan Institute for Ethics. An article version of her first dissertation chapter, entitled "Woman and/as Myth in *Loba*: di Prima's 'Open Field' as Poetic Process and Feminist Praxis," is forthcoming in the *Journal of Black Mountain College Studies* (Spring 2022).