Elegiac Citizens: Sentimentality during the War on Terror

by

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ABSTRACT

Elegiac Citizens: Sentimentality during the War on Terror opens new ground for scholarship on the relationship between poetry and politics by placing contemporary experimental poetry in the context of debates about American sentimentality that date back to the nineteenth century. Standard narratives of twentieth-century literature deride and dismiss the sentimental as an unsophisticated form of women's poetry that has been superseded by the work of experimenters in a long modernist tradition stretching from Emily Dickinson to Lyn Hejinian. My study, by contrast, challenges the progressive assumptions underlying these accounts of literary history by examining how contemporary American experimental poets writing about the War on Terror also belong in a longer lineage of women elegists who mourn the victims of nationalistic violence. The poetic persona that I call the elegiac citizen grieves not only for the dead but simultaneously for a structure of American citizenship predicated on loss of life elsewhere. I argue that the elegiac citizen is a sentimental figure because the politics of her poetics rests on the audience's identification with her affective representations of political life. Consequently, the act of reading becomes a form of public discourse that develops a shared vocabulary for apprehending the individual as situated in global politics and world history. I identify a set of key terms common to poetics and public sphere theory in order to argue that the poetry of the elegiac citizen provides a grammar for describing the publicity of emotional experience typically understood as private.

Whereas the politics of sentimentality are routinely described in terms of the transformative power of emotional experiences such as empathy and love, I attend to the politics of sentimentality

as mediated through literary genres. I argue that elegiac citizens offer forms of consolation that transform melancholic grieving for mass death into an understanding of why contemporary American democracy perpetuates such loss. Through studies of ambivalence about the power of love in the poetry of W.H. Auden, Muriel Rukeyser, and Juliana Spahr's contemporary reception of Sappho, my introduction defines antiwar sentimentality as a mode of grief that reflects the connection between the sensorium of the individual and longer histories of power. My chapters present studies of how three prominent contemporary poets develop modes of elegiac consolation through dramatizing and modeling sentimental forms of reading. Analyzing Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, C.D. Wright's *Rising, Falling, Hovering*, and Anne Carson's *Red Doc>* under the signs of lyric misery, the love narrative, and tragic catharsis, respectively, these chapters explicate how their forms of address ask readers to practice modes of sentimental reading that reimagine notions of democratic citizenship. Rankine's miserable communion refigures lyric reading as the creation of a shared space in which the voices of the powerless persist across history. Instead of the optimistic pursuit of happiness that so characterizes sentimental love narratives, Wright's narration presents happiness as ongoing work with others in the present rather than something to be achieved once and for all in the future. Carson's sentimental catharsis, by contrast with the model of purgation theorized by Aristotle, consoles by rendering grief shared. Dramatizing the reception of an expansive canon of world literature, these intensely intertextual works model a form of sentimental inquiry in which transhistorical emotional identification becomes a mode of perceiving the self within and against structures of power.

Introduction

Making Love and/or War: Sentimentality and Global Violence

Although the title of W.H. Auden's "September 1, 1939" sets the poem on the day of Hitler's invasion of Poland and the beginning of World War II, the poem and, in particular, the poem's consoling crescendo—"we must love one another or die"—tend to recirculate in later times of national and international violence (l.88). In opposing love to death at a moment of impending war, Auden's poem offers a form of elegiac consolation which promises that a sentimental change in feeling can create a more peaceful world. Auden famously came to object to this line: in 1955 he offered the revision "we must love one another *and* die" and he ultimately decided not to include the poem in collections of his work published during his lifetime (emphasis added).[1] The revision abjures the sentimentality of the original and transforms the consolation of the poem into a melancholic statement about the lack of agency of love (and poetry that seeks to cultivate love) in the face of human mortality and the threat of mass violence. While the revision history of Auden's "September 1, 1939" offers two starkly contrasting views of whether the emotional transformations occasioned by reading poetry might do meaningful political work, I argue that the two possibilities are not mutually exclusive but instead represent a dynamic of temptation and frustration that rests at the heart of the sentimental. The poets that I study in this dissertation inhabit the ground between Auden's "and" and "or." While they are doubtful that the force of love can

[1] For a brief survey of the revision history of the poem see Nicholas Jenkins, "Either Or or And: An Enigmatic Moment in the History of 'September 1, 1939.'"

stop war, they are also unwilling to assume the melancholic stance that poetry does not do indispensable political work in times of war. In the face of the elegiac situation of depicting world war in poetry, the poets in this dissertation find consolation not in the hope that their poetry will inspire actions that will restore the world but through the act of apprehending how the experience of grief refigures the imaginary of the citizen.

To begin a study of poetry during the War on Terror with a reading of Auden's "September 1, 1939" borders on cliché: its wide re-circulation after September 11, 2001 has served as a starting point for many literary critical accounts of political poetry in the twenty-first century.[2] However, framing the revision history of Auden's poem in terms of the logic of the sentimental emphasizes the continuity between the popularity of this poem and the historical conditions of its reception. Auden's appeal is hardly the only, or even the most prominent, example of sentimentality in the United States in the twenty-first century. The peculiar idea of a war on an emotional state might strike us as an example of sentimental poetics as George W. Bush's terminology calls the national polity into a shared feeling—terror—in order to motivate and justify a political vision. The notion of the War on Terror thus stands as a concentrated example of the affective dimension of the American public sphere and, furthermore, a moment in which that ordinarily unacknowledged quality of public discourse attains a particularly obvious political force.[3] We might also see the

[2] See Stephanie Burt, "'September 1, 1939' Revisited: Or, Poetry, Politics, and the Idea of the Public" (2003); Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (2015); Rachel Galvin, *News of War: Civilian Poetry 1936-1945* (2017); Moberley Luger, "Poetry after 9/11: Constructing the Memory of Crisis" (2010); Philip Metres, *Behind the Lines: War Resistance and Poetry on the American Homefront since 1941* (2007); and Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry and Its Others: News, Prayer, Song, and the Dialogue of Genres* (2013). In *Reading as Collective Action: Texts as Tactics*, Nicholas Hengen Fox offers a reading that decenters Auden's "September 1, 1939" from accounts of poetry during the War on Terror.

[3] See Lauren Berlant's "The Epistemology of State Emotion" for a discussion of how the War on Terror relates to her concept of national sentimentality and the affective dimension of the American public sphere.

workings of sentimentality in the discourses that argued for the invasion of Iraq based on a need to guarantee freedom for the people of that country.[4] In this instance, sentimentality is coopted into war culture as pity for those experiencing a repressive regime functions as a rationale for military invasion. Oppositely, we might find a different sort of sentimentality in the anti-war movement where the Vietnam War era's "make love not war" reemerges as "no blood for oil." In both of these activist calls, appeals to the human body and capacity for joy and harmony are imagined to outweigh all other political concerns. These activist calls echo the crescendo of Auden's poem.

While all these forms of contemporary sentimentality exist in the contextual background of my study, my focus will be on delineating a particular form of sentimentality that appears in American poetry in the first two decades of the twenty-first century that I identify in the figure of the elegiac citizen. By contrast with the abstraction of the isolated and universal lyric speaker, the elegiac citizen is bound both by genre and national affiliation as their poetry articulates mourning not simply for the dead but primarily for a structure of national citizenship wherein the citizen's existence is predicated on loss of life elsewhere. We can see Auden's "September 1, 1939" as an important precursor to this form of elegizing as Auden represents images of individuals transforming into representations of national history: "Out of the mirror they stare, / Imperialism's face / And the international wrong" (ll.42-44). Despite his expatriate status, Auden observes his face as that of a British citizen defined by complicity in centuries of worldwide violence. The elegiac citizens that I study reckon with the complicity of contemporary American citizens in a time not only of war, but of xenophobic violence, exploitative and destructive transnational capitalism, and corruption of the national polis. In the sentiment-saturated setting of the home front

[4] In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler describes how "Sexually progressive conceptions of feminist rights or sexual freedoms have been mobilized [. . .] to rationalize wars against predominantly Muslim populations" (26).

during the War on Terror, the twenty-first century elegiac citizens that I study find emotional experiences that serve as alternatives to the dominant forms of national sentimentality. While the sentimentality evident in the oft-quoted Auden line suggests that poetry can occasion transformations of feeling that will in turn transform the world, *Elegiac Citizens* turns to poetry instead for the consolation of finding an understanding of history adequate to describe the suffering inherent in present relationships between the individual, the national polis, and global power dynamics.

I anticipate a few questions that will arise immediately: Does the elegiac citizen refer to a new sort of poetic speaker or does it refer to the poets themselves? Are the readers that I refer to within the world of the poem or in the contemporary world of its reception? Does the emotional experience end when the act of reading is terminated or does it reverberate beyond it? At the heart of all of these questions lies a concern about identifying the line between the literary and the historical. Yet, the logic of the sentimental is to (try to) cross that line. These questions point to what appears most provocative about the poems I study in this dissertation. Repeatedly, the focal figure of the poem and the poet herself initially appear distinct but over the course of the poem become increasingly hard to distinguish: Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004) features a first-person narrative persona in the process of writing a non-fiction book who, by the final pages of the poem, emerges as the author of the book we have read; C.D. Wright's *Rising, Falling, Hovering* (2008) begins by using third-person pronouns to describe a woman who very much resembles Wright and whose narrative of wartime experience sometimes switches to the first-person over the course of the book; even the protagonist of Anne Carson's *Red Doc>* (2013), the winged red monster G first introduced as Geryon in *Autobiography of Red* (1998) bears a striking resemblance to Carson's memoiristic first-person personas in *Men in the Off Hours* (2000)

and *The Albertine Workout* (2014). Further compounding these evocative uncertainties about the line between the literary and the historical, each of these poems relies heavily on address to the second person in ways that demand the participation of their readers. Readers cannot simply observe this wavering line between the literary and the historical but are asked to place themselves there as well. The term elegiac citizen reflects this indeterminacy by yoking together incommensurate terms from poetics and politics. The term potentially refers at once to the figure represented in the poem, the poet and, perhaps, to "you" the reader.

The idea of the elegiac citizen thus renders porous a line that key accounts of poetics would render absolute. This difference is evident in my deviation from other readings of "September 1, 1939" that turn to it as an exemplary poem through which to consider the relationship between poetry and politics. With an ambivalence often mirroring Auden's own relationship to the poem, scholars such as Stephanie Burt and Jonathan Culler point to the limitations of turning to this poem for political purposes in the twenty-first century. What interests me is how their critiques of the reception of Auden's poem reflect a more general ambivalence about the sentimental which, in turn, reflects Burt's and Culler's commitments to distinguishing political argument from poetry. By framing my dissent under the sign of the sentimental, I signal how our disagreements reflect a genealogy of poetics that dates back to nineteenth-century liberalism.[5] Burt expresses concern about the faith Auden's poem places in the political potential of changed emotions: "'September 1, 1939'—at least in its original version—seeks to govern the realm of historical action with a realm of feeling inhabited by properly oriented literary readers: if all is right in the second realm (if "we," "the Just," "love one another"), then all will later be right in the first (we will not die)"

[5] In this way, I understand my study of the sentimental to be analogous to the historically-aware uses of lyric in Anthony Reed's *Freedom Time* and Gillian White's *Lyric Shame.*

(542). Burt's emphatic separation of a "realm" of feeling from a "realm" historical action strikes me as a critique of the logic of sentimental politics which is often characterized by the belief that individual changes in the private sphere lead to meaningful political change in the public sphere.[6] Following a long tradition of theorizing the political in contradistinction to the personal, Burt severs emotional response from historical achievement. My study is, in many ways, in sympathy with Burt's motivation in analyzing Auden: like Burt, I am concerned that a focus on the obviously public elements of poetry that became dominant in scholarship about modern and contemporary American poetry written in the wake of deconstruction and New Historicism has led to a neglect of the value of sustained close readings of individual poems.[7] My recourse to the sentimental, however, leads me to query the term "public" and to think about so-called private reading as an importantly public act because I do no separate emotions from the history. Instead, I examine emotional responses to historical situations and configurations.

Other critics have taken issue not with Auden's poem itself but with the modes of reading that inform the poem's popularity. For example, Jonathan Culler (convincingly and, I think, justifiably) attributes the post-9/11 appeal of "September 1, 1939" to "convergences" between the poem and recent history and laments that less easily assimilable portions were not engaged fully (341). While readers might have been moved by references to the "odour of death [that] offends the September night" (ll.10-11) and the image of "blind skyscrapers" (l.35), Culler points out that

[6] For example, Lauren Berlant defines sentimental politics as the belief that "the expression of emotional response and conceptual recalibration [is] achievement enough" (*Female Complaint* x).

[7] Burt begins her essay arguing, "Over the past 15 years, American writing on twentieth-century poetry has moved increasingly from formal and theoretical analyses of individual poems toward social, cultural, or economic contexts and consequences. Rather than simply asking what poems mean, or how they work, critics now want to know who reads modern poetry, how, and why; where readers find it; how they use it; and how it speaks to prominent social issues" (533).

the lines in which the speaker considers his own complicity in world historical events run counter to dominant discourse in the United States: "Yet after 9/11, few in the United States dared [. . .] suggest, as the poem does, that we should look at ourselves in the mirror and consider our complicity" (344). Despite its frequent appearance in public, it is clear that much in "September 1, 1939" went unread. Culler uses this sort of fragmented reading practice as evidence that poetry cannot function reliably as political discourse. That the elegiac citizens I study in this dissertation strive to portray a state of complicity that other discourses evaded suggests to me the necessity of studying poetry for representations of political life.[8] Furthermore, the reading strategy that Culler wishes to delegitimize as a mode of political engagement is the quintessentially sentimental practice of reading for what Virginia Jackson terms "vicarious identification" (*Dickinson's Misery* 211). Far from rendering the poem unfit for politics, readerly identification allows readers to imagine connections between literature and life. While this will not produce political argument in the narrow, Habermasian manner that Burt explicitly and Culler implicitly endorses, my studies suggest that it has a vital political role in deriving a vocabulary to describe readers' identities in relation to the globe and in relation to national and world history.[9]

If we read beyond the much-quoted, much-contested crescendo, we can find a more complex form of sentimentality in "September 1, 1939" than emerges in Burt's and Culler's

[8] Culler argues "Poems offer memorable formulations, which can inform your thought or your life, but they are not thought to offer an argument, which may sometimes enable them to get under the guard of a wary intelligence, but may also lead to selective recall and repetition and evasion of what might be important. This makes it especially difficult to assess the sociopolitical implications of a poem, since what the poem quite obviously declares may not be what is taken in, assimilated" (344)

[9] Burt wishes "to make clear the poor fit between those models and accounts of twentieth-century American poetry which hope to make that poetry central to a political public sphere conceived according to Habermasian norms" (544). Implicitly valuing the Habermasian values of rational critical debate, Culler distinguishes poetry from "comprehensive argument" (344).

critiques. Like the contemporary elegiac citizens that I examine in this dissertation, Auden's form of sentimentality in "September 1, 1939" represents emotions as public and draws upon history in order to find a vocabulary to describe these public emotions. These are variations of the critiques made by Burt and Culler and thus Auden's poem can help us to see how the publicity of emotion and the force of identification might become valuable entryways into understanding something as far outside the self as a war beginning in another continent. By contrast with the aforementioned two realms that Burt presents (one emotive; the other political), the opening of "September 1, 1939" presents emotional experience as a fulcrum between the individual and the larger world: while the poetic persona begins by identifying himself as "uncertain and afraid", the remainder of the first stanza reveals the public origin of those emotions:

> Waves of anger and fear
> Circulate over the bright
> And darkened lands of the earth,
> Obsessing our private lives (ll.6-9)

The persona's emotions originate outside the individual self. Imagined as waves, these emotions emerge as a force that overtakes the globe and replaces any previous sense of private selfhood. Emotional response to news of a world-historical event thus makes the self constructed by the public in a particular way (by contrast with the totalizing vision of the constructed self as developed in poststructuralist theory and poetics that I will discuss at greater length below). Auden suggests that the private realm has been in part formed by a shared, and consequently public, emotional experience. Resembling the late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century model of sentimentality articulated by Adela Pinch in *Strange Fits of Passion*, Auden does not locate emotion in the self

but as a force that joins the self to the world: the anger and fear do not originate within the individual, but reflects the individual's responsiveness to the world.[10]

Perhaps twenty-first century readers identified sentimentally with Auden's speaker not only because of those uncanny convergences between the poem and their present, but also because the poem models a similar form of sentimental historical thinking. Auden's persona turns to Martin Luther, Thucydides and even the diary of the Russian ballerina Vaslav Nijinsky to help describe his emotional experience at the onset of World War II:

> The windiest militant trash
> Important Persons shout
> Is not so crude as our wish:
> What mad Nijinsky wrote
> About Diaghilev
> Is true of the normal heart;
> For the error bred in the bone
> Of each woman and each man
> Craves what it cannot have,
> Not universal love
> But to be loved alone. (ll.57-66)

The final lines of the stanza come from a passage in Nijinsky's diary about the end of WWI in which he contrasts politicians and persons who truly strive for universal love with those who selfishly desire love only for themselves (27). In Auden's reception of this passage of the diary at the onset of another world war, he uses Nijinsky's language to depict a very different political reality in which all humans greedily want love only for themselves. As Auden defines this as a universal "error," his use of Nijinsky's words allows him to devise a vocabulary to describe what flaw in human nature leads to continual warfare. It is greediness not only for land, but also for emotional satisfaction. Thus, when Auden reaches his sentimental crescendo two stanzas later—

[10] Pinch begins *Strange Fits of Passion* observing, "Feelings often seem to have lives of their own in eighteenth-century writing. Not always lodged within the private, inner lives of individual persons, they rather circulate among persons as somewhat autonomous substances" (1).

"we must love one another or die"—the love seems already doomed by this "error bred in the bone." Even in the original version of the poem, Auden does not oppose love and war but shows a more complex relationship between the two given his understanding of love as varied in qualities and aims. In that way, we might say that Auden's original version of the poem complicates the clear binary suggested by the revision history: read as a whole, the poem already exists between the "and" and the "or" because Auden does not develop an idealizing vision of love that can easily translate into a harmonious utopia. Instead, by citing and reconceptualizing historical examples of suffering, Auden creates a consolatory vision that uses the past to illuminate the present. Citation emerges as an act of living with others across history: while it does not hold the same utopian possibilities of loving one another as some readers have found in Auden's original version of the poem, it does represent a way of understanding oneself in the present as part of a longer history. In addition to this example from relatively recent history, Auden turns to Thucydides to consider Hitler within a very long history of dictators in Democracy.

If critics are right in noting the resurgent interest in poetry following September 11th, the nearly two decades of ongoing war, extrajudicial detainment, and infraction of civil liberties that followed are perhaps evidence that poetry, in Auden's famous formulation from another 1939 poem, "makes nothing happen" ("In Memory of W.B. Yeats" l.36). Yet I think the consolation through citation that can be found in "September 1, 1939" helps point to how considerations of the political work of poetry require clarifying our understanding of what it would even mean to make something happen. What strikes me as immensely valuable about this poem in its twenty-first century reception is how it models an attempt to situate oneself as an emotional being both in the globe and in a long narrative of world history. Or, to again turn to Auden's elegy for Yeats, even if poetry makes nothing happen, it still "survives / in the valley of its making [. . .] it survives, a

way of happening, a mouth" (ll.36-41). While Auden denies a clear political role for poetry, he cannot rest in that rejection but instead values another type of "happening" that poetry occasions. Closer attention to genre rather than abstract debates about poetry can help define "the valley of its making," the worldly conditions that called upon the poem for response. To cite "September 1, 1939" as an example simply of poetry obscures how its genre already connects it to political life. Auden's poem belongs in a tradition of Anglo-American elegy which features an elegiac citizen persona who expresses grief for lives lost across the globe due to the violence of imperial advancement in which their citizenship renders them complicit.

Creating Consolation: Reading War Poetry Elegiacally

Elegy renders the emotional experience of mourning in language and poetic form. While we may most readily use this term with regard to poems dedicated to individuals, the prevalence of public mourning after September 11th is only the most salient example of the need to articulate mourning for groups of persons unknown yet still connected to the grieving individual. Anita Helle traces a genealogy of political elegy for mass death from nineteenth-century elegies for Indian removal to September 11th. Despite the different contexts, Helle observes similar poetic debates animating historical and contemporary women's elegies: "In the 'new world' of pain marked by transnational violence and trauma, we also find renewed debates about pathos and the public, echoes of an unfinished modern sentimental which has not yet resolved its relationship to an affective poetics and politics of grief" (13). Informed by the work of feminist scholars of elegy such as Melissa Zeiger and Celeste Schenck, Helle suggests that a model of consolation in which the poem emerges as an aesthetic substitute for the deceased has limited applicability to this lineage of female poets (3). Likewise, the consolatory visions that I identify in the work of twenty-first

century elegiac citizens do not offer the poem as an adequate substitute. The difficult experience of reading the poems of contemporary elegiac citizens emerges as a process of apprehending historical self-consciousness in global terms. Consolation rests not in finding a substitute for the lost but in revising progressive, causal narratives of history that underlie and repeat those losses.

My concept of an elegiac citizen responds to and inverts the connection that Hannah Arendt draws between natality and action in the theorization of the public sphere that she develops in *The Human Condition* (1958). In her tripartite division of human activities into labor, work, and action, Arendt deems only the last one properly political and argues that action is defined by its connection to natality: "the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting" (9). By contrast, the poets in my study tend to see war (as well as other forms of state violence) as revelations of the fundamental inability of the citizen to act in such a way: the individual cannot create peace or sustain lives in the face of contemporary global power dynamics and the long histories of exploitation that underlie the contemporary. Elegiac citizens do not aspire to create revolutionary change and a restored future (because they comprehend the limits of doing so) but instead grieve past losses as well as present structures that perpetuate those genres of loss. We might say that elegiac citizens grieve, above all else, the absence of the very possibility of natality in the sense of an action that will create something entirely new in the world.

With their focus on the past, they reflect a figure that Arendt discusses in her roughly contemporaneous essay "The Gap Between Past and Future" (1961). To illustrate the dynamics of historical thinking (by contrast with acting), Arendt analyzes a parable by Kafka that depicts a man battling both the past and the future. Arendt argues that the presence of the man changes the progression of history, "the insertion of man, as he breaks up the continuum, cannot but cause the

forces to deflect, however lightly, from their original direction" (11). While this description might seem to echo Arendt's depiction of the natality inherent in action since the man creates something new (e.g. deflection), she places this figure situated between the past and the future squarely in the realm of thought.[11] Why is this mental form of natality not considered action for Arendt? The key difference for Arendt is that this battle is a private one by contrast with the public display of action: "each new generation, indeed every new human being as he inserts himself between an infinite past and an infinite future, must discover and ploddingly pave it anew" (13). While my concept of the elegiac citizen resembles Arendt's depiction of the historical thinker because both are concerned with the question of how the present might make the future something other than a repetition of the past, elegiac citizens do so not as individuals but in concert with others through their citational practices and their forms of address. Their poetry rests on the quality of human plurality that, for Arendt, defines the political.[12] I understand consolation as a form of action because it creates a shared vocabulary for historical thinking. In the poetry of elegiac citizens, consolation is a public use of language because their forms of address create a shared understanding of the citizen's place in the world.

Situating poetry about the War on Terror within the long history of American women's sentimental elegies outlined by Helle allows for a particularly feminist approach to war poetry that builds upon the model of Susan Schweik's *A Gulf So Deeply Cut*.[13] Yet I would suggest that our

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[11] "This diagonal force, whose origin is known, whose direction is determined by past and future, but whose eventual end lies in infinity, is the perfect metaphor for the activity of thought" (11-2).
[12] "Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on earth and inhabit the world. While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically *the* condition—not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam*—of all political life" (Human Condition 7).
[13] Susan Schweik's groundbreaking study *A Gulf So Deeply Cut: American Women Poets and the Second World War* (1991) demonstrated the gender ideology upholding the distinction between

bias against women's war poetry reflects not only a gender ideology but also a lyric ideology that privileges poetry about experience.[14] Whereas scholars of war poetry written by civilians such as Philip Metres, Rachel Galvin, and Mary Favret tend to focus on the anxiety that poets on the home front feel about their lack of experiential authority as writers, I work from the assumption that grief itself is an experience worthy of exploration in poetry.[15] My study of war poetry under the sign of elegy instead of lyric serves as another way of complicating the category of experience by locating it not in the lyricized understanding of poetry but in the rhetorical situation of elegy.[16] In my understanding, civilian poetry is as much war poetry as the work of soldier poets. The elegiac citizens that I study are not simply attempting to grieve the casualties of war: their mourning is complicated by a feeling of complicity as these poets reveal connections between the privileges of American citizenship and the loss of life elsewhere on the globe (not to mention the differential distribution of that privilege even within the United States.) Thus, the need to elegize is fundamentally wrapped up with the experience of citizenship that necessitates the practice of state

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who does and does not have authority to write about war. She traces this ideology back to the WWI-era soldier poets (e.g. Owen, Sassoon, Graves) who "had sternly insisted upon 'the authority of experience' as an absolute prerequisite for war writing, and had memorably indicted women for their naive, invariably war-mongering lack of that authority" (5-6)

[14] Rachel Galvin offers a thorough consideration of lyric and civilian poetry in *News of War* (33-6). She begins with the assumption that "The lyric has long been characterized as conveying subjectivity through its first-person representation of individual experience" (33).

[15] Metres begins with the question, "In an age when total war affects nearly every citizen do only soldiers have the right, or the ability to speak about war" (4). Similarly, Rachel Galvin asks, "Must war poetry originate exclusively in the experience of combatants? Could a noncombatant ever have sufficient authority to write of war?" (1-2). Whereas Favret studies how poets attempted "to find sentient ground for what often appeared a free-floating, impersonal military operation, removed from their immediate sensory perception" (9), my poets find their wartime all too sentient.

[16] Here I am indebted to Virginia Jackson's theory of the lyric: "Whereas other poetry genres (epic, poems on affairs of the state, georgic, pastoral, verse epistle, epitaph, elegy, satire) may remain embedded in specific historical occasions or narratives, and thus depend upon some description of those occasions and narratives for their interpretation [. . .], the poetry that comes to be understood as lyric after the eighteenth century is thought to require as its context only the occasion of its reading.

violence. Elegiac citizens mourn not simply for lost lives but primarily for a history and a system that produces the logic under which those lives must be lost.

The binary between elegiac consolation and anti-consolation as developed in key scholarly texts on elegy is ultimately inadequate to describe how these elegiac citizens understand the relationship between mourning and poetry. As Peter Sacks defines the elegy, the central features of the genre rest on "the experience of loss and the search for consolation" (1). By contrast, Jahan Ramazani argues, "modern elegists tend not to achieve but to resist consolation, not to override but to sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss" (xi). In certain ways, "September 1, 1939" and the poems that I examine in my chapters manifest the spirit of this melancholy elegy: by telling long histories of the contemporary—reaching back to Ancient Greece and the Reformation, the discovery of America and the Middle Passage—as well as insisting on the present need to acknowledge the grief occasioned by these events, Auden as well as Rankine, Wright and Carson might seem to melancholically intensify already existing experiences of grief and anger. Yet, ultimately, each does construct a sort of consolation—in Auden this is the prayer to be loving that serves as a conclusion to the poem;[17] in the elegiac citizens I study it will emerge in how the reading of poetry can help readers find ways to articulate the continuing pressure of the past on the present without seeing the future as foreclosed. Consolation is not the end of grief; it is the act of incorporating the experience of grief into political thought.

These consolatory gestures are very much at odds not only with how Ramazani characterizes modern elegy but also how other critics have viewed consolation in relation to

[17] May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame. (ll.95-9)

politics: in his expansion of Ramazani's concept of melancholic elegy into the realm of ethics, R. Clifton Spargo argues that "melancholia [is] evocative of an ethical concern for the other" (11); Deborah Nelson champions a tradition of literary "unsentimentality" whose toughness is defined by the "self-imposed task of looking at painful reality with directness and clarity and without consolation or compensation" (2); much of Judith Butler's recent work on the War on Terror (which I discuss in greater detail below) attempts to find political use for grief. Grief is widely understood as an ethical stance toward others and, for these critics, consolation is thus opposed to political or ethical projects. However, I argue that consolation is a form of action that creates a grammar to apprehend and describe the structures that produce loss. My studies have led me to agree with Diana Fuss' argument in *Modern Dying* (2013) that "It may be too soon to foreclose on consolation. Far from constituting an unethical response to mourning, poems that seek to acknowledge or redress loss continue to perform a vital function, reconstructive repairing, and reinventing sundered lines of contact and communication" (107). Yet it is not simply that these consolatory visions provide an ethical way of relating to the living (as Fuss suggests), but that they represent a mode of acknowledging the past without being paralyzed by the act of mourning for mass death.[18]

Elegiac citizens dramatize the experience of expansive grief as a necessary response to their present and to relevant histories, yet also dramatize the profoundly difficult experiences of

[18] My dissertation joins a nascent movement in contemporary criticism to reconsider the role of consolation. See Rivka Zim, *The Consolations of Writing: Literary Strategies of Resistance from Boethius to Primo Levi* (2014), David James, *Discrepant Solace* (2019), and Josephine Nock-Hee Park "The Poetics of Consolation: Japanese Aesthetics and American Incarceration" (2019). However, these contributions largely consider consolation outside the framework of elegy. Still, I find James' notion of discrepant solace useful to underscore the forms of revisionary consolation I find in the poetry of elegiac citizens: "discrepant solace brings together narratives that twin the aesthetic conundrum surrounding how writing consoles with the ethical one of whether consolation is desirable at all" (7).

depression, rage, and anxiety that stem from their grieving. In many ways, the elegiac citizen reflects a form of subjectivity theorized by Judith Butler in her writings about the War on Terror such as *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Frames of War* (2009). In these studies, Butler works from the central observation that the War on Terror is fueled by a "differential location of grievability" in which U.S. citizens mourn for the loss of life of their fellow citizens but not loss of life of those of other (particularly Middle Eastern) countries (*Frames of War* xiv). Her antiwar politics involve redistributing that grievability: analyzing how the media's framing of war contributes to the viability of waging war, Butler asks "If those of us who watch the wars our governments conduct at a distance are visually solicited and recruited into the war by embedded reporting and publicly approved media reports, under what conditions can we refuse that recruitment effort? What restructuring of the senses does that require and enable?" (xiii). Political theorist Bonnie Honig characterizes Butler's recent work as a "sentimental ethics of loss and lament" (35). From my position as a literary critic, I understand this charge of sentimentality not as a dismissive critique but as a spur to further analysis of how this sentimentality might be structured in particular poetic texts. In that way, my understanding of elegy reflects Max Cavitch's argument that mourning is not simply an affective state but evidenced in elegiac poetry as "the 'work' (both process and artifact) of mourning—a form of psychic labor that is also fundamental to the work of culture" (2). In Cavitch's psychoanalytic model, this work can be defined as "the mute agony of incorporation, whereby we keep the dead inside ourselves, so to speak, in tangles and hollows that figurative language can only strain to reach" (15). For the elegiac citizens I study who tend to regard psychological experience as (at least partially) shared and collective, the psychoanalytic model that Cavitch describes serves not primarily to soothe the individual mourner but to give name to the collective situation that gives rise to the need to mourn in global and transhistorical terms.

Instead of mute agony, elegiac citizens find consolation as address allows for an intersubjective understanding of grief. The politics of their poetry rests not in redistributing grief, but in finding language to represent civic grief.

The most useful precedent for this project is not Auden who rejects his consolatory vision, but Rukeyser's *Elegies* and her hard-earned arrival at consolation by the final one, "Elegy in Joy" (1948). Rukeyser wrote ten elegies between 1939 and 1948, during the years of the Spanish Civil War (the beginning of which Rukeyser witnessed when she was in Spain covering the antifascist alternative to the Berlin Olympics) through the beginning of the Cold War. Susan Schweik argues that Rukeyser's World War II poetry casts war as an outgrowth of the imagination which, in turn, allows her to "reclaim reading as a mode of action" (152). Accordingly, she is an important predecessor to the political work that I identify in twenty-first century elegiac citizens. In some of the earlier elegies, Rukeyser evinces signs of being a poet in sympathy with the Auden of "we must love one another *and* die." For example, Rukeyser laments in the sixth elegy, "I love, I love, and we are far from peace" (37). She notes a discontinuity between her individual emotional experience and the world at war. However, later in the elegies, Rukeyser finds a role for love in the realm of the imagination: "A world is to be fought for, sung, and built; / Love must imagine the world" (55). Here, she theorizes the possibility of continuity between love and the world by attending to the imagined future instead of the present conflict. In "Elegy in Joy," she concludes her sequence of wartime elegies with consolatory visions of love. The political possibilities of this emotional experience are directed squarely at the future: "Every elegy is the present—freedom eating out / hearts, death, and explosion, and the world unbegun. / Now burning and unbegun, I sing earth with its war, / and God the future, and the wish of man" (58). By situating elegy in the present, Rukeyser defines its ground as the damaged world of war and death. Despite the weight

of the nine previous elegies and their depictions of violence and lost life, Rukeyser here frames reality as both "burning" and "unbegun." That is to say, through singing Rukeyser simultaneously presents the horrors of the past and the possibility that the future contains new beginnings. In lieu of the violent divisions of the elegy's present, the future emerges unified in the figure of God and as a site for the realization of the wishes that unite humanity.

Importantly, Rukeyser makes the peaceful future imaginable not simply by performing song but also by directing her reader through address. At the end of the penultimate section of "Elegy in Joy," Rukeyser interrupts a view of a present rife with bombs with an imperative addressed to her reader:

> Much to begin. Now be your green, your burning,
> bear also our joy, come to our meeting-place
> and in the triumph of the reconceived
> lie down at last together face to face. (61)

Rukeyser's capacity to imagine a future different from the past thus relies on her reader's willingness and capacity to bring something new into the world. This happens particularly though the imagination of an intimate meeting of the first and second person. In the poem's conclusion, the intimacy achieved between reader and writer extends outward: "Love that gives us ourselves, in the world known to all / new techniques for the healing of the wound, / and the unknown world. One life, or the faring stars" (61). On the one hand, this seems to be a version of Auden's opposition of love or death as the final sentence suggests that humans need to learn to perceive themselves as part of a unified world or else face certain destruction. However, Rukeyser willfully directs that vision toward the future as she sets it in the "unknown world." Rather than abjuring her poem for its imaginative and unrealistic resolution, Rukeyser finds potential in the imagination itself by self-consciously theorizing it as the force that fuels war in the present and could instead create peace in the future. The act of healing connects the present tense of the elegy with its consolatory vision

of the future. By contrast with the connection between action and birth that Arendt draws in her theorization of the citizen, the consolation of the elegiac citizen as represented in Rukeyser rests in the creation of healers through the way in which the poet addresses and develops the imagination of her readers.

Addressing Love

Rukeyser's *Elegies* fit into the tradition of sentimental antiwar poetry not only because of her appeal to love as a response to war culture, but also because of her reliance on address to the second person. Even more emphatically sentimental than Auden, Rukeyser not only ends by imagining a political role for love but by instilling that emotional response through address. In a highly influential formulation, Jonathan Culler describes address as an "embarrassing" quality of lyric poetry given its aspiration to create change in the world of reception.[19] Culler's understanding of address haunts the most prominent example of sentimental antiwar poetry written during the War on Terror: Juliana Spahr's *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* (2005). *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* has emerged as a touchstone text in scholarship about poetry and the War on Terror.[20] Written in the mode of Auden's "we must love one another *and* die," Spahr's poem features a self-consciously lyric speaker who channels Sappho in an attempt to combat war culture through loving address. Unsurprisingly, the poem also registers the failure of its ambition. While

[19] As Jonathan Culler argues in "Lyric, History, and Genre," "[A]postrophe represents what is most embarrassing in lyric: the pretension to vatic action" (886).

[20] See Charles Altieri, "The Place of Rhetoric in Contemporary American Poetics: Jennifer Moxley and Juliana Spahr" (2011) and "What Theory Can Learn from New Directions in Contemporary American Poetry" (2012); Piotr Gwiazda, *US Poetry in the Age of Empire, 1979-2012* (2014), Lynn Keller, "'Post-Language Lyric': The Example of Juliana Spahr" (2010), Nicky Marsh, "Going 'Glocal': The Local and the Global in Recent Experimental Women's Poetry" (2007); and Heather Milne, *Poetry Matters: Neoliberalism, Affect, and the Posthuman in Twenty-First Century North American Feminist Poetics* (2018).

critics have lauded the sophistication of Spahr's dramatization of the relation between poetry and politics, I would attribute her sense of failure to her definitions of action (as revolutionary change) and poetry (as lyric). The sense that loving address cannot create peace should not be read as evidence as poetry's failure to effect political change, but rather should be read as evidence of the need to examine the terms under which the debate is framed.

Juliana Spahr has been central in articulating a feminist vision of post-language poetry that finds political value in poetics that a previous generation might have derided as merely securing the illusion of bourgeois selfhood. In the introduction to the influential 2002 anthology *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language*, Spahr identifies a canon of contemporary experimental women poets who "make room within lyric for language writing's more politicized claims" (2). However, Spahr's attempts to diversify the canon of contemporary political poetry has not been matched with a necessary reappraisal of poetic history. In a 2001 account of how Language poetry helped her to find her voice as a poet (entitled "After Language Poetry"), Spahr tellingly truncates the history of women's poetry in America:

> Women enter into poetry in the United States around modernism, with typical mixed results. But after modernism, they get tossed in the looney bin with Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. So language writing's self-aware roots in modernism and, to use Hejinian's word, 'inquiry' rather than confessionalism, felt to me to be a way out of the sad poetess model. If I wanted to write things down, it need not be about my angst. It could be about thinking!

By claiming that women enter poetry in the United States around modernism, Spahr disavows two and a half centuries of women writers. Of course, this effacement is not Spahr's alone but reflects pervasive judgments on the part of figures as disparate as canonical modernists, New Critics, and feminist scholars of modern and contemporary poetry.[21] Oddly, even though Spahr effaces the

[21] For discussions of modernism and sentimentality, see Suzanne Clark, *Sentimental Modernism* (1991) and Julie Taylor, *Djuana Barnes and Affective Modernism* (2012). For discussions of New

poetic contributions of earlier women writers from her account of literary history, they remain present in her concern that the confessional poets have left her with only the model of the "sad poetess." She associates valuable poetry with the intellect and tries to cordon it off from emotional experience.

And yet, Spahr's poetry has been increasingly invested in exploring an emotion so often associated with the sad poetess: love. Spahr's poetry in the twenty-first century often finds itself in the same impasse of Auden's "we must love one another *and* die": from *Fuck You – Aloha – I Love You* (2001) to *That Winter the Wolf Came* (2015), Spahr has been continually exploring the political potential of love and continually arriving at an impasse.[22] Spahr's impasse reflects an

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Criticism and sentimentality, see Isobel Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic* (2000) and Tricia Lootens, *Political Poetess* (2016). Heather Milne's *Poetry Matters: Neoliberalism, Affect, and the Posthuman in Twenty-First Century North American Feminist Poetics* (2018) is emblematic of this tendency in studies of contemporary women's poetry. While Milne's book charts much the same territory as my dissertation, she draws a genealogy that begins with feminist responses to Language poetry in the 1980s. Similarly, other recent studies of feminist poetics tend to root their narratives in modernist experimentation. For example, see Elisabeth A. Frost, *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry* (2003) and Amy Moorman Robbins' *American Hybrid Poetics* (2014).

[22] Throughout her twenty-first century work, Juliana Spahr lovingly addresses her reader. The trope begins with the title of *Fuck You – Aloha – I Love You* (2001). The jarringly ambivalent words ostensibly come from the mouth of a singer at a hardcore show in Hawaii, but, by taking those words out of their context and using them as her title, Spahr made "you," her reader, also into the subject of the words' address. Other poems in the volume theorize the political potential of erotic love. In "Switching," for example, she imagined "you" first as partner in academic deliberation ("In a room we sit around a table") and then as a lover ("In another room, in a hotel room, / we hurriedly undress") (35-6). Spahr ascribes power to this love: to have the same "we" at the table and in the hotel room could, she suggested, have transformative effects on both the private and the public sphere. Her most recent collection of poems, *That Winter the Wolf Came* (2015), concludes its poetic account of Occupy Oakland with the sentimental appeal that has become so pervasive in Spahr's work: "Turnt" embeds expressions and texts of "I love you" or "Lub u!!!!!!" or simply "<3" within an apparent network of activists that, as the poem reveals at the end, is actually a list of the most popular baby names worldwide from 2015 (83-5). The appeal reaches not only to her readers, but to a globalized collective of children and, by extension, to a worldwide imaginary of futurity. As Spahr contextualizes these sentimental appeals within the framework of global politics, she seems to bestow her love of an expansive "you" with political power or, at least, an expectation thereof.

assumption that for poetry to have a politics it must lead to demonstrable action in the public sphere. Consider her account of what makes poetry politically valuable in her recent scholarly monograph *DuBois' Telegram*: "I have been moved by various works of literature [. . .] moved not just in my heart but also moved into writing and out onto the streets at the same time" (6). Sentimental and demonstrably political, Spahr longs not only for reading to occasion an emotional transformation but also for what that transformation will cause readers to do in the historical world of reception. But are moving readers into the streets the only way that poetry is political? Consider Muriel Rukeyser's notion of "the long preparation of the self to be used" that she turns to justify why poetry is necessary in times of political crises (*Life of Poetry* 1). In this essay that opens with a scene at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, Rukeyser finds a value in poetry to match her moment of political crisis because the reading of poetry helps to develop the reader morally and emotionally.[23] While Rukeyser ultimately values action, she looks for that action to come from the reader of poetry and not from the reading of a poem. The action does not occur instantaneously but over a long period of time as the development of the individual self and vocabulary emerges as the means by which a reader becomes a fulcrum between the poem and the world.[24]

When critics praise Spahr's recent poetry for its experimental lyricism, they tend to take her understanding of its (failed) politics at face value. In the introductory note to the long poem that tracks the news during the lead up to the March 2003 invasion of Iraq, Spahr explains that her

[23] In a similar vein, albeit one not explicitly connected to war, we might consider Audre Lorde's contention that "poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of 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" (37).

[24] See Stephanie Degooyer's "'The Eyes of Other People': Adam Smith's Triangular Sympathy and the Sentimental Novel" for another account of the prolonged temporality of sentimental politics.

newfound feeling of complicity "made lyric—with its attention to connection, with its dwelling on the beloved and the afar—suddenly somewhat poignant, somewhat apt, even somewhat more useful than I usually find it" (13). Critics tend to praise Spahr's experimental lyricism and follow Spahr in arguing that the poem dramatizes the failure of lyric to oppose militarism. Heather Milne argues that this tension renders *This Connection* "a melancholic text in its realization of the limitation of the poet's role. The poet can document and witness, she can develop a vocabulary of the affective complexities and difficult intimacies of global relations. While these acts are valuable and indeed vital, they cannot halt the invasion of Iraq" (174). However, as the example of Rukeyser's *Elegies* shows, a poet's self-awareness of the circumscribed realm of their influence can lead just as easily to resolve as to melancholia. Charles Altieri goes ever further than Milne by valuing the poem precisely for its lack of consolation: "What poetry can do is refuse to settle for any fictions of resolved opposition, and also refuse any consolation that will ultimately allow the reader to subdue the alienating voices that render insufficient every gesture of intimacy" (137). These evaluations do not reflect anything inherent in the politics of lyricism, but instead reflect a valuation of action over articulation when evaluating the political impact of poetry. Furthermore, the sense of the failure of Spahr's lyricism reflects notions of address that have come to be associated with ideals of lyric reading.

The lyricized assumptions underwriting Spahr's performance of sentimental address emerge with particular clarity if we contrast her revision of Sappho in *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* with a nearly contemporaneous deployment of Sappho in Spahr's prose memoir *The Transformation*. When Spahr revises Sappho in a poem when she is already self-consciously performing as a lyric speaker, she focuses on forms of address that that have come to be understood as particularly defining of lyric understood as a genre. Echoing Auden's opposition of love and

death in a poem set on the eve of World War II, Spahr turns to Sappho's fragment 16 in a poem set on January 20, 2003—the day on which Britain announced it would be sending 31,000 troops to Kuwait to prepare to support the United States' possible invasion of Iraq. Since its rediscovery during World War I, modern readers have regarded this fragment of Sappho as an antiwar poem for the way it contrasts the masculine and epic love of weaponry with the feminine lyricist's desire for the beloved (Prins 263). The opening of the poem identifies a social value for love in contrast to the concerns of war culture.

> Some say thronging cavalry, some say foot soldiers,
> others call a fleet the most beautiful of
> sights the dark earth offers, but I say it's what-
> ever you love best.
>
> And it's easy to make this understood by
> everyone (28; ll.1-6).

I quote from the Jim Powell translation *Sappho: A Garland* because Spahr's syntax suggests that she referenced his version in composing her modernized form of fragment 16. The final quoted line and a half promises that the poem might possess a universal pedagogy, as if the lyricist could convince the warmongers to recognize the precedence of love over armaments. At the ancient origin of lyric, then, we are also asked to see a possible origin of sentimental politics as the Sapphic speaker identifies an activist possibility in her love poems.

Spahr's modernizing revision reflects an engagement with these opening lines of Sappho's fragment. Quoting (without acknowledgment) the opening of Powell's translation, Spahr begins the poem dated January 20, 2003: "Some say thronging cavalry, some say foot soldiers, others call a fleet" (45). Delaying Sappho's turn to beauty and her lyric intervention, Spahr continues to represent the voices of war culture: "Some say an army of cavalry, others of infantry, others of ships / Some say horsemen or footmen or rowers / Or a troop of horses, the serried rankers of

marchers, a noble fleet, some say" (45). By allowing these voices to extend for a further seven lines without mention of beauty and then an additional five lines after providing the context that they are debating the most beautiful sight, Spahr dramatizes the lengthy, droning history of warmongering between the time of Sappho and the present in which she turns to Sappho. Additionally, Spahr updates the fragment for the War on Terror by describing contemporary uses for increasingly modern weaponry alongside those mentioned by Sappho: "Some say thronging Warrior combat vehicles, some say foot soldiers, others call a fleet the most beautiful of sights the dark earth offers. [. . .] On this dark earth, some say the thing most lovely is the thirty thousand assault troops from Britain today joining the sixty-two thousand from the US mobilized in the past ten days and a further sixty thousand from the US on their way" (46). By juxtaposing contemporary and Sapphic terms for weaponry through twelve often exceedingly repetitive lines, Spahr depicts a love of instruments of violence that has become modernized but not fundamentally changed as it persists over time.

Amidst these changing technologies, the type of the female lyricist remains constant as Spahr finally interjects in the thirteenth line, "I say it's what you love best" (46). In opposing love to war, Spahr joins a tradition of feminist readings of Sappho that find in her poetry a feminine opposition to a masculine war culture.[25] And through modernizing this tradition, Spahr dramatizes the failure of its sentimentality as the female lyricist's continuity through time is met only with more destructive weapons. Yet, Spahr's presentation of Sappho's voice does not reflect a thorough engagement with the extant fragment so much as it reflects idealized theories of address that have

[25] See Page duBois' *Sappho is Burning* for an account of this tendency in feminist readings of Sappho (9). Similarly, Jonathan Culler reads the poem as an example of the lyricist's opposition to war culture: "This poem champions, against the epic values that formed the normative view of a warrior society, what has become a modern view of love and of what in general is to be preferred" (*Theory of the Lyric* 309).

come to be associated with lyric reading. Spahr's reception features a lyric "I" who believes in the antiwar possibilities of love and who tries to realize these possibilities through addressing an expansive "you" that comes to include the entire world.[26] As if seeking to formally overwhelm military culture, Spahr responds to her twelve-line catalogue of armaments with fourteen devoted to love. Each of these lines presents itself as a speech act in which Spahr's poetic persona declares her preference for her beloveds. While Sappho's lyric contains only one instance of address to the second person, Spahr's revision contains six: "I say it's whatever you love best. / I say it is the persons you love" (46); "I say it is the sight of the ones you love / I say it again, the sight of the ones you love, those you've met and those you haven't" (47). Reflecting what Jonathan Culler has described as the "vatic action" of lyric address wherein the lyric speaker believes that their words will occasion action in the world, Spahr's appeals the second person rest on the assumption that the lyric speaker possesses agency through the work of address: as if she could make the most beautiful sight be the beloved through speaking it into existence for you, her addressee.

As the speaker grows increasingly aware of her failure to effect change through address, her vatic posture gives way to the relationship that Virginia Jackson terms misery as she dramatizes the impossibility of transmission between the literary and the historical.[27] The poem closes in a stuttering realization of its limits in its final addresses to the second person: "I say it again and again. / Again and again. / I try to keep saying it to keep making it happen. / I say it again, the sight

[26] Throughout *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs*, Spahr addresses a plural "yous." This experimental grammar invites the interpellated reader to see themselves not as individuals but as part of a plural group of potential addressees and linguistically enacts Spahr's sentimental appeal to a universalized beloved.

[27] Jackson associates lyric misery with the dehistoricizing reading strategies of lyric reading: "The textual subjection of this subject is [. . .] both a testimony to the authenticity of her pain and the acknowledgement that lyric testimony will inevitably be read as only the figurative performance (rather than the historical experience) of that referent" (222).

of the ones you love, those you've met and those you haven't" (47). In linking saying with happening, Spahr asserts that the articulation of love and love's value should have some transformative effect on "you." The incessant repetition in these lines registers Spahr's sense that her speech acts have not had the effect on her readers (or on the world) that they theoretically should. Even as she addresses a second person, Spahr's isolated lyric speaker criticizes herself for making nothing happen. Thus, it is not Culler's vatic address but Jackson's syllogistic one that appears primary in Spahr's poem. In this model, the mode of address happens not through the poem's "you" but through its "I": "the structure is one which saying 'I' can stand for saying 'you,' in which the poet's solitude stands in for the solitude of the individual reader" (129). In assuming the Sapphic voice, Spahr allows herself to be transformed into the type of the sentimental lyricist, complete with that lyricist's inability to effect change through address to a second person.

But does this sentimental lyric ideal actually reflect Sappho's poem? If we examine Sappho's fragment 16 beyond the first few lines that Spahr presents in her modernizing translation, we see that Sappho too registers the failure of the poem's opening promises. Sappho's claim to an "easy" universal pedagogy is undercut almost immediately as she cites Helen as a clarifying example (l.7). As Helen's capacity to be beloved is linked absolutely with her capacity to launch a thousand ships, Sappho's opening dichotomy between love and war becomes destabilized. Sappho does not oppose love to war, but imbricates the two by showing a shared basis in longing for possession. Furthermore, Helen's role in the poem becomes destabilized as well: while Sappho establishes her first as a classical example of beauty, as the poem progresses a reader sees that she is actually an example of one whose actions are motivated by falling in love. Whereas Spahr's sentimentalism values actions motivated by love, Sappho appears suspicious of that model: the Sapphic speaker praises Helen's husband, children and parents and observes that the power of love

is such that "when the goddess seduced her wits and / left her to wander, // she forgot them all, she could not remember / anything but longing" (ll.11-4). By contrast with the stable form of love represented by Spahr, Sappho focuses instead on the experience of longing. Longing drags Helen away from her past life and leads her to focus only on an as yet unfulfilled desire. Even though the Sapphic speaker appears critical of this transformation in Helen, she unwittingly allows herself to be transformed in the same way. Such is the power of love, not to stop war but to perpetuate a false sense of its opposition to war:

> But that reminds me
> now: Anactória
>
> She's not here, and I'd rather see her lovely
> step, her sparkling glance and her face than gaze on
> all the troops in Lydia in their chariots and
> glittering armor. (ll.15-20)

As Anactória's "sparkling glance" anticipates the "glittering armor" of the Lydians, the Sapphic speaker (at least as represented in Powell's translation) frames the beloved and weaponry as less distinct from each other than they appeared at the beginning of the poem. Given that Sappho's Lydia occupies the same geographic space as the Helen's Troy, the middle of the poem leads a reader to doubt the exclusivity of the choice between seeing Anactória and seeing the Lydian army: in Helen's case, the sight of the beloved led to the sight of warfare. Ultimately, Sappho portrays the same failure of love to oppose war that Spahr does. The difference is that Sappho's lyric presents an ambivalent view of love whereas Spahr's focuses instead of the failures of address. By contrast with the elegiac citizen, Spahr's revision of Sappho's fragment 16 offers a melancholic view in line with Auden's "we must love one another and die" that finds no consolation in the reading of poetry.

That this faith in address is shaped by a lyric reading practice appears especially clear if we consider Spahr's more textured recourse to Sappho in her prose memoir *The Transformation* (2007). Much like *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs*, *The Transformation* centers on a nexus of love and global politics. Recalling the plural address to the beloveds in *This Connection*, *The Transformation* features a plural protagonist whom Spahr refers to as "they." It is often unclear whether "they" refers to an individual, to the three-person romantic relationship at the center of the narrative, or to larger national and even global groupings.[28] Spahr provides one explanation for this unusual pronoun choice in a description of post-9/11 global politics in which she reduces violence to a problem of pronouns: "it was a time of bombing in different parts of the world. A great deal of the bombing was done by the military that currently occupied the continent. And in order for there to be a bombing there had to be a we and a they, an us and a them. So it was a time of troubled pronouns" (205). Spahr's grammatical analysis dehistoricizes and despecifies the realities of global violence in order to reveal the logic at the heart of nationalistic ideology. Once again reflecting Spahr's utopic faith in love, the polyamorous relationship at the heart of the book offers a mode of loving that models a different way of inhabiting pronouns. And once again, Spahr arrives at this model through a reading of Sappho:

> they had agreed to a third point, a Sapphic point. And because of this third Sapphic point, they did not look into each other's eyes with the assumption of a direct return that would let them forget the world around them. They agreed to no longer see the relationship as a feedback loop of face-to-face desire. Instead they had to deal with a sort of shimmering, a fracturing of their looks and glances. And it was because of this third Sapphic point that they implicated themselves in a they. (206)

[28] For an illuminating analysis of the uncertain referent of "they", see Sianne Ngai, "Network Aesthetics: Juliana Spahr's the Transformation and Bruno Latour's Reassembling the Social" (2012)

Spahr's endnotes clarify that the Sapphic point refers to fragment 31 in the Barnard translation and to Carson's reading of Sappho in *Eros the Bittersweet* (223). On the face of it, Spahr seems to be underreading Sappho in the same way as in *This Connection:* her emphasis on "they" again points to a persistent interest in human beings only in their plurality which leads Spahr to miss much of the inter- and intrapersonal drama evident in the poem.[29] Spahr seems to assume that a poem can only be politically relevant by effacing its interest in the "I" and the precise web of three.

Nonetheless, Spahr reaches a more nuanced politicization of Sappho (and ideas of love) in the prose memoir. Whereas earlier Spahr had opposed love to war, here she portrays a loop of love and anxiety as more expansive love leads to more vulnerability. Thus love leads Spahr's protagonist into the stance of shared precariousness that Butler values. Yet, Spahr dramatizes the failure of this form of love to effect utopic change in the public sphere as the book closes with an image of a heart expanded by Spahr's understanding of the Sapphic point:

> Pumped through their lungs grief for all of them killed by the military that currently occupied the continent, the thems they knew to be near them and the thems they knew not to be near them, because not to grieve meant their humanity was at risk. Then back around to another heart, through the pulmonary veins they pumped long sentences and lists of connections, both paranoid and optimistic. Pumped with the left atriums attempts to map things out through writing so as to understand them. Pumped through the mitral valves the words of others. Pumped with the left ventricles the admission that they didn't have any real answers, only the hope that if they kept writing others might point them to answers. Pumped through the aortic valves changes. With grief, with worry, with desire, with attachment, with anything and everything, they began listing, inventorying, recognizing in hope that a catalogue of vulnerability could begin the process of claiming their being human of the space in the palm of their writing hand (213-4)

In this passage, Spahr comes closest to being what I would call an elegiac citizen as her concern about complicity gives way to a literary attempt to articulate the extent of that grief and to refigure

[29] In *Eros the Bittersweet*, Anne Carson reads the poem as a dramatization of the triangulation of eros: "It is not a poem about the three of them as individuals, but about the geometrical figure formed by their perception of one another, and the gaps in that perception" (13).

the citizen differently than it is imagined in nationalistic accounts. By contrast with the speaker's wish for vatic action through address in *This Connection, The Transformation* dramatizes communication through writing and reading. Ultimately this effort at communication allows Spahr's speaker to find peace in her melancholia as she experiences hope that her action of writing might have some effect in the future through interacting with a reader. While the consolation that Spahr's plural protagonist discovers by the end of *The Transformation* is experienced primarily by the writer, the genres of sentimental reading that I delineate in my chapters provide forms of consolation instead primarily for the reader.

Genres of Sentimental Reading

In my readings of Auden, Rukeyser, and Spahr's reception of Sappho, I describe a form of sentimentality akin the one delineated by Lauren Berlant in *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* given their ambivalence about the force of *love* to remake the world. By contrast, the chapters in my dissertation present genres of sentimentality that focus instead on the readerly experience and response to certain generically-mediated emotions. That is to say, I attune my arguments to the ways in which literary genres structure the emotional experiences of their readers in order to shift my understanding of sentimentality from the political possibilities of *emotion* to the political possibilities of *emotional response to poetry*. The generically-mediated experience of elegiac consolation stands as one such readerly emotional experience that appears central in each of my three chapters. The studies that I present in my chapters differ in which genre of reading experience provides that consolation: a revised form of lyric misery in Rankine, the love narrative in Wright, and tragic catharsis in Carson. In the volumes that I examine by each of these poets, these forms of consolation function

by calling "you" into the text through address. The genres of sentimental reading modeled and demanded by these elegiac citizens make for profoundly difficult reading experiences. By contrast with the difficulty of language writing that confronts its reader with the totalizing deconstruction of the subject, my studies identify a form of difficulty that constructs the reader through an emotional engagement with the literary text. Distinct from the vatic and syllogistic models of address that I discussed in my readings of Spahr, the forms of consolatory address present in the work of Rankine, Wright, and Carson represent a mode of thinking historically with others.

My project shares many of the same questions about the relationship between politics, aesthetics and emotions that motivate the work of Berlant and Sianne Ngai, but my focus on poetry has led me to divergent answers that focus on the specificity of literary experience and a greater sense of continuity between the contemporary and the historical. My understanding of a generically-mediated emotion is informed by Berlant's definition of genre as an "aesthetic structure of affective expectation" (4). However, whereas Berlant tends to equate literary genres with modes of living (e.g. her understanding of femininity as a genre), the poetry that I study does not provide such ready models for living and, consequently, the transmission between literature and life becomes the problem for sentimental poets rather than its defining characteristic.

Even as Lauren Berlant narrates a long history of sentimentality stretching from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to coverage of the Anita Hill trial in her national sentimentality trilogy (*Anatomy of a National Fantasy*, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, *The Female Complaint*), she categorizes her recent work on the contemporary (such as *Cruel Optimism*) under the sign of affect rather than sentiment. Similarly, Sianne Ngai's groundbreaking work on "ugly feelings" relies centrally on a contrast between these modern feelings and a sentimentality that she sequesters in the nineteenth century. Contrasting her research with the nineteenth-century American historicist

studies that focus on sympathy and sentimentality, Ngai argues "But what gets left out in this prevailing emphasis on a reader's sympathetic identification with the feelings of characters in a text is the simple but powerful questions of 'objectified emotion,' or unfelt but perceived feeling, that presents itself most forcefully in the aesthetic concept of tone" (28-9). If it seems retrograde to want to discuss sentimentality after Ngai's innovation in the field, I find it necessary because I think her sense of sentimental readerly engagement as sympathetic identification rests on an idealization of the sentimental that the texts themselves, in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, belie. While Ngai defends her need to innovate new emotional categories by arguing that "in the transnational stage of capitalism that defines our contemporary moment, our emotions no longer link up as securely as they once did with the models of social action and transformation theorized by Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, and others under the signs of relatively unambiguous emotions like anger and fear. In other words, the nature of the sociopolitical itself has changed" (5). Informed by the poets whose works I study, I tend to be more interested in continuities rather than ruptures and am concerned that beliefs in the exceptionality of the contemporary lead to innovations that mischaracterize the complexity of the past.

By and large, when we talk of the sentimental, we think of a tradition that begins with nineteenth-century women's literature or, colloquially, a term to refer to books, films or other media that rely on clichés of emotional experience. Most often, the sentimental is thought of in contrast to the types of experimental poetry that I study here. Even as scholarship on contemporary experimental poetry by women reclaims an archive of modernist and mid-century writers, it rarely acknowledges continuities between disparaged poets of the nineteenth-century and those of the twentieth: this body of scholarship questions the gender-based but not the genre-based biases and

lacunas that inform our contemporary understanding of (lyric) poetry.[30] Following scholars of nineteenth-century sentimentality, I turn from this caricatured understanding of sentimentality in order to define sentimentality not as a mode of inspiring love and empathy but primarily as a reading practice that emotionally implicates the reader in the development on the text. At least since Wimsatt and Beardsley's definition of the affective fallacy, academic readers of poetry have looked at this sentimental reading practice as an insufficiently rigorous mode of engagement with language. Tricia Lootens historically contextualizes the cultural association of sentimentality and ease in terms of the abolitionist dreams of early sentimental poets and suggests that "sentimental poetry [came], over time, to act as a generic scapegoat, bearing the symbolic burden of what had been, in practice, multigeneric dreams of heart-driven, liberating global power" (16-7). Our contemporary sense of sentimentality's ease reflects a long abjuration of the utopic political aspiration at its origin. For Lootens as for me, the historical contingency of our association with the sentimental serves as a call to examine the particular forms of sentimentality with attentive close reading once reserved for canonical poems as defined in contradistinction to the sentimental. Like Lootens, I am methodologically indebted to Isobel Armstrong's argument that New Critical close reading developed as a mode of repelling the emotional from the cognitive and that, consequently, the practice that we have come to call close reading is actually a form of "distant reading" in which the critic separates themselves from the text rather than seeing themselves

[30] See Juliana Spahr, *Twenty-First Century American Women Poets* (2002); Elisabeth A. Frost, *Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry* (2003); Linda K. Kinnahan, *Lyric Interventions: Feminism, Experimental Poetry, and Contemporary Discourse* (2004); Lynn Keller, *Thinking Poetry: Readings in Contemporary Women's Exploratory Poetic*s (2010); and Amy Moorman Robbins, *American Hybrid Poetics: Gender, Mass Culture, and Form* (2014). Exceptions to this characterization of twentieth- and twenty-first century literary criticism tend to either study both nineteenth and twentieth century poets (such as Susan Rosenbaum's *Professing Sincerity*) or explicitly query the modernist ideology of rupture (such as Suzanne Clark's *Sentimental Modernism* or Melissa Girard's research on sentimentality in modernist women's poetry).

implicated in it (87). While I find Armstrong's analysis of New Criticism provocative and generative, I depart from her theorization of close reading because it is insufficiently attentive to the difference that genre can make in defining the emotional experience of reading.

Following Jackson's understanding of sentimental lyricism as exemplary of the logic of sentimentality, Tricia Lootens has recently suggested "perhaps one of the best ways to confront the larger premises (and promises) of national sentimentality is to approach these through poetry: to explore, that is, the force of 'separate' spheres' precise imaginary structurings of patriotic terror and desire in their rawest, most revelatory and, as it turns out, often most familiar forms" (17). For Lootens, the private and public spheres are not *separate* but *separated*: that is to say, the imaginary of their separation (an imaginary that we can see in readings such as Burt's analysis of Auden) is itself a historical construct that reflects the patriarchal organization of society. Inspired by Lootens call to read poetry for the revelation of the "dream poetics of separate spheres" (2), I have been tempted to call this study "postmodern poetess" and to similarly study how these texts represent first-person personas who deconstruct the boundary between the public and the private. Yet, I became concerned that the term poetess obscured too many differences between poets in the nineteenth century and those in the twenty-first: in terms of content (my contemporary poets are less patriotic); genre (all the poets that I study in this dissertation have become increasingly interested in the cross-genre book); and, perhaps most importantly, different circulation (the audience for poetry is much smaller in the twenty-first century than it was for these popular poets in the nineteenth century). Sentimentality, however, is a term that haunts criticism and by turning

to other terms (such as affect) instead, we lose sight of how poetics terms have a genealogy that dates back to nineteenth century liberalism.[31]

I began this project with a guiding motivation to write about sentimentality in contemporary experimental poetry. The focus on the War on Terror emerged out of the studies because the practice of war on a global scale posed such an extreme challenge to a politics of feeling even if, from Sappho's time to our own, sentimentality has appeared as a tempting but troubled form of political engagement. It would be much easier to write about the political engagement of the poets that I study in other realms: I could point to the impact of *Citizen* (2014) on contemporary discourse about microaggressions in efforts toward diversity; I could make a case for C.D. Wright's elegy for the civil rights activist Margaret Vittitow in *One with Others: a little book of her days* (2010) as being political poetry in the strict Arendtian sense of memorializing past actions in order to inspire the future;[32] Anne Carson could be considered within a lineage of feminist scholars who have challenged patriarchal norms about research and writing. Instead, I have chosen to look at a topic that remains significant in the works of these poets but that cannot be as easily linked with politics as action. The politics rests on the emotional and linguistic effect of these works on the imaginations of their readers: to return to Rukeyser's understanding of the politics of poetry, that means that I have sought to describe how these works imagine the construction of the self and the refinement of vocabulary.

In my first chapter—"Let Peace Begin with You": Miserable Communions in Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*—I examine how Rankine decenters September 11th by framing

[31] See Anthony Reed, *Freedom Time* (2014) and Gillian White, *Lyric Shame* (2014) for foundational studies in examining the ongoing ramifications of nineteenth century poetics in our understanding of twentieth- and twenty-first- century poetry.

[32] In *The Human Condition*, Arendt argues that "Homer was . . . a shining example of the poet's political function" because he "immortalized" acts of human greatness (197).

the War on Terror within a longer history of American xenophobia and state violence. By contrast with this fantasy of national autonomy and isolation, Rankine finds consolation for a range of griefs through the act of sentimental reading of poetry which draws the reader into relationship with a canon of American and world poets. Unlike the sentimental lyric reading described by Jackson, Rankine dramatizes not identification but communion wherein reader and poet share a space that Rankine calls "here." Thus, the poetic "here" becomes a form of consolation for the elegiac citizen. Whereas Jackson ascribes misery to the sentimental poetess who knows their poetry will be dehistoricized by the reader, Rankine ascribes misery to the reader who can join the writer imaginatively but cannot meaningfully effect change in the world of reception. In Rankine's misery, a reader's sense of responsibility exceeds their sense of agency. Yet, this misery creates a shared vocabulary in which the words of the powerless can persist despite the force of power.

My second chapter—"'Happiness is for Amateurs': Decoupling Love and Optimism in C.D. Wright's *Rising, Falling Hovering*"—examines C.D. Wright's narrative poem concerning the early years of the War in Iraq. Typical of Wright's late work, this experimental book-length poem grounds its account of an historical topic in the sensorium of an individual poet. By representing the sensorium of the individual with modernist techniques of juxtaposition, Wright insists on the dispersed and shared realm of influence of the individual citizen. *Rising, Falling, Hovering* offers transnational narration of American history from the perspective of its borderlands and warzones. By framing this narrative in the domestic sphere, Wright posits the experience of marital love as a corresponding struggle to live with profound otherness. While Lauren Berlant has argued that the optimistic feeling of love in feminine sentimental realist texts is characterized by stasis and repetition, the form of love that emerges is *Rising, Falling, Hovering* decouples love from optimism while remaining focused on moving toward the future with others. Far from an

easy act of soothing or escapism, the consolation that Wright offers helps the living to navigate an increasingly bleak future, whether in the home or in American borderlands and war zones. Whereas Rankine's miserable communions take place through the reading of poetry with consciousness of connections between historical moments, Wright places the figure of the poet within the whirl of history. Her consolation is not primarily a shared vocabulary, but a sense of time as processual and valuation of the beauty of particulars at a time of the disappearance of nature. Whereas Wright's view of the future is without optimism, she attaches optimism instead to an apprehension of others in the present.

My third chapter—"Elegiac Actors: Sentimentalizing Catharsis in Anne Carson's Wartime Poetics"—examines Anne Carson's wartime translations of Greek tragedy and her adaptation of the form in the verse novel *Red Doc>*. By yoking together contemporary American politics and Greek tragedy, Carson reveals a history of the War on Terror that begins not with the middle passage (as in Rankine) nor with the discovery of America (as in Wright), but with the idea of democracy that contemporary Americans have inherited from Classical Greece. By contrast with Rankine's and Wright's new genealogies of the War on Terror, Carson's telling of history does not assume such a clear narrative form: her translations and adaptations of Greek tragedy "float" one time period out of the chronology of history in order to enlarge and challenge a contemporary reader's understanding of the present. While an enlarged perspective stands as a site of melancholy for Rankine and Wright given how it amplifies grief, for Carson it emerges as a form of consolation for the way it can allow for a moment of catharsis that resituates the self who grieves in relation to others. I offer the term "elegiac actor" in order to theorize how regarding literary representations of the suffering of others creates the experience of sentimentalized catharsis. I turn to Carson's representations of elegiac actors in *Men in the Off Hours* (2001), a collection of poetry and prose

where Virginia Woolf emerges as an elegiac actor for Carson in several essays about the civilian experience of war and about personal bereavement. By contrasting Carson's representation of Woolf with Sontag's twenty-first-century critique of Woolf's pacifism in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), I offer a theorization of the sentimental that focuses not on palliative action in the present but on reorienting the self in relation to others across space and time. The second half of the chapter focuses on Carson's adaptation of Greek tragedy in *Red Doc>* (2013). This verse novel continues the narrative of Carson's acclaimed bildungsroman *Autobiography of Red* (1998), but shifts to focus on a traumatized veteran's return home. In its final pages *Red Doc>* turns poignantly to elegy, and I argue that this genre is central throughout this text, as Carson represents both *Autobiography of Red*'s Geryon (now G) and Herakles (now Sad But Great) plagued by the inability to express grief for their pasts. For both characters, cathartic reading practices allow them to find consolation by resituating their selves in relation to others. By revealing a fundamental incommensurability between the bereaved civilian and traumatized veteran, however, Carson dramatizes the impossibility of discovering an antiwar politics in *Red Doc>*. Carson views that incommensurability not as grounds for critique of the sentimental but as a failure that prompts renewed and revised attempts to situate the present. The possibility of an antiwar politics floats at the horizon of her wartime writings: while Carson never offers a normative vision of how the civilian should act during a time of endless war, each of her wartime writings enlarges a reader's capacity for considering the relationship between war and democracy.

My conclusion offers brief readings of Solmaz Sharif's *Look* (2016) and Aria Aber's *Hard Damage* (2019). Both of these debut volumes of poetry center on elegiac sequences for uncles killed in conflicts that could be seen as important predecessors to the War on Terror: Sharif's uncle fought in the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) and Aber's uncle disappeared during Mujahedeen

opposition to the Soviet Occupation in Afghanistan (1979-1989). As elegists, both Sharif and Aber struggle to uncover the unknown facts that nonetheless define their family's history. In entwining these familial stories with contemporary news of the War on Terror, both poets implicate their contemporary American audience in the histories they unfold. Even as both elegists arrive at moments of generational consolation in which they confront the known unknowns at the heart of their family histories, Sharif and Aber deny that consolation to their American audiences and instead present us with an expansive sense of the violence that underlies the contemporary moment without any expansive sense of agency. Consequently, they offer an understanding of how national histories interconnect and how the consequences of war reverberate long beyond armistices.

CHAPTER I

"Let Peace Begin with You": Miserable Communions in Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric*

Although all the poets in this dissertation might be read as elegists, Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004) fits most firmly in this tradition as it begins with an attempt to express grief in language and ends with an uneasily consoling affirmation of poetry's ability to create a space in which reader and writer can commune. As a genre, elegies are traditionally expected to offer consolation. Scholars of twentieth and twenty-first century Anglophone elegy contend, however, that modern elegy disrupts traditional generic expectations and refuses consolation (Ramazani, Spargo). In Jahan Ramazani's formulation, modern elegists offer a "melancholic" model of mourning that "tends not to achieve but to resist consolation, not to override but to sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss" (xi). In certain ways, we could categorize Rankine, as well as Wright and Carson, as modern melancholic elegists who insist on keeping the traumas of history continually present for their readers. However, it would be more appropriate to say that these elegiac citizens revise rather than resist traditions of consolation. They do not reject the emotional affordances of the genre, but make them new. For Rankine, this revision takes the form of a miserable communion that develops an imaginary of a more sutured social world even as, paradoxically, misery disallows complete consolation as it makes the reader aware of what exceeds their field of agency. In this misery, a readers' sense of awakened responsibility exceeds their sense of agency.

In choosing the term misery, I signal the way in which my argument builds upon Virginia Jackson's conception of misery as the pathos of transmission between the textual and the historical in the sentimental lyric address to the second person. In her analysis of Emily Dickinson as a sentimental poetess, Jackson illuminates the gender bias in critics such as Samuel Bowles and Matthew Arnold who express anxiety about whether the expression of sadness in poetry by women simply reflects women's (supposed) capacity to feel deeply rather than real artistic merit. Through close readings of Dickinson's writing, Jackson demonstrates a level of self-reflexivity in sentimental poetics and argues that the misery of this poetry reflects a recognition of the audience's assumptions: "the 'ahistorical' situation of the lyric—its association with extreme privacy as well as its aspiration to be more than merely *personal*—is exactly the problem for the writers of sentimental verse" (222). Dickinson's misery, then, rests in the understanding that a "chasm" exists between the embodied poet and the audience who will dehistoricize the poem in the act of reception (219). By contrast, Rankine attaches a similar experience of misery primarily to the reader. While the narrative persona of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* repeatedly imagines that "you" can join her "here" in the physical space of a poem, a reader obviously can enter this space only in imagination and not in action.[33] In addition to the problematically imaginative nature of this communion, the deictic here is necessarily perspectival and not universal. Rankine's reader's misery lies in their imperfect and varied ability to meet the narrative persona "here" and their even more limited ability to unite

[33] Anthony Reed has also written about the central role the concept of here plays in Rankine's poetry arguing "saying 'here' complicates traditional lyric temporality by emphasizing the act of saying—of extending the hand—over the experience expressed" (114). I would argue that Reed overstates the extent to which Rankine's poetics value the act of expression of content of what is expressed and consequently does not pay sufficient attention to the imaginative leap Rankine asks readers to make to join her narrative persona in the space of the poem.

the narrative persona's historicized readings of poetry with any concomitant action in their own historical reality.

Sad and its synonyms permeate *Lonely*. Miserable is one of the book's more extreme synonyms of sad and it appears in a scene that dramatizes this very difficulty in the relationship between the reader and the writer. In an early vignette, Rankine's narrative persona describes a friend who is diagnosed with Alzheimer's. While this friend is still lucid "he understands he is getting ill and will die with this illness" and he writes on a message board "this is the most miserable in my life" (17). The friend's superlative feeling of misery reflects his simultaneous knowledge of how he will die and his lack of agency in the face of that knowledge. In his communicative appeal, the friend does not seek help from his interlocutor but simply testifies to the fact of his misery. In that way, communication makes misery's union of comprehension and incapacity a shared one. As Rankine presents her reader with this message through a photograph of the board on which it has been written, she appears to provide her audience with proof that this misery refers to something not only in the diegetic world of the narrative persona but in the historical world of the book's reception. The photograph suggests that this misery is, or at least could be, something that crosses the presumed chasm between the reality of the text and that of the reader.

Rankine might seem to present her reader with an example of modern melancholic mourning as the narrative persona hangs this message board on the wall of her study and thereby remembers her friend at his most miserable. However, the narrative persona's recollection of poetry transforms this apparent melancholy into the generically mediated emotion that I call a miserable communion. Just as the photograph insists on a continuity between the world of the poem and the world of its reception, Rankine's narrative persona experiences the line separating

poetry from experience as a porous one. Following a second photograph of the message board, the narrative persona recounts:

> One day I hear, as if he is standing next to me, the poet Joseph Brodsky saying, *What's the point of forgetting if it's followed by dying*? Joseph Brodsky is dead, but this fact does not stop his voice from entering the room every time I look up—this is the most miserable in my life *what's the point of forgetting if it's followed by dying* this is the most miserable in my life *what's the point* . . . I can't stop people from saying what they need to say. I don't know how to stop repetitions like these. (17)

As the notes at the end of *Lonely* clarify, the cited Brodsky poem is "Song"—an elegy (or perhaps a love elegy) in which each stanza begins "I wish you were here, dear, / I wish you were here" (ll.1-2). While the elegiac speaker of Brodsky's poem wishes that the absent one were present and seems to relish lush memories together as a consolation, Rankine's narrative persona experiences the illusion of the presence of this absent poet through their shared act of mourning. In a displaced fashion, this communion realizes Brodsky's elegiac wish for the absent to be "here" (which, given the suggestion of the photograph, appears potentially coincident with a reader's reality). If this communion is not purely melancholic, however, neither is it entirely successful as a form of consolation—the three figures appear joined together in misery's union of comprehension and incapability. They share language and therefore understanding, but nothing comes of that other than an expansion of the narrative persona's attention and sense of connectivity and responsibility to others. As the photographs and closing appeals to the second person ("the phrase echoes in your head") reach out the Rankine's reader, we too become joined in this miserable communion (18).

Over the course of *Lonely*, the deaths that the narrative persona attempts to find language to grieve become increasingly historical and, consequently, contemporary American readers of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* become drawn into this relation of misery by the shared citizenship as well. The volume presents a narrative persona, possibly named Claudia, who draws on a

geographically and historically diverse range of poets to help her find consolation for experiences of mourning stemming from her depression, her lost family and friends, and from the historical events the book depicts.[34] The book-length poem consists primarily of short prose poems (often isolated with one at the top of each long, newspaper-shaped page) organized in a roughly chronological fashion starting with the narrative person's childhood and ending on the 2004 Election Day (which, at time of publication, was still two months away.) Following Pound's definition of the epic, it is very much a poem including history as it depicts the violence against people of color in America that persists alongside the economic boom of the nineties and then traces continuities between that recent past and the early years of the War on Terror. History enters the book not only through reference, but also through the paratextual apparatus of photographs and scholarly notes. If the images and notes appear to supplement the assumed limits of first-person poetics with objective facts and thus to firmly connect the poetry with the context of its reception, then perhaps they are the most sentimental element of this book-length poem in that they ask us as Rankine's readers to fulfill the quintessentially sentimental political task of connecting the consolation discovered in the literary world of the poem to the objective facts of our own historical reality.[35] Rankine seems to promise that what can be learned in the book might matter for how we understand recent American history.

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[34] Discussing the movie *Magnolia*, the narrative persona remarks "Tom Cruise is convincing as the disappointed son in *Magnolia*. There is another character with my name who is also bitterly disappointed" (10). Presumably she is referring the character of Claudia Wilson Gator, but disappointment (to put it mildly) abounds in the movie and she could just as easily be referring to the characters of Rose Gator or Linda Partridge.

[35] In an interview, Rankine stated "the introduction of images in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* was an attempt to acknowledge a total experience of being – to involve as many of our senses as possible" (Flescher and Caspar). Consequently, this idea that the images in the book play a political role through their elicitation of feeling has rightfully become a commonplace in the criticism on *Lonely*. See Kimberly 282, Robbins 139-40 and Frost. For an indirect account of their politics through a discussion of lyric reading practices see Reed 116-8.

If the book appears to counsel collective grieving as a response to that history, however, Rankine also stages the faltering of the politics of the book's sentimental project as the experience of the miserable communion emerges in the disjunction between what is possible for the second-person addressee to imagine in the poem and what the poem actually makes possible in the world of its reception. When the narrative persona elegizes as a citizen rather than as a friend, she again partially takes the stance of a modern melancholic mourner who finds truth in recognizing and articulating the sadness of American history. Her persistent experience of sadness leads her to develop a provocative imaginary of the United States that counters the future-oriented stance of what she calls "American optimism" with a backwards-looking understanding of how the white supremacist origins of the nation continue to manifest in twentieth and twenty-first century politics (21). As critics have noted, however, the slightness of the term sad that occurs throughout the book appears incommensurate with the gravity of the historical situations it describes: Christopher Nealon argues that *Lonely* represents the problem of finding meaning at a historical moment where hope for a better future seems impossible and claims, "The simple word Rankine uses for this problem is 'sad'—a word that appears throughout the book, and that she links to racial violence, historical hope, and the value of life" (148); Anthony Reed remarks, "the repeated adjective 'sad' seems at once a necessary statement of care and pointedly inadequate to reckon with lives simply not mattering" (114). While a surface reading of the text of the poem might suggest that sad is the best word to describe the emotional politics of *Lonely*, the term misery allows us to consider additionally the generic mediation of this sadness that Rankine foregrounds through her subtitling this volume "An American Lyric." Through close readings of the text that remain attentive to the generic transmission of emotion, I will further define the idea of a miserable communion and show how the question of shared citizenship complicates that dynamic. In the second half of the chapter,

I will consider how misery functions differently within the context of the War on Terror that emerges in the latter portion of the book. Before embarking on those close readings, I will situate *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* within Rankine's corpus in order to demonstrate why this volume serves as a particularly promising starting point to define the politics of Rankine's poetry.

Feeling Political: Rankine's Poetics from *Nothing in Nature is Private* to *Citizen*

Don't Let Me Be Lonely occupies a nodal point in Rankine's career as a poet concerned with political issues. It represents the fullest realization of a form of politically-oriented poetry that Rankine had been developing since her rejection of the accessible, mainstream poetics of her first volume *Nothing in Nature is Private* (1994)—a realization that paves the way for *Citizen* (2014) as well as her public-facing working following the success of that volume. In the mid-nineties, Rankine turned to avant-garde Language writing strategies in her second and third volumes *The End of the Alphabet* (1998) and *Plot* (2001). As Rankine situates these avant-garde techniques in specific historical contexts first in *Plot* and then more emphatically in *Lonely*, a recursive avant-gardism emerges that tests the theory against the conditions of life as lived. Her narrative persona in *Lonely* confronts a similar conundrum as she wonders, "If I am present in a subject position what responsibility do I have to the context, to the truth values, of the words themselves? Is 'I' even me or am 'I' a gearshift to get from one sentence to the next? Should I say we? Is the voice not various if I take responsibility for it? What does my subject mean to me?" (54). Wresting with notions of selfhood that have come to be associated with avant-garde poetics, the narrative persona appears uncertain how to then connect those notions of selfhood to the experiential content of her book. The concept of responsibility emerges as a limit to pure deconstructive play. Although I do not wish to collapse the narrative persona and Rankine, I would argue that responsibility—to the

dead, to those who mourn, to those whose lives are precarious—informs Rankine's poetics. As Rankine entwines the expression of emotion with the description of larger structural forces, a poetics of misery emerges which seeks to develop language to describe the felt experience of powerlessness.

Contrasting two of Rankine's recent essays illustrates the difference between a politics of grief and a politics of misery. In her work as a public intellectual, the politics of grief does emerge as a possibility for social change. However, this politics of grief does not include a role for poetry. In a *New York Times Magazine* article "The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning" (2015), Rankine asserts "Though the white liberal imagination likes to feel temporarily bad about black suffering, there is really no mode of empathy that can replicate the daily strain of knowing that as a black person you can be killed for simply being black." In this situation, empathy does not suffice because the momentary experience of it cannot convey the temporal extension of a societal problem that is less a situation and more a structure. Although Rankine starts from this critique of empathy, the essay concludes in the tradition of the sentimental politics by calling for the primary change to happen at the level of individual feeling rather than structural policy: "the real change needs a rerouting of interior belief. It's an individual challenge that needs to happen before any action by a political justice system would signify true societal change [. . .] It's a lack of feeling for another that is our problem. Grief, then, for these deceased others might align some of us, for the first time, with the living." Advocating for the experience of grief, Rankine bestows the act of mourning by otherwise unaffected individuals with radical potential: this intensifying shift in feelings from momentary sadness to ongoing grief is a prerequisite for meaningful social change. To create this public grief, Rankine primarily discusses the role of the public visibility of corpses from Emmett Till to Michael Brown and the work of the activist group Black Lives Matter.

Consequently, the politics of shared feeling developed by Rankine in "The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning" leaves unanswered the question of poetry's role in helping to create social change.

We can approach an answer to this question by considering the function of Rankine's reading of César Vallejo's poem "Los Heraldos Negros" in her *New York Times Magazine* response to an August 2017 white supremacist march, "Was Charlottesville the Exception or the Rule?" Arguing in favor of latter view, Rankine asserts that the march should be seen as a manifestation of a national history in which there has never been a "moment when the persecution of nonwhite Americans wasn't the norm." She develops this understanding of white supremacy as an "everyday condition" through a long record of historical facts and with recourse to the essays and scholarship of James Baldwin, Lauren Berlant, and Sara Ahmed. The essay, however, begins by dramatizing a network of moments of poetry reading and reception. Reviewing the translation history of Vallejo's *Los Heraldos Negros* (1918), Rankine focuses on different ways in which translators have attempted to convey his "yo no sé" and concludes that the variety of possibilities reveals how "each translator has to confront Vallejo's lacunas for the ungraspable experience of having to bear unbearable acts of power."[36] Although Rankine's other sources of evidence lead her to develop a clear argument about the legacy of white supremacy in America, the opening appeal to poetry frames the essay in another order of historicization: to understand the events of Charlottesville in 2017, Rankine first asks her reader to consider a Peruvian poem from 1918. Rather than draw a linear or causal relationship between the two, the link appears in the shared predicament of misery: it is not simply that the Vallejo poem discusses the experience of feeling

[36] Claudia Rankine, "Was Charlottesville the Exception or the Rule?" New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/13/magazine/was-charlottesville-the-exception-or-the-rule.html

grief in a manner that a contemporary reader can empathize with, but that both the poem and Rankine's lengthy attention to the problems of translation foreground the difficulty of articulating a feeling and discovering avenues for action. Since semantic uncertainty is at the heart of both the poem and the poem's reception, this citation cannot solidify the logical persuasiveness of her argument. This uncertainty does not, however, similarly accompany Rankine's attempt to make the poem emotionally resonant for her audience: "I've thought about this poem often over the past year as I have encountered many who feel they, too, cannot translate the horror of what is happening in America. They are shocked, and they are speechless. They can't say; they can't answer." By suggesting that an understanding of this incommunicable feeling can be approached through the act of reading a poem whose origins are distant both historically and geographically, Rankine models a type of sentimental reading that situates the publicity of shared emotions within a long and dispersed history of political domination and literary transmission. I call this a sentimental reading because the words of the poet provide the reader with a vocabulary to describe emotional experience. The political work of this reading of Vallejo is not to instill grief, but to connect the reader to ongoing project of misery in which the powerless seek language to describe the personal experience of the public "blows of power."[37]

As the article moves toward its conclusion, Rankine returns to the Vallejo poem and develops a contrast between what she (presumably following Berlant) refers to as "our national sentimentality" and the predicament of misery dramatized by the poem and its translations. Characterizing the generic American response as one of taking a presentist view that interprets the

[37] It is worth noting the extent to which it is performative for Rankine to seem to state that this poem by Vallejo has particular value in Trump's America. Many of these images can be seen in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* characterizations of late-nineties and early-naughts citizenship. Additionally, when the section of *Citizen* concerning Hurricane Katrina was first published in *jubilat* it had the title "Backed up in the Soul" which is an allusion to this Vallejo poem.

march in Charlottesville as an exception rather than a rule, Rankine asserts, "Americans continue to request that our president indulge our national sentimentality and with a show of good manners denounce white supremacy." Here, sentimentality becomes associated with both an insufficiently historicized understanding of the present as well as a belief that decorous, polite words alone suffice to undo history. While Rankine presents this national sentimentality in opposition to the sort of governmental change that would need to occur to counter white supremacy in America, she retains a focus on poetry and the perspective of the individual in creating political change. Abruptly transitioning from Trump, Rankine returns to the poem:

> Vallejo's poem goes on to describe, in one translation, the blows of power as the 'deep waters of everything lived through were backed up in the soul.' It was this metaphor comparing the soul to a toilet that made me commit this poem to memory. The unbearable racism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, homophobia and white rage won't simply flush itself from the soul of our system.

In another act of sentimental reception, Rankine associates Vallejo's image with that of a clogged toilet. This identification is not supported by the poem itself but only by an association with the significance of the phrase "backed up" in contemporary American parlance. The idea of a national soul that Rankine develops through her reading of Vallejo's poem allows her, in turn, to define an inward concept of an American national character that precedes all the horrific actions in the public sphere that the other parts of her essay enumerate. By contrast with the historical facts and theoretical interventions that Rankine uses to develop her argument, her sentimental reading of Vallejo's poem provides her with a new imaginary of the nation whose source in early twentieth-century Peru helps loosen her from any view that would see a particular historical moment in an individual nation as a singular exception. If Vallejo offers a form of consolation, it is, like that offered by Brodsky, a miserable communion in which feelings are shared, situations understood, but avenues for action are left unavailable.

There are clear lines of continuity between this 2017 *New York Times* article and *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* both in terms of themes (the experience of misery, the historicist stance Rankine takes toward the idea of the American nation) and in terms of specific references and images (Vallejo, the toilet, the idea of a national soul). In turning to *Lonely*, however, we face another level of difficulty in accounting for the politics of misery: the book does not provide an expository account of reading poetry, but instead folds the reading of poems into a larger poetic structure whose experimentation Anthony Reed has compellingly characterized as post-lyric for the way it stages "received understandings of the lyric as a horizon of hermeneutic expectation, only to disrupt the very basis of that mode: the assumed solidity of the speaking, universal 'I'" (99). Expanding on Reed's effort to describe *Lonely*'s lyric "I" in terms that do not replicate the binary logic that characterize the poetry wars, I want to focus on an attribute of the speaker commonly associated with lyric poetry: the expression of emotion. We can see Rankine's mature political poetics that emerge in *Lonely* as a sentimental avant-gardism. By contrast with a tradition of thought that would oppose these two terms, Rankine's sentimental avant-gardism finds its mode of experimentation through her effort to represent emotional experience. In this manner, Rankine rejects the focus on the intellect and action that characterize the American neo-avant-garde understanding of the politics of poetry and considers instead the public ramifications of emotional experience and the act of self-reflection. This follows from Rankine's concern to gain awareness of what she calls the "national soul" rather than a direct desire to affect the practices of the nation.

Rankine's accounts of the development of her poetics from *Nothing in Nature is Private* to *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* reveal the inextricable entwining of the sentimental desire to represent emotional experience and the strategies of poetic difficulty that characterize the avant-garde. In a 1999 interview with Katy Lederer, Rankine remarks that her relatively mainstream first book

Nothing in Nature is Private was "written too much from the head and not enough from the pulse and nerves" and consequently "the point of view began to typecast itself in a performance of blackness and immigration" (147). The cerebral nature of the poetics hinders the political content from appearing truthful to Rankine. She describes her turn to avant-garde poetics in her second book *End of the Alphabet* as a way to counter this tendency by "creat[ing] a 'languaged self' that was built up from her insides, from her pulse and breath" (148). While the American neo-avant-garde turned to techniques of fragmentation and disjunction due to an intellectual understanding of deconstruction, Rankine's account of her poetic development contrastingly locates her turn to these strategies as motivated by a drive to represent feelings more accurately in poetry.[38] This sentimental avant-gardism becomes progressively more connected to social issues in Rankine's subsequent books. *Plot*, she claims, was her attempt to expand the experiment of *Alphabet* beyond the realm of the self as the later book "tries to bring the world back into the text" (148). Telling a similar narrative of her poetic development in an interview with Jennifer Flescher and Robert N. Caspar conducted after the publication of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, Rankine focuses on the challenges of meeting her poetic goals:

> *Nothing in Nature is Private* correctly engaged my belief that the public and private selves are intertwined. But ultimately those early poems seem too public—the issues seem set up. In writing *Alphabet*, I tried to get closer to the private self and not be overwhelmed by the darkness and vulnerability that self seems to hold. Eventually I was able to bring that feeling back into its context, in terms of both the personal and the public world.

[38] The Romantic language further distances Rankine from the American avant-garde as her emphasis on the pulse recalls Keats' 1918 letter to John Hamilton Reynolds: "for axioms in philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses" (122-3).

This happens in Rankine's work as the avant-garde experimentation of *End of the Alphabet* becomes increasingly socially contextualized: first in the world of the family in *Plot* and finally in the shared political world in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* and *Citizen*.

In canonical accounts of the politics of neo-avant-garde writing, however, this sort of contextualization would emerge as politically retrograde for the way it rests on bourgeois notions of subjectivity.[39] This has emerged as particularly problematic in the avant-garde reception of writing by poets of color.[40] For example, in "Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde," Cathy Park Hong registers how the Eurocentrism of the contemporary avant-garde affects contemporary poets of color by afflicting them with the fear of being labeled an "identity politics poet": "To be an identity politics poet is to be anti-intellectual, without literary merit, no complexity, sentimental, manufactured, feminine, niche-focused, woefully out-of-date and therefore woefully unhip, politically light, and deadliest of all, used as bait by market forces' calculated branding of boutique liberalism." For the avant-garde poets whom Hong critiques, identity and sentimentality are linked because both are imagined to be representative of a liberal vision of the individuated self. And yet, for Rankine, identity and structure seem as necessarily entwined as emotion and linguistic innovation. Regarding *Lonely*, Rankine remarks in the interview with Flescher and Caspar, "I feel like I need both things [a more accessible, socially engaged voice and a fragmented, interior register]. *Lonely* has an interior register as well: even though the book tries to negotiate questions in the world, it focuses on one's inability to effect change, which is deeply crippling." If avant-

[39] For a canonical account of the politics of difficulty in the American neo-avant-garde, see "Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry" (*Social Text*, 1988).
[40] For studies of this phenomenon in the African American tradition, see Evie Shockley, *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* (2011); Anthony Reed, *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing* (2014). For an account of a similar dynamic in Asian American poetry, see Timothy Yu, *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry since 1965*.

garde political poetics demand looking at structures rather than subjects, Rankine points to the inability to escape one's subjective experience of that predicament. For her, addressing feelings appears inseparable from addressing politics: "I used to believe that feelings were properly private. I thought of them as separate from one's daily activities. But if you let yourself feel what you are feeling in the world, it is interesting how much more precious the details of a life seem" (Lederer 148). The act of contextualizing one's feelings in a specific environment does not change that environment but does allow one to understand it in a more detailed, textured, and nuanced way. In *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, Rankine contextualizes her narrative persona's feelings in context of American politics and, consequently, envisions American politics from the perspective of the sensorium of an individual citizen. Rankine's understanding of what constitutes an American lyric thus helps to define the "national soul" from the everyday experience of individual citizens rather than the rhetoric of politicians. In bringing the poet into the polis, Rankine casts pathos as a valid method of research and persuades the reader to redefine the concept of the citizen as an embodied and embedded figure.

This embedding happens not only through the inclusion of a historical context, but also through the citation of poetry. Whereas a purely avant-garde methodology of citation might emphasize the constructedness of the speaker and the unexceptional status of the poet, Rankine's sentimental avant-gardism instead regards poetic texts as something to be sentimentally incorporated into the narrative persona's experience. Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith's anthology *Against Expression* presents Rankine's volume as emblematic of avant-garde citation practices as they argue that it "charts a path between fabrication and documentation; the former is freely invented [. . .] and the latter is scrupulously and flatly pursued" (504). However, the editorial note in *Against Expression* seems less like an accurate representation of Rankine's project and

more like an attempt to fit her project into Goldsmith's brand of uncreative writing.[41] While Rankine's narrative persona does often assume a stoic tone even as she describes highly emotional scenes, the citations are read sentimentally for consolation as the narrative persona brings them into her own historical context. Observing the emotional work that the citations do for the narrative persona, Nealon argues that Rankine:

> assembles, after the fashion of a scrapbook, a network of citations to European literary modernism alongside an American history of violence against black people. [*Lonely's*] scrapbook technique maps out a survival strategy for those years: to pit the vulnerability of textual assemblage against the mercilessness of the image stream of the first decade of the twenty-first century. (34)

Nealon's interpretation rests on an essentialized Adornian notion of the resistance of lyric poetry. Reed seems to make this point when he critiques the lyric essentialism in Nealon's claim by observing, "'Lyric' in his account remains distinct from other textual and linguistic forms, retaining its status as a means of recording some other experience or contemplation" and argues instead "the lyric is complicit in *Lonely*'s sense of isolation, being a vehicle for the plots necessary to give life meaning" (118). The debate between Nealon and Reed rests on the more foundational question of whether we should we read lyric as a special category that resists the social or whether we should read lyric as part of the social. Both of these, however, rest on decontextualized notions of lyric. To return Rankine's sense of lyric to her effort to construct American context for it, I will pursue close readings of these citations of poetry. As I will show, the cited poems perform a consolatory and therefore elegiac role that helps the narrative persona to articulate the social

[41] In his introductory essay to the anthology *Against Expression*, Kenneth Goldsmith defines uncreative writing by contrast with the valorization of human subjectivity and creativity that characterizes much post-Romantic aesthetic theory. Uncreative writing is "mimetic and replicative, involving notions of distribution while proposing new platforms of receivership. Words very well might be written not to be read but rather to be shared, moved, and manipulated" (xxi). This tendency in contemporary poetry has found a critical and scholarly champion in Marjorie Perloff (*Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century*, 2010).

experience of grieving. The cited poems teach her how to grieve and how to conceptualize the social world in which she is grieving as well as how to attempt to communicate that understanding to others.

Given this emphasis on emotions and the reading of poetry, I also want to distinguish my reading of *Lonely* from a line of criticism that appears overly idealizing about the sentimental politics of the volume. Representative of this line of criticism, Amy Moorman Robbins emphasizes the active role the book creates for its readers and interprets it as "an open call to all readers to feel, while offering the possibility that the lessons of humanity to be found in art have the potential to bring us together as a culture again" (147).[42] While I would certainly agree with this widespread critical consensus that *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* calls for a community created by the poetic text and based on feeling to oppose the dehumanizing forces of mass media and neoliberal politics, I believe the sentimentality of this conclusion remains underexamined and that Rankine's own sense of its limitations has not been fully elaborated nor the specificity of the emotions properly explicated.[43] This becomes particularly clear as we think of this book as a piece of civilian poetry.

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[42] For other readings of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* that similarly emphasize the political possibilities of feeling see Emma Kimberly, "Politics and Poetics of Fear after 9/11: Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*," *Journal of American Studies* 45, no. 4 (2011): 777-791; Tana Jean Welch, "*Don't Let Me Be Lonely*: The Trans-Corporeal Ethics of Claudia Rankine's Investigative Poetics," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 40, no.1(2015): 124-148; Elizabeth A. Frost, "Claudia Rankine and the Body Politic," In *News from Poems: Essays on the 21st Century American Poetry of Engagement*. Edited by Jeffrey Gray and Ann Keniston. (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 2016); Rebecca Macmillan, "The Archival Poetics of Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric*." *Contemporary Literature* 58, no. 2 (2017): 173-203; and Heather Milne, *Poetry Matters: Neoliberalism, Affect, and the Posthuman in Twenty-First Century North American Feminist Poetics*, (Iowa City: Iowa UP, 2018).

[43] One exception would be Angela Hume's analysis of Myung Mi Kim and Claudia Rankine, but that one strikes me as too absolute in its pessimism—as if Rankine merely expresses hopelessness, not that she also tries to imagine a poetics that confronts that hopelessness. In Hume's more recent study of Rankine's poetry, she has begun to move past this pessimism through a convincing ecocritical lens.

The common phrase "think globally, act locally" might describe Rankine's political poetics well—while the narrative persona thinks of a wide-ranging global set of problems affecting people "over there" and to whom Americans are complexly linked, poetic action ultimately can only spur change "here" in the exchange between reader and writer. There is a real sorrow to thinking globally and acting locally that is registered in *Lonely*. And as current critical views attempt to explicate how Rankine recuperates a first person poetics for political poetry, they bypass how misery inheres in the attempt to address this sorrowful predicament in poetry. Rather than endorse or critique the sentimental reading of *Lonely*, I want to pose a more limited question about its lyric sentimentalism: what political potentials might this experience of misery present for the reader?

Miserable Communions

The line of argumentation that suggests that the politics of Rankine's poetics rests in its ability to make readers feel rests on the assumption that the societal problems that she represents are the primary cause of the loneliness the book depicts. For Rankine, however, emotionally anesthetized subjectivity is not simply an epiphenomenon of twenty-first century media culture and unjust social structures, but reflects a fundamental challenge of intersubjective communication. The narrative persona of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* relies on sentimental readings of poetry in order to help develop a vocabulary that might cross the chasm between individuals. Even as the development of a shared vocabulary represents an achievement for the individuals involved, one that might even feel revolutionarily significant, it does not itself constitute a utopian political possibility. Given that an element of misery defines the relationship between textual and historical realities, readers can never fully answer the appeal of the volume's title to prevent the textual persona from being lonely as we can join her "here" only in imagination. What would it mean to read the politics of this volume in a manner that does not dismiss the imaginative element

as purely ideological but that also does not deduce a demonstrable politics from the imaginative? As I will show in this section, poetry offers at best a miserable communion in which reader and writer learn to share a vocabulary. Accordingly, Rankine's readers necessarily emerge with interpretative capabilities that the figures who share the narrative persona's world cannot similarly assume. Rankine's miserable readers might not be able to help the narrative persona no longer be lonely, but, paradoxically, the interpretative stance that we take toward the narrative persona also renders us uniquely prepared to do so.

My departure from other critical readings of *Lonely* rests centrally on interpreting Rankine's citations of ethical thinkers such as Aimé Césaire and Emmanuel Levinas as conflicted acts of grappling with the difficulty of enacting their theories rather than as wholehearted endorsements. To develop the optimistic sentimental reading of *Lonely*'s politics, critics tend to privilege the book's epigraph from Aimé Césaire as a guiding morality underlying Rankine's poem (Kimberly 783, Robbins 146-7, Welch 126). In the epigraph, Césaire urges approaching the suffering of others empathetically: "And most of all beware, even in thought, of assuming the sterile attitude of the spectator, for life is not a spectacle, a sea of grief is not a proscenium, a man who wails is not a dancing bear . . . . " (vii). It is easy to see how this motivates readings of *Lonely* as a critique of a media-saturated and emotionally anesthetized contemporary moment. Given my emphasis on the sensorium of the reader rather than demonstrable action in the public sphere, I want instead to consider how Rankine probes Césaire's odd parenthetical that warns that the sterile attitude of the spectator should not happen "even in thought"—in a cognitive process strongly associated with the sterile, inviolable process of ratiocination and which is often understood in contrast to the sorts of actions an empathetic spectator should take. In the opening of *Lonely*, the narrative persona appears less concerned with letting thoughts dictate action than with the

challenge of finding language to communicate thoughts to others. For the narrative persona, poetry emerges as space where Césaire's form of sentimental thinking can be practiced, but even this fitting of language to thought does not in turn allow her to have a more agential or even communicative relationship with her reality.

Despite the emotional appeal of the title and the way in which sadness permeates the content of the book, tonally, *Lonely* remains in an overwhelmingly stoic and sonically restrained register. Consequently, Rankine simultaneously encourages and impedes readerly emotional engagement. As if looking back to an idyllic past free of sadness, Rankine's narrative persona begins, "There was a time I could say no one I knew well had died" (5). The sight but weighty descriptor "I could say" renders the issue of speech paramount in these opening lines. And, indeed, the depiction is not of an idyllic past but rather of the challenge to articulate mourning: "This is not to suggest that no one died. When I was eight my mother became pregnant. She went to the hospital to give birth and returned without the baby. Where's the baby? We asked. Did she shrug? She was the kind of woman who liked to shrug; deep within her was an everlasting shrug. This didn't seem like a death" (5). The scene of pregnancy and stillbirth seems oddly evacuated of both agency and sentiment: at a moment where one might expect sympathetic connection and efforts toward consolation, the question asked by the unspecified "we" seems inappropriately flippant and poorly attuned to the mother's difficulty in articulating emotions with anything other than a habitual gesture. As the opening prose poem shifts to depict the narrative persona's father after learning that his mother has died, the narrative persona exhibits an increased ability to interpret the emotions of another person but that is matched with a decreased ability to communicate: "He had a look that was unfamiliar: it was flooded, so leaking. I climbed the steps as far away from him as I could get. He was breaking or broken. Or, to be more precise, he looked to me like

someone understanding his aloneness. Loneliness" (5). Even less empathetic than with her mother, the narrative persona increases the distance between herself and her crying father. Yet, in this distance, the narrative persona develops an understanding of the interior state causing his demonstration of emotion. Regardless of the narrative persona's understanding, however, her father's loneliness persists. The language (in the form of the poem) comes only later and is retrospectively addressed to an interlocutor who does not share this reality.

As the opening section of *Lonely* progresses, Rankine demands that her reader imagine sharing this reality as she shifts from memoiristic first person narration to interpellating addresses to the second person. While Rankine's use of this same technique in *Citizen* has been widely analyzed and read as a technique for forcing the reader into a heightened state of racial consciousness, in *Lonely* it primarily asks us to grapple with the language of another individual's consciousness.[44] Following another childhood scene in which the narrative persona expresses concern for the mortality of actors on television (as if the aesthetic mediation affords her the ability to articulate emotion), Rankine transitions out of these first person accounts with the same conjunction that allows the narrative persona insight into her father: "Or one begins asking oneself that same question differently. Am I dead?" (7). While the additive conjunction "and" might better suit the logic of chronological development, these "or"s afford the narrative persona (as well as the reader) some distance from narrative immersion as Rankine further defines the concept of loneliness through a different set of experiences. Even as the "or" alienates the reader from the text, the turn to the second person situates us in the world of the poem:

> You are, as usual, watching the television, the eight o'clock movie, when a number flashes on the screen: 1-800-SUICIDE. You call the number. Do you feel like killing yourself? the man on the other side of the receiver asks. You tell him,

[44] Erica Hunt's "All About You" offers a particularly in depth reading of this technique in *Citizen. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/all-about-you/*

> I feel like I am already dead. When he makes no response you add, I am in death's position. He finally says, Don't believe what you are thinking and feeling. (7)

While Rankine briefly stages the interpellating act of the second person in a relatively assimilable way, the profusion of details quickly strains a reader's ability to easily inhabit this role. Even if the basic situation might appear "relatable" for some readers, the narrative persona's odd turns of phrase render the scene idiosyncratic. Like the man at the suicide hotline, we might struggle with the script that we have been asked to perform. While the hotline worker's reaction is to ignore the content of his interlocutor's speech and to recite a common script of prepared and generic responses, I want to ask if there is another option for responding to the odd quality of these statements available to the readers of poetry if not for the interlocutors in the world of the poem. Or, what is possible in poetry that is not possible in life?

For a reader, close and responsive attention to language emerges as an alternative to rote repetition. The point here, however, is not that we could eradicate existential loneliness if only we could perform as good interpretive New Critics to all the people in our lives. Rather, the point is that these realizations discoverable in poetry are potentially unrealistic and frankly indulgent to ask others to practice off the page. Once the EMT worker arrives, "You explain to the ambulance attendant that you had a momentary lapse of happily. The noun, happiness, is a static state of some Platonic ideal you know better than to pursue. Your modifying process had happily or unhappily experienced a momentary pause. This kind of thing happens, perhaps is still happening" (7). As the notes suggest, Lyn Hejinian's *Happily* (2000) informs Rankine's play with the root word "hap." In this performance of sentimental reading, Rankine's narrative persona translates Hejinian's theoretical, linguistic championing of the fluidity of adverbs over the solidity of nouns from the avant-garde poetry world to an interaction with a member of the general public. While

the narrative persona's reading of Hejinian has altered her understanding of an emotional experience and while our reading of this reception might also affect our understanding of happiness, the ambulance attendant cannot deviate from the role he is institutionally bound to perform: "He shrugs and in turn explains that you need to come quietly or he will need to restrain you. If he is forced to restrain you, he will have to report that he is forced to restrain you. It is this simple. Resistance will only make matters worse. By law, I will have to restrain you" (7). For the EMT worker, the relationship between the "I" and the "you" is a sequence of actions mandated by law. In one sense, the scene gives way to his social contract as Rankine concludes, "You climb into an ambulance unassisted" (7). As readers, however, we are afforded some distance from fully identifying with this second-person address and its imperative to a lonely, unassisted action and can instead appreciate the poem for the opportunity it offers to think collaboratively with Rankine and Hejinian. However, the partnership seems impossible to ask of the EMT worker who, after all, has responsibilities to the narrative persona other than the interpretive.

While avant-garde poetics such as those of Hejinian are more often associated with deconstruction of the self rather than with the personal communion afforded by the narrative persona's sentimental reading practices, Rankine translates the avant-garde to the level of personal inquiry due to her understanding of the self as constructed at least in part through exchanges in the environment. For the narrative persona, these self-constructing encounters happen not only in lived experience but also in the act of reading. At the conclusion of the first sequence of prose poems, the narrative persona turns to Gertrude Stein to help her address her overarching elegiac question: "Why do people waste away?" (11). She attempts to answer her question initially with a materialistic account of the development of cancer, but counters this account of tissue and sensation with Stein's quasi-philosophic approach to the question: "Or as Gertrude Stein, who

herself died of stomach cancer, points out, 'if everybody did not die the earth would be all covered over and I, I as I, could not have come to be and try as much as I can try not to be I, nevertheless, I would mind that so much, as much as anything, so then why not die, any yet again and again, not a thing, not a thing to be liking, not a thing'" (11). The narrative persona establishes Stein as an authority by pointing to her stomach cancer. Yet, Stein's avant-garde poetics presents, at best, a wavering authority: a mind seeking to come to terms with death intellectually while in experience struggling to do so. The logical explanation of why people must die clashes in the poetics with the mind trying to cope with that logic. The quotation expands the concerns of the poem into the political realm as the notes specify that this comes from Stein's *Wars I Have Seen* and concerns her distant witnessing of war rather than her experience of stomach cancer. The political bleeds into the personal as war casualties and deaths from cancer becomes linked. Although this is the key move of sentimental politics—the sense that changes on the level of individual can affect the systemic level—this sentimental reading of Stein does not offer any possibility for change, whether politically or personally. Stein offers no consolation except for the limited consolation of communion with another struggling with a similar question. This communion is a miserable one that offers no avenues for agency beyond what limited realizations it might help to produce to share a question with an interlocutor.

Yet, this communion assumes a degree of social potential in *Lonely* as a dialogic poetics emerges as a solution (albeit an imperfect one) to the problem of speech and the concomitant loneliness that characterizes the opening prose poems. In the fictional world of the poem, the narrative persona is a non-fiction writer working on a book about the liver. Her turn to a form more recognizable as poetry emerges in the second section of the book after she watches a faltering dialogue between a man and a boy about whether the boy's father is alive: "That day I find I can't

work, so in the margin of my notebook I write a dialogue" (16). The dialogic poetics appears as a fantasy to rectify writer's block and perhaps to ease anguish caused by the man and the boy's inability to communicate:

> I thought I was dead
>
> You thought you were dead?
>
> I thought I was.
>
> Did you feel dead?
>
> I said, God rest me.
>
> God rest your soul?
>
> I thought I was dead.
>
> You tried everything?
>
> I waited.
>
> You spoke aloud?
>
> I said, God rest me.
>
> You'd let me be lonely?
>
> I thought I was dead. (16)

The narrative persona repeats the conversation she had with the suicide hotline worker. Instead of institutional scripts, this dialogue attentively responds with questions asking the narrative persona to clarify her claims and to make them more comprehensible to the interlocutor. As the dialogue cyclically resolves where it starts, the only resolution seems to be the creation of an interlocutor with whom one can communicate. Consequently, the narrative persona's dialogic poetics is non-agential, but is more fully revelatory: in an imaginative world free from action, she can commune with an interlocutor who can listen without being beholden to certain scripts of behavior and

response. The existence of the interlocutor addresses, but does not solve, the problem of loneliness. And in the interlocutor's concern about being left alone as well, they become miserable together as increased understanding in the world of the poem does not allow for increased opportunities for agency. If this seems limited as an achievement, how much more so does it seem in the realm of the nation where democratic politics lead us to believe that we should be able to have some form of agency beyond this misery?

Miserable Citizens

While the opening of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* develops the problem of loneliness and the partial solution of the miserable communion afforded by the reading of poetry within a dehistoricized context, Rankine explicitly sets later portions of the book during the late 1990s and early 2000s. As the problem of finding language for mourning remains a persistent problem for the narrative persona, the political contexts of these deaths nuance that problem: the question becomes not only how does one articulate mourning, but how does a citizen articulate mourning as a member of a national public. Within these political contexts, poetry emerges even more emphatically as a site of communion where otherwise inexpressible feelings can and must be expressed. In the process of writing a non-fiction book about the liver, however, the narrative persona appears unable to create these utopic spaces and can access them only as a reader. As Rankine dramatizes her narrative persona's reading practices, the receptive act of sentimental reading rather than the authoritative act of writing emerges as a way of imagining the value of the emotions of the citizen as well as a way to imagine collectivities beyond the nation and beyond the present.

As Rankine develops a political context in *Lonely*, the narrative persona appears more capable of articulating the experience of mourning. In a sophisticated way, she uses an emotional reaction to a news report about the 2000 election to launch an argument against a social theorist. However, the power of her sentimentality appears limited as her only interlocutor for this is another writer: "Cornel West makes the point that hope is different from American optimism. After the initial presidential election results come in, I stop watching the news. I want to continue watching, charting, and discussing the counts, but I cannot. I lose hope. However Bush came to have won, he would still be winning ten days later and we would still be in the throes of our American optimism" (21). To begin responding to West, the narrative persona frames a contemporary political issue in terms of a historically persistent structure of feeling that she calls "American optimism." While West separates that national structure of feeling from the individual experience of hope, the narrative persona cannot divorce the experience of hope from its collective manifestation. Her emotions appear too entwined with the polis—and the past of the polis—for her to cultivate hope as an individual. She cannot see Bush in 2000 without remembering her emotional response to him two years prior when he failed to remember how many men were convicted for the 1998 murder of James Byrd Jr.: "You don't remember because you don't care. Sometimes my mother's voice swells and fills my forehead. Mostly I resist the flooding, but in Bush's case I find myself talking to the television screen: You don't know because you don't care" (21). In this scene of talking truth to power (albeit in a mediated and impotent form), the narrative persona diagnoses this political problem as Bush's failure to care sufficiently about other people and, in particular, people of color. As the everyday speech of the narrative persona's mother becomes remediated as political discourse, Rankine works in the sentimental political tradition by suggesting that an instance of maternal care could solve the problems of the polis. And while

Rankine certainly holds this sentimental possibility as a temptation, the indirect address of the narrative persona undercuts the agential possibilities of this stance.

Further undercutting expectations for a sentimental appeal, the narrative persona quite shockingly moves from outrage to consolation. In an abrupt transition, the narrative persona breaks off from the crescendo of anger at Bush to a calmer tone in the next paragraph: "I forget things too. It makes me sad. Or it makes me the saddest" (23). While the narrative persona identifies with Bush, her affect is different since her forgetting is paired with sadness. Sadness becomes a mode of research into the problems of the contemporary that reveals its wide historical and geographic range:

> The sadness is not really about George W. or our American optimism; the sadness lives in the recognition that a life cannot matter. Or, as there are billions of lives, my sadness is alive alongside the recognition that billions of lives never mattered. I write this without breaking my heart. Or perhaps, Emily Dickinson, my love, hope was never a thing with feathers. (23)

By connecting the contemporary with the poetry of Emily Dickinson, the narrative persona develops an ambivalent analysis of the figure of the sentimental poetess: on the one hand, she seems to fault herself for having an internal sense of great sadness without a concomitant external expression; on the other, she connects these expressions to an untenable American belief in hope. By linking sadness and hope through the figure of Dickinson, Rankine both celebrates and disavows the poet. It is as if the narrative persona wishes to be consoled by Dickinson's vision of hope amidst sadness, but cannot due to the global scale of what saddens her. She diagnoses in herself a more specific feeling "the deepening personality flaw: IMH, the Inability to Maintain Hope" (23). While the idea of a personality flaw might seem individual, the abbreviation gives it the more general appearance of a widespread syndrome. This allows the narrative persona to return to her critique of Cornel West: "Cornel West says this is what is wrong with black people today—

too nihilistic. Too scared by hope to hope, too experienced to experience, too close to dead is what I think" (23). It is unclear whether this ending is simply literal (as in the case of Byrd) or also figurative (as in the case of the expressive deadening of the narrative persona and her family). Regardless, here we see the narrative persona use an emotional experience (the anger and sadness occasioned by the memory of Byrd's death) to develop an imaginary of a group of the American citizenry. The reliance on emotions gives her argument its truth value as this is the mechanism by which the narrative persona brings West's argument to the ground of experience as it is lived not just by one person with an unusually sensitive soul but by a group experiencing a set of feelings created by a political system and a national history. The recollection of poetry fails to offer consolation in this situation because the narrative persona tries to argue with Dickinson in the same way she argues with West. What type of reading strategy would allow her to make Dickinson relevant to this collective vision of emotion?

As a writer, the narrative persona finds some consolation in poetry in acknowledging a relationship of a miserable communion, seeing a shared purpose with another individual. The narrative persona's non-fiction book about the liver emerges as a sublimated way of dealing simultaneously with her own depressive past as well with a political problem she perceives in her vision of the national soul. Even with regard to the depressive motivation, her account remains generalized: "Again and again there exists an 'I' who was hospitalized because 'I swallowed a bottle of Tylenol and went into a coma. Now I can say luckily the coma did not lead to liver failure and death, but back then I can say I was disappointed when I woke up in a hospital room . . . "(53). The story continues for several more lines written from the point of view of a first person speaker and filled with such visceral details that it appears difficult to believe that this is merely a hypothetical example and not personal testimony. While her editor asks for the personal motivation

for this subject matter, the narrative persona refuses to share this past: "Why do I care about the liver? I could have told her it is because the word *live* hides within it. Or we might have been able to do something with the fact that the liver is the largest single organ next to the soul, which looms large though it is hidden" (54). The image next to this passage shows a diagram of a human body with a large map of the United States in place of the intestines. As this map appears as the largest organ in the body, Rankine's diagram suggests that the external collective of the nation has taken the place of the individual soul. Given that the liver's physiological function is to produce enzymes that detoxify the contents of the intestines, this diagram suggests that the narrative persona's subject matter is of civic importance. If, as Rankine argued in her article about Charlottesville, the national soul contains the "racism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, homophobia and white rage" that need to be flushed out of the system, then the liver appears as the organ responsible for that detoxification.

While the assemblage of poetry and image suggests this complex interlinking of the personal and the national to Rankine's reader, the narrative persona herself seem unable to communicate these connections. She provides another experience of reading and remembering poetry as a motivation for her own writing, but this poetic language cannot be communicated to her editor:

> how can I say to her, *Understand without effort that man is left, at times thinking, as if trying to weep*. I am somewhat rephrasing the poet César Vallejo because Vallejo comes closest to explaining that any kind of knowledge can be a prescription against despair, but she wouldn't accept his answer, she couldn't really use it for ad copy. (55)

Again, Vallejo emerges as a representative of misery as his poetry speaks to the experience of having difficulty communicating emotion. As a motive for writing, this rationale does not remedy the narrative persona's misery but attempts to transform it. In a Freudian no-man's-land between

melancholy and mourning, this shared ars poetica provides Vallejo and the narrative persona with ways to incompletely and imperfectly mollify their emotional responses. To her reader, Rankine's notes suggest a political root of this misery as they suggest that the source of Vallejo's wished for weeping might be caused by his political devotion to labor and anti-Fascist politics (142). Both Vallejo and the narrative persona are miserable citizens: whereas a miserable communion happens on the dehistoricized ground of interpersonal communication, these experiences of the miserable union of comprehension and incapacity relate specifically to the experience of unrealizable responsibility to the polis. As a motive for political writing, miserable citizenship focuses on articulating the emotional experience rather than describing the external cause of that experience.

It is worth noting that the narrative persona's reading of Vallejo's "Considering coldly, impartially" is not a particularly full one. From the expression of misery in the middle of the poem that the narrative persona quotes, Vallejo moves to an imaginative resolution as the poet consoles this suffering man: "I signal him, / he comes, / and I embrace him, moved. / So what! Moved . . . Moved . . ." (73). The narrative persona identifies with the problem that Vallejo depicts, but not the resolution that the poem offers. I would suggest that is because the narrative persona has difficulty identifying herself through her emotional responses. Despite her recognition of the emotional motivation of her work, the narrative persona appears ambivalent about identifying herself as sentimental because, for her, the visceral and the cognitive coexist uneasily: "And I am not exactly a crying person, though my eyes tear up frequently because of my allergies. In any case, the other tears, the ones that express emotion, the ones that recognize and take responsibility for the soul, don't come. Instead I get a sharp pain in my gut" (56). Parodically cerebral, the narrative persona is quick to clarify that she experiences tears with a physiological purpose but not those with a metaphysical, even quasi-religious, one. Instead of a tearful response that could

communicate emotion to another person, the narrative persona experiences a symptom fully internalized and not comprehensible to a witness as an experience of sadness. In this particular passage, her sharp pain is brought on by news of Abner Louima's settlement with the NYC police union after he was brutalized while in their custody. A televised Louima remarks, "I hope what comes out of my case is change. What happened to me should not happen to any human being, to my children or to anybody else's children" (56). The narrative persona reacts, "instinctively my hand braces my abdomen" (56). While Louima's statement rests on the assumption that the future can be made better than the past, the memory of Louima's past is enacted in the present on the body of the narrative persona. She experiences sadness here as a pain in her gut—Louima's past physical pain becomes translated to her present psychosomatic sympathetic response in a way that mimics what happened to him in police custody. As if unable to experience Louima's hope for the future, this pain mires the narrative persona in the past. This happens because she sees it as a repeated trauma. In the next part of the sequence, the narrative persona connects Louima to the death of Amadou Diallo, another black immigrant victimized by the New York City police. Despite the insight that the sentimental reaction has brought her, she justifies her non-communicative reaction and concludes "it felt wasteful to cry" at this news. This feeling of wastefulness adds another layer of feeling onto the sadness, revealing not only a common thread connecting various individuals, but a critique of this sort of cognition in the face of an economy of utility. This sense of waste translates sadness into misery: despite the historical basis of the feeling, its effects are non-historical and leave the narrative persona full of the knowledge of the suffering of others and her inability to remedy or adequately transform that suffering.

The narrative persona thus finds herself in a double bind: she feels a responsibility to communicate to others, but the only ways of doing so are judged inappropriate. As if chiding

herself for these wasteful reactions, she reflects, “Sometimes I think it is sentimental, or excessive, certainly not intellectual, perhaps too naïve, too self-wounded to value each life like that, to feel the loss to the point of being bent over each time” (57). That the narrative persona *thinks* this emphasizes the cognitive element of the critique. And yet, the profusion of critiques and the limiting adverb “sometimes” shows the limits of thought: the brain is unable to reach a stable understanding of why this act feels wasteful. As the intellectual critique of sentimentality falters, the narrative persona develops a social and writerly one instead: “There is no innovating loss. It was never invented, it happened as something physically, something physically experienced. It is not something an ‘I’ discusses socially” (57). Pain frustrates the modernist dicta for poets to make it new: as a subject, it does not display the author’s linguistic agency but is rather a passive experience of one’s subjection to the world. In remarking that it is not something that an “I” (in quotation marks) discusses socially, the narrative persona seems also to suggest that part of the performance of autonomous human subjectivity entails a tacit agreement not to discuss these moments in which one’s autonomy is impinged upon. In this model, the difficulty of articulating mourning rests in a prohibition against speech that represents intersubjective and bodily experience.

For the narrative persona, poetry itself emerges as an alternate social world in which an “I” can (and indeed must) discuss bodily and emotional reaction socially. The avant-garde poetics of Myung Mi Kim provide the narrative persona with an alternate sense of who an “I” can be in the social world of poetry: “Though Myung Mi Kim did say that the poem is really a responsibility to everyone in a social space. She did say it was okay to cramp, to clog, to fold over at the gut, to have to put hand to flesh, to have to hold the pain, and then translate it here. She did say, in so many words, that what alerts alters” (57). Although the narrative persona refers to this as Kim’s

speech, it would be more appropriate to refer to it as poetry: many of these ideas come from Kim's 2002 volume *Commons* (110-1). By attributing speech to text, the narrative persona casts the book as a real space, a "here" that reader and writer inhabit together and in which the writer is responsible for the reader. As a poem is obviously not a real space in any objective sense, the readerly sense of misery emerges in the distance between the poetic consolation that the narrative persona discovers and a concomitant inability to find that consolation in the historical world of reception. Ambivalently, a theory of agency emerges as the emotional reaction is given a permanence that becomes social in the performance of the poem. "What alerts, alters": but alters what? The sensorium of the reader rather than anything external in the world of reception.

While the language concerning translation, responsibility and the altering power of alertness can be found in *Commons*, I can find no direct evidence for the lengthy sentence about pain. Of course, Kim's book abounds with geographically and historically diverse examples of physical suffering: there are unlocatable references to famine and war as well as specific references to South Korea, Sarajevo, Siberia and Hiroshima. Even as the U.S. can sometimes appear as a place of relative safety in Kim's depictions of immigration, Kim's avant-garde poetics emphasize the connectedness of these distinct times and places. In locating her own experience of pain in Kim's dispersed history of suffering, Rankine's narrative persona not only elegizes Diallo and Louima but also situates herself within this ongoing project of testifying to the blows of power. As miserable citizens, Vallejo, Kim and Rankine's narrative persona cannot rectify the past, but can tell history in a way that keeps them from seeing themselves as autonomous sovereign subjects. Instead, they are joined in unimaginably plural ways to others across the globe and across history.

Despite the communion that the narrative persona discovers in her reading of Myung Mi Kim, Rankine only provides this sort of communion to her readers at a degree of remove: the

narrative persona does not create the poetic "here" but simply narrates her sentimental reactions in a fairly deadpan fashion. This discrepancy between the model of poetry offered in the figure of Kim and the citational narration of Rankine emphasizes that the appeal of the poetic "here" is created less by the writer's language and more by the reader's engagement with that language. The narrative persona discovers communion in Kim's poetics; she does not, however, attempt to replicate that communion and, as a writer, remains dedicated to her non-fiction. The reading of Kim expands her notion of a citizenship and allows her to understand the citizen as an emotional being who can express pain rather than as an autonomous and wholly rational figure. The citizen can emerge as an elegiac citizen. How can one inhabit this role when mourning not a constellation of related deaths but those of wartime's mass murder?

Feeling the War on Terror

The notes that accompany the account of Amadou Diallo's death offer an unsettling coda to the possibilities for emotional communion that the narrative persona finds in her reading of Myung Mi Kim as they discuss a controversy among police that Bruce Springsteen faced over his memorial song "American Skin (41 Shots)": "This song was released only as a single, and was not included, to the chagrin of many critics, on his next full album *This Rising*, which was released after the events of September 11, 2001, in which many New York City police officers lost their lives" (142). The beginning of the War on Terror marks a complicated moment of rupture and continuity: politically appropriate dissent changes while deeper histories remain unchanged. If the reading of Myung Mi Kim offered a politics through rethinking the concept of the citizen, the emergence of the wartime context of the poem eclipses that momentary resolution by expanding the scope of the book's politics from American to global concerns. What can be accomplished

"here" seems newly inadequate when so much depends on the relationship between what happens here and what happens over there. While the narrative persona finds avenues for articulating her grief for Byrd, Louima, Diallo, the scale of the War on Terror (both in terms of the number of causalities and in terms of geography) challenges whatever provisional consolation she discovers in poetry. In the early vignettes about the War on Terror, Rankine represents the narrative persona in the process of finding a way for sentimental writing to respond adequately to events that might not seem to be felt by citizens on the home front.

For a New Yorker, the narrative persona's experience of 9/11 seems oddly devoid of action. Her reception is mediated and belated. Even when she travels to Ground Zero, the only action she observes is the experience of grieving. While 9/11 is frequently figured as an entirely disruptive event in the national consciousness, Rankine presents it more continuously with the preceding history: the relationship between the citizen and their television remains foregrounded as the narrative persona recounts an argument overheard between two women about whether Mayor Rudy Giuliani had to kneel when he was knighted. In this post-9/11 moment, the narrative persona feels a greater sense of continuity between herself and the national public:

> Still a day after the attack on the World Trade Center a reporter asked [Giuliani] to estimate the number of dead. His reply—more than we can bear—caused me to turn and look at him as if for the first time. It is true that we carry the idea of us along with us. And then there are three thousand dead and it is incomprehensible and ungraspable. Physically and emotionally we cannot bear it, should in fact never have this capacity. So when the number is released it is a sieve that cannot hold the loss Giuliani recognized and answered for. (81)

As Giuliani's words provide the narrative persona with a language to imagine her feelings (a language that empirical reality itself cannot capture), she feels interpellated as part of his "we" and understands herself as part of a larger citizenry. Giuliani becomes cast as an ideal lyric poet as the poem transitions to a quotation from Wallace Stevens' wartime lecture "The Noble Rider and the

Sound of Words" concerning the "nobility of the imagination" and the need to express it despite its evasiveness and potential shamefulness (the notes further specify that this essay suggests that imaginative poets play a greater social role than contemporary poets who create politically didactic verse) (81). As with Stevens' imaginative poet, Giuliani's response to the reporter provides a way to describe the internal impact of external events. For the narrative persona, Giuliani's response offers not misery but melancholic anti-consolation as his answer functions as a prolepsis which speaks to the impossibility of consolation.

As the narrative persona attempts to create her own imaginative account of reality, however, she appears unable to reach the noble heights set by Stevens. She imagines merely the scene not televised: "Sir Giuliani kneeling. It was apparently not something to be seen on television, but rather a moment to be heard and experienced; a moment that allows his imagination's encounter with death to kneel under the weight of the real" (81). While this scene offers an account of Giuliani's imagination and reality converging (as if Giuliani realizes a Hegelian ideal of lyric subjectivity), the notes complicate this reading as they reveal that this final paragraph is wholly fictional. Giuliani's honorary knighthood does not allow for the use of the title "sir" nor was there a dubbing ceremony. The narrative persona thus becomes a political poet in the Stevensian mode of valuing imagination over reality. Yet, this imagination seems pathetically mired in the factual: reality appears hardly changed on Rankine's blue guitar. Perhaps then we could read Rankine as both trying to endorse Stevens' poetics and dramatizing the difficulty of accessing the imagination during wartime. Her own sentimental response is stunted and her thoughts are directed at representing political events elsewhere rather than the texture of civilian life.

This emerges as a particularly limiting problem regarding elements of the War on Terror that must be imagined due to their geographic distance from the American civilian narrative persona. She seeks first to imagine the geographically distant elements of the war on an intellectual level. The political enters the domestic again through television: "Overnight Osama bin Laden becomes a household name. Laden, I am told, rhymes with sadden, not lawless" (84). As rhyme might be seen to connect related words, the imposed pronunciation tutorial attempts to associate bin Laden with the purely emotional response to the 9/11 attacks rather than with an intellectual understanding of them. To separate herself from this national sentimentality of grieving decoupled from self-reflection, the narrative persona draws on Hegel's theory of state violence as a threat to control citizens. She considers bin Laden through the lens of lawless rather than sadness: "The minute you stop fearing death you are no longer controlled by governments and councils. In a sense you are no longer accountable to life. The relationships embedded between the 'I' and the 'we' unhinge and lose all sense of responsibility. That 'you' functioning as other, now exists beyond our notions of civil and social space" (84). Abstracting the concept of terrorism into a grammar lesson about the relationality of pronouns, the narrative persona depicts the terrorist as an isolated subjectivity who experiences no responsibility to the social space or collective. In that way, the terrorist is the opposite of a poem as defined in the section concerning Louima, Diallo and Myung Mi Kim's *Commons*. As the use of the second person here interpellates the reader into the role of terrorist, we are thrust into a critical reading practice where the second person is utterly inassimilable. The very difficulty of identification poses a difficulty to the type of the sentimental identification that typically happens in appeals to the second person. Consequently, we are asked to perform a thought experiment that involves bracketing the self and becoming wholly defined by the reading of the text.

The depiction of bin Laden developed in this prose poem rests on the intellect not only due to the recourse to Hegel and the alienating strategies of appealing to the second person, but also through its syllogistic structure: the first paragraph identifies bin Laden as a terrorist, the second paragraph develops a Hegelian definition of a terrorist and the third paragraph draws a conclusion from these two premises: "So terrorists embody that state of beyond; they are that freedom embodied" (84). By contrast with the popular American national rhetoric that claimed "terrorists hate our freedoms," the narrative persona's Hegelian understanding of bin Laden imagines him epitomizing the ideal of freedom. As the narrative persona further develops this Hegelian bin Laden, she turns to a decontextualized aesthetic interpretation:

> Antigone, the character not the play, by Theban definition was a domestic terrorist. Hegel uses her as an example. She identified with the dead, was willing to walk among them. In the course of the drama, even though she has many lines left to speak in the play, Creon eloquently describes her to her sister as already dead. So it is, was with Osama. (84)

Is this a sympathetic portrait of bin Laden? On the one hand, it identifies him with the American value of freedom and this honored antiauthoritarian figure in Western Civilization. On the other hand, the narrative persona seems to move too easily between art and life as she considers the character rather than the play, the Theban opinion rather than the Sophoclean frame. Rather than unambiguously providing a more sympathetic view of bin Laden, the strained syllogistic logic denies him steadiness and, in so doing, denies what the intellect can make for itself. To reach this conclusion, the narrative persona must bracket her own sense of the value of social responsibility and choose to view bin Laden purely through the lens of lawlessness rather than sadness. In this intellectual imagination of bin Laden, Greek tragedy is used to provide a factual understanding of the world without a sense of any process of aesthetic or formal mediation. When the aesthetic is

used to provide comfort to the intellectual rather than the emotional, misery does not present an obstacle.

And yet this comfort does not provide the narrative persona with persistent consolation. Even as she comes to an intellectual understanding of the concept of the terrorist, the narrative persona continues to feel political problems in her own civilian life. Although the magnitude of the War on Terror exceeds the sensorium of the individual citizen, the narrative persona discovers that the study of feeling serves as a way to understand her place as an individual citizen within the larger war culture. In a scene sometimes pointed to as a model of the type of social community *Lonely* seeks to create (Frost 180-1), the narrative persona recalls her mind wandering as she rides in a taxi: "feelings fill the gaps created by the indirectness of experience. Though the experience is social, thoughts carry it into a singular space and it is this that causes the feeling of loneliness; or it is that that collides the feeling with the experiences so that what is left is the solitude called loneliness" (89). The cognitive separates individuals: thought privatizes the social element of emotional experience and thereby makes the social appear private even when its origin is public and beyond the individual. Loneliness stems not simply from a difficulty of communication, but specifically from the difficulty of communicating the experience of emotions. Although this is a wartime context, this passage features nothing particular to wartime: part of feeling the War on Terror as a civilian involves continuing to feel one's own pre-war dilemmas. Consequently, the experience of feeling remains a mode of research into the political even as the political seems to be elsewhere.

Although feeling might reveal elements of war culture, Rankine does not offer embracing and expressing feeling as a solution to this predicament: the private language developed for oneself to describe emotional experience also impedes social communication. Interrupting the monologue

that opens the scene, the taxi driver enters into dialogue with the narrative person as he asks her where she lives and what she does:

> I write about the liver
>
> The liver? Really? You are a doctor?
>
> No, no. I write about the liver
> because I'm thinking as if trying to weep
>
> Excuse me? You think the liver
> is connected to thoughts?
>
> Well not exactly. (84)

After this quoted section, the taxi driver initiates a conversation with the narrative persona about their experiences as racialized people in the U.S. after 9/11. I want to linger on the opening of the dialogue, however, because it reveals the persistence of loneliness even in scenes where community seems to have been achieved. Formally, this exchange recalls the dialogues written by the narrative persona because she makes indicative statements while her interlocutor primarily asks questions. While we as readers have been fashioned into people who can understand the significance of the Vallejo quotation in this passage, the taxi driver cannot interpret this idiosyncratic emotional language and (understandably!) reads it literally. Rather than the narrative persona attempting a more communicable explanation and rather than the taxi driver probing her answer, they move onto an already shared experience as a subject of conversation. Expression of feeling and quotation of poetry does not suffice to render one intelligible to another and to overcome loneliness.

The allusion to Vallejo returns the narrative persona to her pre-9/11 sentimental reading. As we will see, civilian emotional life in *Lonely* is characterized as one of fear and anxiety. This continuity of misery, however, provides the narrative persona with an anchor of continuity between

eras of history and allows her to see how the American soul remains essentially unchanged throughout. As the vignette comes to a close, the taxi driver asks, "Why with such a nice smile are you trying to weep?" (89) The narrative persona does not answer, but Rankine provides her readers with an answer as she again inserts the diagram of the body with the map of the United States in place of the intestines and a label identifying the liver. The reader thus knows that the weeping reflects the narrative persona's feeling of miserable citizenship. How might the poetic function as a liver for this national soul and help to detoxify it? What are the politics of Rankine's poetics of misery?

The Politics of Misery during the War on Terror

In *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, the home front emerges as a significant site in the perpetuation of the War on Terror as individual citizens are conscripted into the war effort through national scripts of emotional response. Looking back on the nineties, the narrative persona remarks, "Again and again these were Kodak moments, full of individuation; we were all on our way to our personal best. America was seemingly a meritocracy. I, I, I am Tiger Woods. It was the nineties. Now it is the twenty-first century and either you are with us or you are against us. Where is your flag?" (91). Whereas collectivity had been defined around attention to individual ambition in the nineties, it becomes defined around nationhood and enmity after 9/11. As enacted through the question to the second person, "being with us" entails not just a patriotic love of country but xenophobic suspicion and rejection of the other. This way of relating to the other, however, is continuous with the violence toward people of color depicted amidst the economic boom of the nineties discussed above. At this point in the book, however, the narrative persona struggles to retain her sentimental independence as she dramatizes her own state-sanctioned transition from sadness to fear as she

follows the Postmaster General's instructions for detecting anthrax: "As the days pass I begin to watch myself closely. The America that I am is washing her hands. She is checking for return addresses. She is noticing the postage amount. [. . .] Do I like who I am becoming? Is this me? Fear. Fear in phlegm. Fear airborne. Fear foreign" (92). Given this rejection of the possible threat of the other, we might say an American is always lonely when acting as an American. However, the reading of poetry emerges as a mode of imagining an alternate form of sociality in the midst of national anxiety by creating a space of shared misery. The idea here is not simply that feeling sad is different from feeling anxious and therefore politically revolutionary, but that the meta-sadness that characterizes misery does not fool a reader into believing that consolation leads easily to political change. The poetics of misery models, but does not make, another form a citizenship: one open to contamination and sentimental in its incorporative reading practices. Therefore it allows the imagination of the American citizen to see beyond the American exceptionalism that fuels this post-9/11 anxiety. Contrasting an activist reading strategy that seeks to change actions with a sentimental reading strategy that seeks to incorporate the external into the internal, Rankine offers her readers a model of poetry reception that allows the powerless individual to persist across history. Reading poetry offers a history not written by the victors and thereby allows for ways of inhabiting the present and hoping for the future that are not bound to the dominant political narratives of power.

Initially, the narrative persona seems to imagine herself as an agent of change who can bring peace into wartime. She recounts seeing a documentary on Louis Armstrong where "a room full of strangers" honored the film with a standing ovation and which spurred the man she was with to pontificate on the nature of Mahalia Jackson's genius (97). Reflecting on the collective aesthetic experience rather than the man's intellection, the narrative persona remarks, "Her clarity

of vision crosses thirty years to address intimately each of us. It is as if her voice has always been dormant within us, waiting to be awakened, even though 'it had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, (and) through the thousand darknesses of murderous speech'" (97). In this model of aesthetic reception, the "genius" of the performer addresses each individual member of the audience who then respond collectively to this individual and internal stimulus. The quotation from Paul Celan compounds this model of genius by suggesting a uniform function across different cultures and different historical traumas. Yet, the narrative persona herself appears idiosyncratic in her response: "Even though the lyrics of the song are, 'Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me,' I am hearing, Let it begin in me" (97). By substituting "in" for "with," the narrative persona renders Jackson's wish interior and individual. Action in the world with others is translated into a personalized vision of change. The aesthetic response is rendered autonomous instead of collective.

The narrative persona becomes immediately aware of the inadequacy of this theory of aesthetic agency that relies on an ability to make herself into the force through which peace comes to this earth. She recounts a dream in which, "I apologize to everyone I meet. Instead of introducing myself, I apologize for not knowing why I am alive" (98). She contrasts this with real life where she tends to avoid contact with strangers and theorizes, "In real life the looking away is the apology, despite the fact that when I look away I almost always feel guilty; I do not feel as if I have apologized. Instead I feel as if I have created a reason to apologize, I feel the guilt of having ignored that thing—the encounter" (98). Far from bringing peace to the world, the narrative persona understands herself as adding something shameful. The desired encounter is not merely about having the confidence to acknowledge others, but to acknowledge her own uncertainty about her place in the world: "I could have nodded, I could have smiled without showing my teeth. In

some small way I could have wordlessly said, I see you seeing me and I apologize for not knowing why I am alive. I am sorry. I am sorry. I apologize" (98). In rehearsing this dialogue, however, the poem *does* give an apology to its readers. In contrast to Mahalia Jackson's intimate address, Rankine's narrative persona provides a social address: she does not touch something that is dormant deep inside her reader, but offers something to the reader as she might to someone in the street. At this point in the long poem, however, it emerges as a compensation for a failure to those in lived experience to be able to do this for those in her writing's audience: "Afterwards, after I have looked away, I never feel as if I can say, Look, look at me again so that I can see you, so that I can acknowledge that I have seen you, so that I can see you and apologize" (98). This sort of delayed apology is possible in poetry but not in life. The space of poetry, the "here" we are asked to imagine, compensates for a failure of social interaction in lived reality.

In post-9/11 America, these imagined encounters with strangers are made even more difficult by the national rhetoric that the narrative persona uncomfortably feels others to be trapped within. The poetic "here" becomes more necessary even as it becomes increasingly more inadequate. While trying fruitlessly to find a cab, the narrative persona makes a rare approach to another person: "At the bus stop, I say it's hard to get a cab now. The woman standing next to me glances over without turning her head. She faces the street where cab after cab drives by with its light out. She says as if to anyone it's hard to live now. I don't respond. Hers is an Operation Iraqi Freedom answer" (113). The dreamed avoidance of the encounter is made real in this scene: the narrative persona cannot determine how to react to the weight of this encounter. However, this has less to do with any personal failing than it does with the particular problem of determining how to respond to the historical moment. Interpreting the woman's answer as reflecting the fear of an elevated national security threat level following the invasion of Iraq, the narrative persona reflects:

> I could say something, but my packages are getting heavier by the minute and besides, what is there to say since rhetorically it's not about our oil under their sand but about freeing Iraqis from Iraqis and Osama is Saddam and Saddam is "that man who tried to kill my father" and the weapons of mass destruction are, well, invisible and Afghanistan is Iraq and Iraq is Syria and we see ourselves only through our own eyes and the British, but not the French, and Germany won't and Turkey won't join us but the coalition is inside Baghdad where the future is the threat the Americans feel they can escape but there is no escaping the Americans because war, this war, is about peace: "the war in Iraq is really about peace. Trying to make the world more peaceful. This victory in Iraq, when it happens, will make the world more peaceful. (113)

While this may be a political rhetoric, Rankine displays its logic as far from rational and, indeed, perhaps more poetic: the slippages between places and persons recall the blurred boundaries of metaphor (except, of course, real lives are immediately at stake in Bush's poetics.) Two millennia after Plato's *Republic*, it is the poet (or at least the writer) who seems concerned that the democratic politician has fallen into a world of semblances. The alienation is not just between citizens, but between nations as the United States cannot see itself as others see it and seems to wish for an exceptional status: the nation wishes to avoid threat while still being a threat that other nations cannot avoid. The failure of the individual evident in the dream is presented not simply as the fault of the individual, but also due to a national rhetoric that makes dialogue difficult.

The narrative persona seeks not to debunk this national poetics, but to discover a counter poetics based on an imaginary that emphasizes connectivity over exceptionalism. In the next subsection, the narrative persona moves to an account (again linked with the conjunction "or") of seeing the news that President Mbeki of South Africa had decided to allow HIV antiretroviral drugs to be distributed. While reading the international news, the narrative persona experiences a change in her own emotional life and bodily sensations: "my distress at Mbeki's previous position against distribution had physically lodged itself like a virus within me" (117). By contrast with the fear and anxiety that serves as the lens through which the narrative persona's would-be

interlocutor at the bus stop understood the United States' position in the world, the narrative persona instead experiences distress—one of the more extreme synonyms of sad that appears in the book. However, this extreme sadness seems ambivalently valued as it appears unclear how we are to interpret the simile of the virus. Is it insensitive in its overly presumptuous claim about the mimetic force of empathy? Or is it an accomplishment in recognizing a shared humanity? Perhaps it serves as a site to move past binary rhetoric around sentimentality as the narrative persona's simile is followed by a photograph of Nelson Mandela wearing a (false) HIV Positive shirt. Mandela's citizenship and proximity to the crisis allows his imagined empathy to be accompanied by action.

As someone on the other side of the world, however, the narrative persona cannot identify possibilities for action. Accordingly, her distress about the situation in South Africa turns into a meta-distress about the seeming impotence of her empathetic response. She becomes a sentimental reader of the news who, perhaps like Spahr in her bias toward demonstrable action, critiques herself for this sentimental response: "It is not possible to communicate how useless, how much like a skin-sack of uselessness I felt. *I am better than thou are now: I am a fool, the fool said. Thou art nothing.* Is she dead? Is he dead? Yes, they are dead. One observes. One opens the paper. One turns on the television. Nothing changes. My distress grows into a nothing. Thou art nothing" (117). While the narrative persona previously imagined herself as able to escape being fooled by the national poetics, this citation from Lear momentarily turns Rankine's "American Lyric" into a tragedy where the hamartia appears as faith in any transcendent possibilities for the individual mind. Moving between pronouns (I, One, Thou), the narrative persona casts this tragic position on herself, on anyone who might similarly take this sentimental stance toward the media, and finally perhaps to the reader—the "thou" whose feelings have been developed by this book but whose

sentimental responses to poetry, like the narrative persona's sentimental response to the news, seem to make nothing happen.

As I have been arguing throughout, however, we, as readers of poetry, are not nothing: readers of poetry enter a contract with the poem and experience a generically-mediated emotion, in this case misery, which recalibrates our sense of the relationship between self and others, between citizen and polis. We are fashioned into the interlocutors who the narrative persona continually turns to in her dialogic poetry. This, in the world of *Lonely*, is a complicated resolution. By contrast with tragic catharsis, the narrative persona remains mired in her distress and finds that time's ongoingness transforms the seemingly useless sentimental response into something more agential: "Such distress moved in with muscle and bone. Its entrance by necessity slowly translated my already grief into a tremendously exhausted hope. The translation occurs as a form of life. Then life, which seemed so full of waiting, awakes suddenly into a life of hope" (18). The narrative persona, plagued since the beginning with the "Inability to Maintain Hope" finds hope finally in this moment where her distress turns reflexively into a meta-distress at the inability of her feelings to effect change in the world. By identifying the distress as itself the translator of grief, the narrative persona attributes a degree of agency to her emotional experiences, even if the world of action is in her own sensorium. A poetic dialogue on the facing page works to clarify this seeming mystery even as the role of the reader of poetry remains an ambivalent one as the interlocutor asks:

> Life is a form of hope?
>
> If you are hopeful.
>
> Maybe hope is the same as breath—part of
> what it means to be human and alive.
>
> Or maybe hoping is the same as waiting,
> it can be futile.

Waiting for what?

For a life to begin.

I am here.

And I am still lonely. (119)

Hope is not inherent, but actively constructed by outlook. Yet the emotional arc of moving from the Inability to Maintain Hope to this tentative hopefulness is undercut by the failure of the interlocutor to address the central problem of the text as announced by the title: the primary speaker of these dialogues remains lonely. What seemed to be a global problem in fact is also a very local one: the failure of the limited communion between the poet and their imagined interlocutor to fully rectify loneliness. In other words, misery.

The narrative persona's pessimistic reading of Levinas helps to illuminate the misery underlying the relationship between self and other, poet and interlocutor, and the role of language in attempting to establish relationships between them. If the scene with the taxi driver is where critics in the sentimental tradition tend to identify the enactment of the social ideals explored and developed in *Lonely*, then the citation of Levinas is where they tend to locate the intellectual roots of this ideal (Gallagher, Robbins 133, Welch 142-3). For this to be true, however, one would need a more optimistic reading of Rankine's poetics than I find possible. Following the dialogue on the persistence of loneliness even in the experience of hope, the narrative persona transitions back to a monologue: "Then all life is a form of waiting, but it is the waiting of loneliness. One waits to recognize the other, to see the other as one sees the self" (120). Although the opening conjunctive adverb "then" suggests that this idea follows logically from the dialogue, it effaces the other even as it idealizes the encounter. She proceeds to quote from Levinas's essay "The Transcendence of Words" in which Levinas establishes speech as the mechanism by which relationships between the

self and the other are fabricated spatially: "in social relations the real presence of the other is important [. . .] The use of the word wrenches experience out of its aesthetic self-sufficiency, the *here* where it has quietly been lying. Invoking experience transforms it into a creature" (148). Assuming Rankine was herself influenced by Levinas' theorization of the idea of "here" in aesthetics, we can see how poetry problematically straddles this line between the aesthetic "here" and the "living creature" in a shared world: despite appearing as speech addressed to a second person, *Lonely* depicts the reader joining the poet in the aesthetic here rather than translating the ideas into a "living creature" useful in the world of reception. The poem itself explores this idea of speech as a living creature as the narrative persona quotes from the conclusion of the essay:

> Levinas writes 'The object who speaks is situated in relation to the other. The privilege of the other ceases to be of importance once we admit that the first fact of existence is neither being for itself but being for the other, in other words, that human existence is a creature. By offering a word, a subject putting himself forward lays himself open and, in a sense, prays. (120)

This ideal relationship with the other falters immediately as the next prose poem describes a stranger giving the narrative persona a religious pamphlet. Reacting to a perversely postmodern American rendition of the subject laying himself open in prayer, the narrative persona "stiffens" at the approach of the other and throws away the pamphlet without reading beyond a slogan. If Levinas is an ideal, it is one that is rendered difficult to reach both in the world depicted in the poem and in the reader's world of reception because otherness remains impossible to assimilate to the self.[45]

For Rankine, poetry about the War on Terror thus faces challenges at two diametrically opposed poles: the global scale of the politics and the local scale of intersubjective communication.

[45] Rankine seems to complicate any possibility of easily endorsing the philosophy of Levinas in *Plot* as well: "Were we ever to arrive at knowing the other as the same pulsing compassion would break the most orthodox heart" (14)

In the final page of this penultimate section of *Lonely*, Levinas' model of meeting the other as the self emerges as particularly problematic in context of the War on Terror. The narrative person sister is depicted as suffering from night sweats due to the antidepressant Zoloft: "She's dying? From somewhere my sister, this character, hears this. Is she dead? She wakes to find herself wet [. . .] the pills say this is a possible side effect. They say in order to block pain sensations from being sent to the brain other things can happen" (123). Far from solving the sister's problems, the Zoloft and its medical side effect produces a state of existential uncertainty. Following a dialogue with the narrative persona that illustrates perfect understanding ("Night sweats. / Oh, the Zoloft"), the televised news of Saddam Hussein's capture enters this world of night sweats and insomnia: "She pauses because this is meant to be important. It is supposed to mean something about peace. The newscaster, speaking very quickly, hopes this will be the end of the killings in Iraq [. . .] She closes her eyes against the water beating down. Would the natural coolness of the earth prevent night sweats? She wonders. Would a spider hole be considered a homeopathic cure for feeling like a corpse" (123). The sister internalizes the news event in a manner that separates her from the anxious national community of feeling but also does not produce any change (political or otherwise) by the idiosyncrasy: at a moment where (as she acknowledges) the U.S. should be feeling victorious, she instead appears mired in her own sorrow and own personal vision of hope. Perceiving the other as the self appears absurd and reveals that this event is so disconnected from the perceptual reality of those on the U.S. home front that its significance cannot be experienced as such, but becomes distorted, even perverted as it enters the individual American consciousness. In this final depiction of the War on Terror, Rankine presents and seems to critique a particularly unimaginative empathy that makes the other too closely match the self.

If the preceding vignette dramatizes the absurdity of empathy during the War on Terror, what of misery? What are the politics of reading in a way that not only causes an emotional response but also makes one aware of the structural limitations of that response? Rankine's final section parodies any clear agential relationship between reading and the real world as it opens, "I would have to drink five more cups of coffee a day to reduce my chances of getting type 2 diabetes. I usually have one cup in the morning. Today I am staring into a possible second cup, and I do not see my husband's expression when I tell him about the darkness and the curtain" (127). As the notes clarify, the narrative persona is referring to a study that linked heavy coffee consumption with a reduced risk of diabetes. Although this scientific study suggests a clear agential relationship between what one can learn through reading and the prospect of improving one's health, this changed behavior is presented as ridiculous (indeed, as the notes further clarify, the researchers also warned "these findings should not be interpreted as a prescription to drink 6 cups of coffee a day") (153). This possible route to improvement is parodied also for its partiality: the abrupt appearance of the vague but threatening idea of the darkness and the curtain detracts from the positivistic application that the narrative persona attempts with the scientific research. She continues and clarifies,

> I have a dream, or rather, in my dream the lights are out in New York City. They are out because they were out. Even in my dream I know I am dreaming. The events of my dream are a form of mimesis. The darkness that accompanied the blackout existed, but does not now in the world outside the dream. In my dream the lights are out because I cannot see ahead of me. Or in this dark dream I am looking for a chance, "my chance to" or "my chance for"—it is no clear. Then where I am going or what I want is behind a black curtain, but it is so dark the curtain becomes night. I want to fall asleep inside my dream. This wish for further paralysis wakes me up. (127)

Identifying the dream as a form of mimesis, the narrative persona suggests that it plays a role similar to the aesthetic. It is, like the scientific research, connected to life, but the mechanism of

that connection is not understood as clearly by the narrative persona. Again, "or"s proliferate as she grapples with possible meanings for the darkness. Ultimately, however, the cause of the darkness seems less important than the narrative persona's emotional reaction to it as her reaction to the dream, rather than the dream itself, scares her into waking. Dreaming emerges an alternate model of interpretation to the scientific study in that it relies on a connection between itself and life that is individual, mysterious, and troubled rather than clear and agential. Its significance lies in the meaning it makes rather than the effects it causes.

To study the connection between the dream and her life, the narrative persona presents a mode of sentimental reading as lived interpretation. The husband offers a purely sociological rationale for the dream, "You think voting won't make a difference, says my husband. This might be a wise thing to think. He says all this without lifting his gaze from the morning paper" (127). To interpret the dream, the husband finds a possible political referent (the dark curtain as voting booth) and makes a realistic claim based on that likeness. In this way, he reads the dream in the same manner that the narrative persona reads the scientific study: it relates to reality unambiguously and directly. That the husband does not look up from the paper recalls earlier scenes in which insufficient attention to dialogue emerged as a social problem. Unconvinced by his interpretation, the narrative persona theorizes how it emerged as truth for him: "He is reading about the candidates for the presidency. He is wondering if voting against someone is enough motivation to drag voters away from the televised news of the election into actual voting booths. Sometimes you read something and a thought that was floating around your veins organizes itself into the sentence that reflects it. This might also be a form of dreaming" (127). By contrast with a model of reading the leads to behavioral change and clear interpretation, the narrative persona offers a more idiosyncratic model of reading as co-creation of thoughts: reading translates felt,

bodily knowledge into the linguistic realm. By referring to this sentimental mode of reading as a form of dreaming, the narrative persona underscores the personal, associational qualities of it. By contrast with the husband's reading practice that imposes a static idea onto his lived reality, this alternative values reception as it happens in time.

How can this be an adequate response the political stakes of the 2004 election? As the book moves toward its end in the subsequent pages, the narrative persona models this type of reading by turning back to literature—first verse drama, then the novel, and finally the lyric poem. In the first, she offers another interpretation for her dream: "Or I remember that the last two sentences I ready in Fanny Howe's *Tis of Thee* before falling asleep the previous night were: 'I learned to renounce a sense of independence by degrees and finally felt defeated by the times I lived in. Obedient to them" (128). The narrative persona posits another possible etiology of the dream as originating in the contemporary avant-garde verse drama that she reads. As this is the emotional reaction that wakes the narrative persona, it is as if she sees how terrifying it would be to believe in this absolute passivity modeled for her by the Howe's dramatic speech. The next "or" introduces a reading that seems less connected to the dream than to the process of writing the book:

> Or, well, I tried to fit language into the shape of usefulness. The world moves through words as if the bodies words reflect did not exist. The world, like a giant liver, receives everyone and everything, including these words: Is he dead? Is she dead? The words remain an inscription on the surface of my loneliness. This loneliness stems from a feeling of uselessness. Then Coetzee's Costello says in fictional lecture, "for instants at a time I know what it is like to be a corpse." (129)

By contrast with the connections that the avant-garde draws between language and behavior in the world, the narrative persona identifies a disconnect between world and words which leads her as a writer to sense her own lack of agency. She pushes against this distinction, however, with a simile of the world as a liver to posit some connective tissue between the linguistic and the

material. Perhaps the liver detoxifies in this model by adding some degree of reality to what has been articulated: the words "Is he dead? Is she dead?" become just as real as a corpse. This does not yield a new utopic vision, however. Instead her simile adds to the magnitude of the world but does not change it. While Costello laments a similar situation (the notes clarify that she is a writer talking about writer's block), the conjunction "then" suggests a turn. Even if Costello is lamenting her failures, her simile signals a turn for the narrative persona because it renders an emotional experience communicable.

By rendering new concepts articulable and therefore potentially shared, literature solves, or at least soothes, the elegiac challenge at the heart of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*. For Rankine's narrative persona, this literary solution emerges with particular force in the reading of lyric poetry because of the association of the lyric poem and the biographical person. While Virginia Jackson identifies this association as the root of lyric misery, Rankine's theory of reading offers an opportunity to imagine it attesting to the persistence of the poet's life: "Or Paul Celan said that the poem was no different from a handshake. *I cannot see any basic difference between a handshake and a poem*—is how Rosemary [sic] Waldrop translated his German" (129). While this metaphor of the poem as handshake rests on familiar, lyricized concepts of the poet as person, it contextualizes the reader's reception of the poem within a social ground. In Rankine's model, the reader touches rather than overhears the poet. By making the process of translation and transmission visible, the narrative persona helps reveal the sorts of metaphorical handshakes at work in her reception of Celan. As the narrative persona theorizes the handshake, the key distinction between this form of reception and the lyricized model of overhearing lyric rests on the act of recognition: "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. The conflation of the solidity

of presence with the offering of this same presence perhaps has everything to do with being alive" (130). For Rankine's narrative persona, the power of lyric poetry functions as a consolation to the situation of elegy because her lyricized understanding of the poetic speaker paired with her social understanding of the poem's reception functions as a way to perpetuate the life of the poet.

In these final passages, the line between Rankine and the narrative persona becomes further blurred as the "I" presents itself as the author of the book we have read rather than the non-fiction book about the liver. That equation, and the social significance of that equation, rests on the reader. As if testifying not only to Rankine's composition but also to Rankine's perpetuation of Celan, the final prose poem incorporates the theorization of the handshake into a direct address to the reader of *Lonely*:

> Or one meaning of here is "In this world, in this life, on earth. In this presence of position, indicating the presence of." Or in other words, I am here. It also means to hand something to somebody—Here you are. Here, he said to her. Here both recognizes and demands recognition. I see you, or here, he said to her. 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. (131)

As the passage ends with a preposition, we as readers are left to create the context to which Rankine's extension of Celan's language renders. The shift from "you" to "we" over the course of final prose poem suggests that we can only imagine this context if we imagine ourselves somehow sharing a reality with the "I" of this book. Just as *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* imagines a space in which a transnational and transhistorical canon of poets coexist, we are asked to read the book as the narrative persona reads Hejinian and Stein, Vallejo and Celan by carrying her language forward into our own time of reading. This sentimental reading strategy allows the reader to imagine narratives of the past that counter history as told by the victors. In the high stakes of imagining the 2004 election, reading becomes a political act for Rankine for the way it can loosen a reader from

the grip of American optimism and learn to see the self connected to others across the globe and across history, even if only miserably.

If, as Virginia Jackson has argued, we can identify Dickinson's misery in the chasm between historical experience and ahistorical metaphor and the poet's knowledge that the real, historical reader will see the poem only ahistorically, then perhaps Rankine's poetics of misery invites the reader to cross that chasm themselves as *Lonely* reaches its sentimental conclusion emphatically only in the level of imagination. Yet, in calling this agency imagined, I do not wish to condemn it as ideological and purely fantastical. Instead, the poem asks the reader to undertake the labor of seeing themselves historically: not to view literature through the lens of an American optimism, but to read for the limited and specific hope we can attempt to construct "here." In this sense, the reading of poetry is not a transhistorical communion, but a reminder of how history is still with the present and how certain reading and writing practices maintain that visibility. That this view does not immediately translate into a politics—that we cannot recross the chasm and translate this imaginary into a real utopia—does not absolutely discount the potential. The politics rests in the decision to hope instead of wait.

Chapter II:

"Happiness is for Amateurs": Decoupling Love and Optimism in C.D. Wright's *Rising, Falling, Hovering*

> Meant to tell F this morning about dream of eating grasshoppers, fried but happy. Our love a difficult instrument we are learning to play. Practice, practice.
> C.D. Wright, "Living"

C.D. Wright's representation of the early years of the second Iraq War in *Rising, Falling, Hovering* (2008) entwines a narration of military conflict in the Middle East with familial conflict and rapprochement in New England. Consequently, Wright might seem to participate in what Lauren Berlant has deemed the "unfinished business of sentimentality" as the book stages the creation of peace in the domestic realm and might therefore suggest that warring nations could learn from feuding families. However, Wright's view of love is consolatory rather than revolutionary. While poets such as W.H. Auden and Juliana Spahr vacillate between utopic ambitions for love and melancholic realizations of love's failure to meet those ambitions—the difference between "we must love one another *or* die" and "we must love one another *and* die"—Wright's view of love lacks their optimism and, consequently, also lacks their disappointment at love's failure to translate into politics. By contrast with the optimistic, teleological hopes for a more perfect union that undergird the type of love alternately celebrated and disavowed by Auden and Spahr, Wright instead sees love as the perseverance necessary to live amidst the human condition of plurality. Accordingly, the consolation in *Rising, Falling, Hovering* rests in revising notions of time. A late poem in the volume dramatizes a speaker accepting the difficulty of happiness in a world in which "There is no sacrosanct version there is only time" (84). Rather

than bemoan human imperfectability, however, Wright offers the consolation of learning to read narrative without expecting success (rising) or failure (falling), but simply the uncertain act of hovering in relation to others.

Although a gloss of the content of *Rising, Falling, Hovering* links the volume to the sentimental tradition, the form of C.D. Wright's poem aligns more closely with the modernist aesthetics that scholars generally oppose to the sentimental. Instead of the plot-driven narration of feminine realist sentimentality, Wright juxtaposes disparate times and places in order to develop a full representation of the present and the legacy of the past upon the present.[46] The unfinished business of sentimentality is thus much larger than contemporary feminist theorists have tended to see and includes poetry in the modernist tradition.[47] Wright's love during wartime follows a tradition of modernist women poets such as Mina Loy and H.D. In an essay on those poets, Wright quotes Loy's biographer who refers to her love poems as 'a peculiar kind of war poetry' and Wright argues that H.D.'s *Trilogy* "makes her stand for the endurance of love, selfhood, and poetry—against the odds [. . .] and would proclaim poetry the redemptive successor to violence" (*The Poet* 104-5). By associating love with endurance, Wright casts its redemptive force as a continual struggle. Love never triumphs; it only continues. Wright values poetry for its willingness to proclaim itself as the successor to violence rather than for its actual ability to fulfil that role:

[46] "The poem did not have a plot as such, it was episodic, and different parties were brought in without firm respect for logic. Juxtaposition was a strategy with which she was comfortable" (*The Poet…* 74).

[47] Feminist scholars such as Suzanne Clark and Julie Taylor have developed similar arguments with regard to modernist poetry. I build on their work by showing how a Pound-centered understanding of modernism has affected the way in which we interpret the politics of modernist difficulty. What interests me is not only a misunderstanding of modernism as rupture but the way in which that misunderstanding further shapes political and aesthetic judgements.

matching Wright's understanding of love, this view of poetry emphasizes its endurance in times of crisis.

The key difference between Wright's vision of love and the understanding of love that informs Berlant, Auden, and Spahr is its different relationship to time. Drawing on Lacan, Berlant argues that the realities of love can only live up to fantasy "when people can rely on re-experiencing their intimates' fundamental sympathy with the project of repetition and recognition, no small feat since the terms of that sympathy are constantly shifting internally as they are renegotiated in the world. This explains the fetishistic optimism of romantic love about 'tomorrow'" (*Female Complaint* 15). This optimistic form of love, then, imagines the future without attention to the shifting ground of the present. Wright's love poetry, by contrast, attunes reader to that shifting ground.

The first poem in C.D. Wright's wartime volume *Rising, Falling, Hovering* emblematizes the consolatory vision of the book as a whole: initially, it seems to promise communion as a solution to mourning, but then swerves to emphasize the ongoing difficulties posed by communion. "Re: Happiness, in pursuit thereof" begins where *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* ends as it features a wildly shifting array of pronouns and geographies which require readers to assume the difficult task of imagining an encounter with a textually mediated interlocutor. Translating the U.S. Declaration of Independence into the diction of twenty-first century office communications, Wright asks how the classical vision of the American dream can be realized in contemporary society. The poem begins in the mode of a dramatic monologue with a first-person embodiment of New Orleans addressing the reader, "It is 2005, just before landfall. / Here I am, a labyrinth, and I am a mess. / I am located at the corner of Waterway and Bluff. I need your help" (3). Although the identity of the poem's speaker becomes progressively clear in these lines, no such

identification is possible for the second person and, consequently, the poem directly appeals to the reader for palliative action in the face of Hurricane Katrina. Wright melancholically unsettles the temporality of the event in two ways: first, just as Rankine decenters September 11th from a history of terrorism in America, Wright depicts New Orleans as a "mess" before Hurricane Katrina; second, the year in the first line drags Wright's contemporary readers (in 2008 and beyond) back to a prior moment in American history. Initially Wright answers her melancholic opening with an appeal to communion as the necessary help emerges only by imagining the you and I as one entity: "We burn to make one another sing; / to stay the lake that it not boil, earth / not rock" (3). Linking suffering and desire, the approach toward the other aspires at once to heal the world and to bring song into the world. At the midpoint of "Re: Happiness, in pursuit thereof," Wright presents poetry as an activity that restores the world by joining individuals in collective creation.

By contrast with the shared vocabulary and concomitant possibility of hope that develops in Rankine's miserable communion, Wright turns to an even more melancholic vision of history as she contains the teleological American drive toward happiness within an opposing notion of history: "We are running on Aztec time, fifth and final cycle" (3). In assuming this first person plural pronoun, Wright asks her readers to view history askance and to see Hurricane Katrina not as an event from U.S. history in 2005, but as a symptom of the Aztec fifth sun of destruction. In addition to interpellating her reader into a collective through the first person plural, Wright engages her reader by offering a disjunctive portrait of how to act toward each other at the end times:

> We would be mercurochrome to one another
> bee balm or chamomile. We should be concrete,
> glass, and spandex. We should be digital or
> at least early. Be ivory-billed. Invisible
> except to the most prepared observer.
> We will be stardust. Ancient tailings
> of nothing. Elapsed breath. No,
> we must first be ice. Be nails. Be teeth.

Be lightning. (3)

Each of the first four sentences presents a different verb tense and a different set of qualities to bring to our interactions with others. Subjunctively and ideally, we would care for each other as salves. Conditionally and more realistically, we should be utilitarian materials. Moving away from these ideals, Wright uses the imperative to implore her reader to more natural wonders. In the future tense, Wright meditates on humans' eventual extinction or at least death. By end of poem, the pursuit of happiness seems beside the point of the pursuit of survival for an expansive first person plural. Similarly, Wright shifts her focus from future-oriented tenses to the present or the imperative. The conclusion recalls H.D.'s imperative in *Trilogy* to "be indigestible, hard, ungiving" that Wright quoted in her essay on modernist women poets. Just as Wright interpreted the H.D. line as an affirmation of love, selfhood, and poetry, we can identify in Wright a reconceptualization of love as perseverance amidst challenges.

The following poem, "Like Having a Light at Your Back You Can't See but You Can Still Feel (1)," domesticates the sublime finale of the opening poem and shifts to focus on the relationship between two couples rather than between the text and the reader. Here, the address of the title places the reader into a relationship with a scene of people rather than the voice of a speaker. Written in a juxtapositional modernist style, the poem consists of one- or two-line stanzas that are frequently disjunctive. By contrast with the totalizing deconstruction of Language writers, Wright's disjunctive poetics becomes a mode of destabilizing a reader's ability to confidently determine whether lines refer to a couple struggling to communicate in a domestic setting or a couple in the process of migration. Initially, the light of the title appears as an ordinary, interior light source as the poem opens by elaborating the title's simile, "As if it were streaming into your ear // The edges of a room long vanished. // She is not really hearing what he's really saying" (4).

While the appeals to the second person in the title and the first line seek to make a bodily sensation communicable to the reader, the identities of the third person pronouns become progressively hard to track as the poem moves out of the room introduced in the second line and into an outdoor scene: "The shine is going out of the ground / but they are sure of their footing. // It's not that they have been here before, but / they are young and they have water" (4). Even as Wright repeats pronouns across this poem, a reader struggles to find a stable referent for those pronouns. Both couples appear linked in a situation where "The forward direction requires almost no effort / Consonant with this feeling of harmony / comes another, less comfortable. // Not of being lost but of not belonging" (4). Instead of the sentimental idealization of the future, Wright reveals an ambivalence about the ease of moving toward the future with others. The poem concludes by theorizing its own ambiguity: "Others are out there who are drifting. / If this took place anywhere near the presidential palace / it would be nonstop terrifying. / And this could be the reason she has started to scream" (4-5). The scream makes logical sense only if the ability to see the connections between disparate scenes in a legitimate way of viewing the world. This is the interpenetration of feminine realist sentimentality, but in Wright's rendition love is not a solution but a further space for conflict that reflects the difficulty of the self relating to others.

Despite the melancholic irresolution of the first two poems, Wright does ultimately develop a new sense of happiness that focuses on present-tense performances instead of fantasies of future perfection. The final introductory poem "Like Hearing Your Name Called in a Language You Don't Understand" recalls the second poem structurally (it too consists of disjunctive one- or two-line stanzas), but features a coherent "I" encountering others in a Mexican Plaza de Armas. The speaker's passivity is remarkable as she recounts her observations and allows herself to be open to other people and other languages: "I have read what was written there, said, Gracias, and sat down

again. // I have climbed the pyramidal steps and felt winded and humbled" (4). Gratitude and humility allow the "I" to persevere amid challenges. The poem concludes with an address to the second person, "I say unto you: // Comrades, be not in mourning for your being // to express happiness and expel scorpions is the best job on earth" (7). For Wright, one finds consolation for mourning through the ongoing work of communicating joy while simultaneously ridding oneself of harm. Instead of the American pursuit of happiness, Wright offers acceptance that happiness is ongoing work in the present rather than something to be achieved once and for all in the future.

While Rankine's miserable communion rests on the assumption that poetry has to serve as a surrogate site where the understanding of others can occur in a way impossible in lived reality, C.D. Wright's mode of revising elegiac consolation instead rests on developing a sense of reality that allows for the management of the difficulties of encountering others and sustaining relationships amid these difficulties, whether in the home or in borderlands and war zones. Unable to achieve absolute consolation in a world where "happiness is for amateurs"—a world in which any expansion in love is met only with an expanded need to mourn or grieve—Wright instead develops a love narrative that portrays love as the human experience that helps us move into an increasingly bleak future even as Wright decouples that love from optimism. Before turning to *Rising, Falling, Hovering*, I will linger on Wright's collections of prose in order to argue that the politics of Wright's poetics of love are best understood in context of an ongoing conversation with George Oppen, Theodor Adorno and H.D. rather than the dominant postmodern poetic project of Language writing. Wright stages Oppen and H.D. as two alternative voices of what poetry does in war: Wright associated Oppen with silence and H.D. with the persistence of language. While Oppen's stance has more cultural prominence—Wright convincingly associates him with Adorno—her poetry ultimately reflects an engagement with H.D.'s emphasis on continuity and

perseverance. Turning to *Rising, Falling, Hovering*, I will argue that Wright responds to Adorno's and Oppen's idealization of silence by framing poetry as a necessary consolation for the difficulties of living with others. The second section argues for the contradictory notion of this consolation as Wright both melancholically expands the range of her persona's mourning and attempts to find consolation in the love narrative. Finally, I will attend to the short poems that conclude the volume in order to argue that Wright offers poetry as a present-tense performance of willing happiness even when the future appears foreclosed.

Wright's Political Poetics: Beyond the Hybrid

Wright's vision of love reflects an alternate lineage of modernist poetics than is dominant in Language writing and thus distinct from critics' championing of Spahr's Auden-esque global love poem, *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs*. Given that Wright's career began with volumes of short, discrete poems and moved toward increasingly multi-generic book-length works, scholars have tended to narrate her career trajectory as a shift from short lyric poems to mature hybridized work (Keller, Goodman). Although Wright's disjunctive poetics certainly reflect lessons learned from Language poetry, she does not share their intellectual engagement with Western Marxism and French theory. Her volumes of collected prose reflect a more varied set of interlocutors primarily focused on other poets: William Carlos Williams, Robert Creeley, Jean Valentine (among others). By situating Wright in her own poetics instead of contemporary discourses about Language and lyric, I argue that we can better understand the legacy of modernism in her poetics. Recalling Rankine's sentimental avant-gardism in which the techniques of Language writing were used to represent emotional experience, Wright offers a personal modernism in which the elegiac citizen's disjunctive account of her emotional experiences reflects

her ties to others in the home and across the globe. Wright proclaims an investment in engaging readers affectively and depicting affective experience: "I am looking for a way to vocalize, perform, act out, address, the commonly felt crises of my time. These are spiritual exercises" (*Cooling Time* 6). Wright shifts the focus of political poetry from action and revolution to representing temporal experience in language. By emphasizing the spiritual dimensions of writing poetry, Wright suggests that poetry becomes equal to the moment when it serves as a source of wise insight rather than agent of change.

Perhaps because of her poor fit within dominant modes of critical discourse about poetics, Wright's work has not received much scholarly attention. In their respective accounts of poetry after Language writing, both Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Burt mention C.D. Wright as an exemplar of innovative poetics at the turn of the millennium.[48] Similarly, in the two major scholarly accounts of Wright's poetics, Jenny Goodman and Lynn Keller have each identified her work from the early nineties as the moment in which Wright forms an "innovative combination" (Goodman 40) or "hybrid" (Keller 29) of lyric and Language poetic traditions. Focusing respectively on *String Light* (1991) and *Just Whistle* (1993), Goodman locates Wright's politics in this aesthetic experimentation while Keller ascribes a deconstruction-influenced feminism to Wright's mature work. With their focus on poetic genealogy, critics who focus on Wright's work from the nineties frame her work through its relationship to Language writing.

Since these book-length sequences from the mid-nineties, Wright's poetry has turned toward increasingly multi-generic book-length works with an increasing focus on national and global politics. By contrast with the earlier book-length sequences discussed by Goodman and

[48] See Burt's "The Elliptical Poets" (1999) and Juliana Spahr's Introduction to *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language* (2002).

Keller, the form of *Deepstep Come Shining* (1998) makes it difficult to isolate any unit smaller than the book. Robert Baker argues that "the roving collage of *Deepstep Come Shining* is the basic form at work in Wright's three last works" (215-6). In so doing, he seeks to complicate Burt's characterization of Wright as an "elliptical" poet (Burt's designation for contemporary poets who represent the self in ways that reflect some engagement with the deconstructive tendencies of Language writing). Baker instead places Wright in the romantic lineage of the quest poem and argues that these disjunctive, collaged book-length works provide a way to think about wholeness at a time when that is increasingly unfashionable: by contrast with the dominant postmodern poetics, he argues that Wright's collage form "calls us to the talk of seeing a many-sided wholeness" (237). Jennie Berner has also distanced Wright from the "standard postmodern project" in her reading of *Deepstep Come Shining* and Wright's next book, the 2003 collaboration with the photography Deborah Luster *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana*. That volume employs similar techniques but applies them to a more specific end in representing the prison-industrial complex through an assemblage of disjunctive reportage. *Rising, Falling, Hovering* has a similarly specific context, though in this volume personal themes and isolatable poetic structures become more present even as the content becomes more unwieldly for reporting. In her next book-length work *One With Others: A Little Book of Her Days* (2010), Wright elegizes her friend V through twinning stories of her illness and her past civil rights era activism through memoir, interview, and abrupt movements across geography and time.[49] Thus, in Wright's most mature poetry the discourse of postmodernism is only of limited relevance.

[49] Wright's first posthumous volume of poems *ShallCross* (2016) is not a book-length work and consequently warns the critic against projecting a teleology away from lyric onto Wright's work. Her final book *Casting Deep Shade* (2019) is an essayistic study of beech trees.

Wright's unique relationship to postmodernism reflects the modernist lineage informing her poetics. In the final prose essay in her 2005 collection *Cooling Time: An American Poetry Vigil*, C.D. Wright situates herself in conversation with George Oppen and his famous poetic silence between 1934 and 1958. Although it is most common to attribute Oppen's silence to his labor organizing and life as an exile in Mexico, Oren Izenberg emphasizes the wartime context (Oppen fought in the Battle of the Bulge and was part of the unit that liberated the Dachau concentration camps): "the crisis as it 'occurred' to Oppen was not just the ideological conflict in America that made him choose temporary exile but the 'total war' and the effort at total extermination that preceded and precipitated it" (81). Wright, too, situates Oppen in a wartime context by considering how he might speak to American poets at the outset of the War on Terror. Wright depicts Oppen caught in a double bind between politics and poetics: "so abstemious [. . .] in his relationship to his commitment to social change and so absolutist in his relationship to his art that he could not yield to programmatic ideals" (106). On the one hand, Wright's Oppen appears too concerned with the exigencies of action to see how poetry can be valuable in a time of crisis. On the other, he appears too dedicated to his own aesthetic program to adapt it to a political cause. Faced with the irreconcilable choices between his aesthetics and his politics, Oppen offers only silence.

Although Wright addresses a similar struggle, she gives language and poetics to the irreconcilable pulls. Wright depicts herself motivated to write poetry despite an inevitable sense of her own failure to thus reshape the world: "So, what does it mean *now* to sequester oneself for the single purpose of exploring the limits of one's language *in our time* when the accords of nations with respect to the fate of millions, with respect to the very viability of the world, are deemed anachronisms, that is, irrelevant by a handful of political hacks, war criminals, and profiteers who

are more or less recognized as being in rightful control" (106). The image of a sequestered poet focused on the limits of language removes art from the public sphere, yet Wright points to the engaged nature of contemporary poetry by its virtue of being written in time (a point that she emphasizes through the italicized "now" and "in our time.") In describing her political situation, however, Wright also points to the role of language: her terms frame the way her readers interpret politicians, the idea of the nation, and the role of international agreements. The essay ends by dramatizing the possible value of poetry for its readers, as Wright closes with references to a poet without much public recognition and to a Guatemalan activist for indigenous rights:

> *The time has come to loot to hew and Eden*, writes Marjorie Milligan, an obscure Providence poet. I take her line as a call to words. I submit that pressing the demands of the word forward is pertinent, urgent, a requirement even. The happiness that belongs to all of us has been stolen by the few, declared Rigoberta Menchú. I cannot accept this outcome. I will not. Notwithstanding scale— (106)

By contrast with a vision of political poetics that idealizes poetry that serves as a call to *action*, Wright instead frames her reception of Milligan's line as a call to *words*. Opposing Oppen's silence, Wright valorizes efforts to find language that fits the contemporary moment. Perhaps this difference reflects Wright's emphasis on the emotional components of citizenship. We might call Wright a socialist of sentiments: she seeks to redistribute joy rather than resources (though, Wright does not espouse any naïve faith that joy can somehow be separated from material conditions). The looting and hewing of Milligan's line offer a vision of revolution, but the conclusion with Eden offers a vision of idyllic happiness in harmony with nature. Wright seems aware of her inevitable failure as the essay concludes on apprehensive note about scale, but she emphasizes the significance of her refusal rather than the inevitability of her failure to produce a desired outcome.

The essays in *Cooling Time* predate the publication of *Rising, Falling, Hovering*. Wright's later volume of collected prose—the voluminously-titled *The Poet, the Lion, Talking Pictures, El*

Farolito, a Wedding in St. Roch, the Big Box Store, the Warp in the Mirror, Spring, Midnights, Fire & All (2016)—contains essays that reflect upon the composition of *Rising, Falling, Hovering* and which revise Wright's argument about silence during wartime. In the second of two essays entitled "During the Composition of *Rising, Falling, Hovering*," Wright still emerges as an anti-Oppen for whom Mexico is ground for writing poetry about American politics:

> Was it not incumbent on all who opposed the war to protest by any means available to them. Poetry never seems up to the task. Poetry is always up for more than she gave it credit. But picking the words to pin to the unflagging fury the regime inspired, building the frame to ensure the word could weather that perilous emotion—it was one of those by-hook-or-by-crook courses of moment. She was at a juncture in her life where she was tumultuously involved with her immediate family and Mexico offered a fertile, entangled place in which her thoughts could explore her thoughts + a close friend, a Mexican poet, had a bad diagnosis. (76)

Recalling the Wright of "What Would Oppen Say," the authorial persona in this essay (described in the third person, as she appears in much of the "Rising, Falling, Hovering" sequence) maintains a motivation to write poetry even as poetry seems unable to accomplish all that she wants in the world. The essay evinces Wright's characteristic tendency to punctuate questions with periods as if symbolizing that even her doubts and uncertainties should be regarded as a form of factual statement. A long history of war poetry would lead us to understand the poetic problem about writing about the War on Terror from the homefront to be one of distance, yet Wright unexpectedly theorizes a need for even greater distance: both from the nation that inspires anger and from the tumultuous family situation. The two are not equated, but coexist.

For Wright, the consolatory achievement of *Rising, Falling, Hovering* rests in creating something new in the world rather than the experience of writing. Wright describes the difficult process of composition:

> The process was painstaking—spread out over several years and geographies—the more so because it was lived-in; because it was temperamental by dint of its

> sources; because one can imagine more readily obstacles that do not exist than one can imagine apertures that do; because poetry, alas, makes nothing happen. In the end, she was more satisfied than she expected to be since the process was so protracted and procured so little solace [. . .] Other accounts she had read of individuals making something that hadn't quite been there before had unrolled in like manner. (78)

Alluding to Auden's "Elegy for W.B. Yeats," Wright suggests that one of the painful aspects of composing *Rising, Falling, Hovering* rests in her awareness of her inability to create a more peaceful world through poetry. Although Wright asserts that the process did not provide individual solace, I would argue that the social nature of consolation is in fact achieved in this volume: even though Wright's poetry does not create peace, it does, as she concludes, make something new in the world. By presenting readers with that new object, Wright offers an innovative perspective on the relation of the individual to larger systems of wartime power.

Wright also reconsiders the value of silence in an essay in the same volume entitled "Of Those Who Can Afford to Be Gentle, I'll Say it Again."[50] Although Wright does not frame the essay as a response to Oppen (indeed, Adorno is the more pronounced interlocutor), it does emerge as a continuation of her thinking about silence: "Poetry, I have tardily determined, not only seeks silence, it aspires to silence. I mean not that it aims for perfection but for an opening, an unofficial opening, a zone wherein the language affords unexpected associations and alternative outcomes" (90). Inverting Oppen's model of silence, Wright envisions silence following rather than preceding poetry. Poetry allows for a state of silence after a new understanding of reality has been achieved. Accordingly, she offers a vision of elegy that points toward a consolatory vision: "Even in elegy,

[50] The title alludes to then Presidential Candidate Jimmy Carter's address to the Liberal Party: "A strong nation, like a strong person, can afford to be gentle, firm, thoughtful, and restrained. It can afford to extend a helping hand to others. It's a weak nation, like a weak person, that must behave with bluster and boasting and rashness and other signs of insecurity" (184). For a full text of the address, see Carter's *A Government as Good as Its People* (University of Arkansas Press, 1996).

poetry persists not just to remember but also to ratify our existence" (91). For Wright, then, elegy does not simply express mourning but also validates present existence. Wright distances her understanding of the relationship of poetry and politics from understandings based on action to think instead about the politics of one's conceptualization of reality:

> Inasmuch as poetry is the mind's domain, it is the mind's defense. But poets will have to shed some of our mental armor. We will have to channel our loathing toward our elected objects of negation; forgo our gentle murmurings (as Adorno says, 'There is nothing innocuous left'). Poets will have to stop bemoaning poetry's lost station, while continuing to press its perceptions. That which we cannot speak of we can no longer pass over in silence. Mostly, poets will fail. The structures will fail. Words will fumble and fail. But in so failing and fumbling poets refuse to be accomplices. We continue to articulate the possibility of solidarity. Human discourse. Continuity. At the onset of his *History of the Conquest of Mexico,* William Prescott wrote of Montezuma's nonresistance to evil. No more of that. There are haunting, indelible marks to be made before our abandonment of words can be complete. Poets in our days will have to draw down against our latent subversiveness and punch through the dream hole to that opening wherein listening is possible and violence is not inevitable. (94-5)

That poetry cannot lead to a desired action cannot be justification for poetic silence. Instead, Wright urges poets to give language to their failures to create a more peaceful world. As I will discuss below, in *Rising, Falling, Hovering* Wright presents the encounter between Montezuma and Cortés as the origin of a legacy of domination that she presents as a through line in American history. In this later essay, Wright situates poetry outside the conflict between the conquistador and the conquered for the way it gives language to the struggle. Yet, this stance outside should not be mistaken for an escape: Adorno's pessimism pervades Wright's analysis of contemporary society and poetry's inevitable failure. However, although poetry may fail to change the spirit that fuels over four hundred years of conquest, it does give language and form to that narrative. It elegizes rather than changes.

Private Words and a World at War

The epigraphs of *Rising, Falling, Hovering* cast a sentimental frame around the book as they coordinate individual acts of caring for others with the political creation of peace: the first comes from Benito Juáraz, "El respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz" (Respect for the rights of others is peace) and the second comes from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The momentum of existence towards others, towards the future, towards the world can be restored as a river unfreezes." Yet, Wright's poem challenges rather than endorses the epigraphs. They may haunt the poem as a possibility, but they are not easily achieved. The "Rising, Falling, Hovering" sequences represent global war from within the psyche of an individual citizen. Shuttling between the first, second, and third person singular pronouns, Wright refuses to grant her readers any stable point of identification and instead provides multiple vantages on the beginning of war. As Wright interweaves narratives of marital conflict on the home front, the bombing of Baghdad, and immigration across the U.S.-Mexico border, she frames her disparate content with leitmotifs of expansive mourning and an Adornian suspicion of the appropriateness of writing poetry in times of conflict. The difficulty of reading Wright's modernist poetics enacts the obscured nature of American citizenship by making readers aware of disparate global connections experienced even in their own backyards. Yet, Wright's poetry offers perseverance rather than resistance: her love narrative offers no counter to the unethical treatment of others, but instead provides a model of continuing toward the future even without optimistic faith that love will lead to peace.

The first of the two "Rising, Falling, Hovering" sequences starts and ends in the quintessentially sentimental setting of the suburban backyard of a middle-aged married couple. By contrast with the sentimental fetishization of the future, however, the poem begins on a note of nostalgia: "Yesterday / nothing was unusual a rainy March morning / there were scores of

starlings on the ground" (11). In this neo-romantic past, the only notable detail is the extraordinary number of birds. At first, Wright presents the interruption of this idyllic past as nothing more than ruminating on marital conflict, "she had been thinking about what he said / What has been said is said often" (11). By casting her characters simply as third person singular pronouns, Wright strips them of any identifying idiosyncrasies: although "Rising, Falling, Hovering" seems to be in part a memoiristic poem (as biographical details and prose sketches confirm), the presentation of the married couple in this generalized form lends the poem a depersonalized effect (even if the heteronormativity limits its collective reach to a particular type of reader). Wright's poetry further encourages that interpretation as she shifts from the narrative account to an impersonal truism about the ordinariness of this exchange. Wright renders this ordinariness transhistorical as the present (what is said) simply repeats the past (what has been said). The shift from narration to more general analysis encourages the reader to see the female figure from the outside rather than identifying with the characters. Compounding the poem's uncouth sentimentality, Wright presents us with a moment of aesthetic redemption at the very beginning of the poem: "Sifting for some interlinear significance on the pallid grass / the birds accumulated chromatic density" (11). Given Wright's juxtapositional poetics, the referent of sifting remains unclear and could refer to the female figure analyzing the male figure's words, the readers trying to analyze the movements of Wright's poetics, or even the birds whose digging for worms Wright might be describing metaphorically. Regardless, the act of interpretation brings beauty into the world of the poem as it heralds the return of the birds and, by extension, an intensification of color.

Recalling the movement from "Re: Happiness, in pursuit thereof" to "Like Having a Light at Your Back You Can't See but You Can Still Feel (1)," the narrative of "Rising, Falling, Hovering" continues past this return of aesthetic pleasure. Following a tense attempt at

rapprochement, the female and male figure drive silently to the airport. The male figure can find no words for his wife, but does find words for himself: "He took a pen out of his shirt pocket / and wrote something down / he cared not to share with her" (13). Wright figures his writing practice as both private and privatizing as it creates further distance between the couple. Yet, Wright does not linger on this detail (a detail that will accrue significance throughout the poem). Instead, she situates the figures in multiple realities at once: "her bags had not been in anyone else's possession / her bracelets set off the metal detector / On the moving sidewalk she studied his back" (13-4). Wright presents her readers with several points of view in quick succession: the tense privacy of the man, the anti-terror measures of airports, and the way the actions of the individual interact with this system. At the same time, the poem seems more fully personal as it also becomes more general: the man's writing aligns the he and she more firmly with Wright and her husband, the poet and translator, Forrest Gander, though the question of whether one's bags have been in anyone else's possession is a question familiar to anyone who has flown in the U.S. The particular and the general (the individual person and the individual as citizen) coexist: they are not reducible to each other, but individual subjectivity is presented as flickering between the idiosyncratic and the general.

Further compounding confusion about the focus of subjectivity, Wright features a series of addresses to the second person following a description of emotional life not firmly attached to any one person:

> A funnel of feelings about going anywhere
>
> during a war
>
> Are your ears popping
>
> trying to make light talk his half-delineated face
>
> already in twilight the batting pouring

from clouds below

Were you ever told the soul detaches from its earthly body

at around 40,000 feet

If they handed you the black box

what would you bequeath

trying to make light talk (14)

Through address, Wright situates the reader alongside the man and woman on the plane. The couple's tense silence becomes a shared incapacity to "make light talk"—a phrase that evokes both casual small talk and the sublime, metaphoric work of giving voice to the sun. The use of address further discourages identification with the characters and instead encourages the reader to imagine themselves as a more communicative companion than the silent man.

The tension between the couple becomes shared not only through address, but also because the domestic world of the couple does not exist independently from their historical reality. While the man sleeps, the woman glances at the news: "One glimpse of the paper was too much / the number of their dead to remain unknown" (15). Mourning in the unframed ways valued by Butler, the woman reacts primarily to the way in which Iraqi casualties are excluded from the media's frame.[51] Thus, the failures of love happen only within a larger context of failures of love on a global scale. As marital strife and global war appear simultaneously:

[51] In *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, Butler argues that US civilians are conscripted into the war effort through the political and cultural work of framing certain lives—such as those of U.S. citizens—as grievable while other lives are presented as not grievable because they are not even fully recognized as human lives to begin with. Butler seems to imagine a possibility of resistance through the project of her critique when she asks "If those of us who watch the wars our

> About the other night I know you are sorry I am sorry too We were tired Me and my open-shut-case mouth You and your clockwork disciplines And I know it is too far to go But we can't leave it to the forces to rub out the color of the world (15)

As a female complaint poem, *Rising, Falling, Hovering* does not center exclusively on a transhistorical problem of love and the difficulty of tolerating someone's otherness. Wright also depicts the way the contemporary world challenges the couple by leaving them unsure how to react to changes in history and how to recalibrate their actions both as a couple and as individuals. Although their apologies sound generic—with both sides recognizing their faults and understanding what personal characteristics helped to create the tension—the end of the stanza reveals that global politics rest at the heart of the argument. An argument about how to create peace in the world appears to create marital tension as apology resolves into a question about agency in world politics. Recalling the "chromatic density" of the birds, the reference to the "color of the world" links the beauty of the home with what the world requires in times of war. Yet, Wright undercuts the sentimentality of this connection as the next stanza recalls Adorno and Oppen: "What is said has been said before This is no time for poetry" (15). The interlocutors the haunt Wright's essays emerge as a voice in her poetry as well. The revised repetition of "what has been said is said often" (from the first page of the poem) again emphasizes a connection between the past and the present and suggests that the words that the couple find to describe their world are disconnected from their present.

In the first "Rising, Falling, Hovering" sequence, Wright initially expresses an inability to write poetry equal to the moment and mocks the idea that her poetry could help end war. Alluding to and negating Anna Akhmatova' *Requiem* (1935-1957), Wright assumes the first person voice:

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governments conduct at a distance are visually solicited and recruited into the war by embedded reporting and publicly approved media reports, under what conditions can we refuse that recruitment effort? What restructuring of the senses does that require and enable?" (xiii).

"Then: on a certain night and no other / another telegenic war begins. / Can you describe this. / I cannot. This is not the day or the hour. / The color is all wrong" (17). In the preface her depiction of the Yezhov terror in *Requiem*, Akhmatova describes waiting in line to see her son in a Leningrad prison when a woman recognizes her as a poet and asks, "Can you describe this?" to which the poet responds, "I can" (Akhmatova 95). Lacking such a clear setting, Wright's address to the second person reaches instead to the audience (or perhaps dramatizes a conversation between the couple). Although Wright might appear to participate in the trope of lyric recusatio as she claims not to be able to tackle the topic, she attributes that failure not to her poetics but to the nature of the war. Instead she and her interlocutor describe a shared dream in which "We were going to speed of night. / We were riding black dogs" (17). After an interlude describing the news (in which Wright emphasizes the loss of the past as "Baghdad's thirteen-century chronicle / shelled into the memory hole. // Heat radiating from burning books. Evidence of ago gone"), the image of the black dogs recurs in a parody of resistance (17-8):

> One bright night we will see through their oaths of threat and protection
>
> We will get out of our white cars in our white dresses
>
> We will join the black dogs in a circle of the light
>
> We will turn in the circle of the night
>
> Memory murdered (19)

While color emerges early in "Rising, Falling, Hovering" as a trope of resistance, here Wright portrays only opposite shades. The vision suggests that seeing through governmental rhetoric can occasion the joining of opposites into a single, harmonious dance and thereby "murder memory" and undo the past's hold on the present. Throughout *Rising, Falling, Hovering*, Wright refers to the hyperbolic power of whiteness which appears to signal a mocking sense of her own

positionality and fantasies of agency. Wright constructs this scene to appear hyperbolic, unreal and problematic and thus critiques the fantasy of pacifism inherent in the image.

Rather than imagining new worlds, Wright imagines the poet's first task as representing this one, including forms of (inadequate) resistance in the world. The decentered view from Mexico allows Wright to oppose nationalistic ways of understanding the War in Iraq. In the aftermath of the first day of shock and awe, Wright describes, "She struggles with the dailies in Spanish. BARBARO ATAQUE: MAS DE MIL BOMBOS CAYERON EN LA CAPITAL" (19). As Suzanne Wise has pointed out, the inclusion of Spanish in Wright's text decenters her readers from American-centric expectations for poetry (415). The diction of the headline furthers that process of decentering: from this international, relatively neutral, viewpoint, the attack is barbarous for the number of bombs that have fallen on the capital of Iraq. What might appear as military splendor to an American audience gets portrayed as intense cruelty. Referring to Baghdad as "the capital" requires a perspective that affords Iraq the same respect nations extend to any other nation. And Wright's poetics extend that respect to Mexico's capital as well: "In Mexico's capital, which is teeming, which is sinking by inches, which is ringed by cardboard colonials, which are teeming, the day after the bombs have begun to drop on Baghdad, the florists are bringing their blooms to the heart, de costumbre, on Fridays, to the hotels and restaurants, the markets and sidewalk vendors" (19). The anaphora structuring this prose section links the bustle of the city, the effects of environmental change and the effects of poverty. The simple action of the florists beginning their delivery thus becomes heightened and linked into a larger network of Mexican (and international) culture. These florists "empty their pungent cargo and begin to a make a mosaic, which can be read by guests in the Grand Hotel and the Majestic, which spells NO A LA GUERRA Y SI A LA PAZ. And the blooms left over which are given away to passersby" (19). Here the florists

offer a linguistic and altruistic action to oppose war. Yet that action appears non-consequential in the poem, though not for the reason one might expect (what could these international visitors at the luxury hotels do?): "All quiet in the capital of the old Aztec Empire. Silence in the heart, habitat of 22,000,000 souls, which is sinking by centimeters. Which in inches equals eight a year" (20). The eerie attention to Mexico City's sinking reminds us of the global catastrophe of global warming overshadowing other events. It is as if the international perspective of the female character affords her a respite from nationalism and allows her to look into the overlapping global systems and problems.

Despite the constant awareness of the Iraq War even in Mexico, the female figure finds a complicated emotional ease in her travels: "Ashamed of her solace in being here to be ashamed is to be American" (22). By contrast with elegiac consolation, the comforts of solace appear wholly private and individual. Indeed, the more prominent emotional experience is a second order one of shame about the experience of solace. Wright attaches this shame not simply to the female figure's experience of solace, but to a broader sense of American citizenship. Upon returning to the U.S., the female figure's shame gives way to anger directed at the government, the citizenry, and even to poetry: "she begins to tear / the pages from the sewn spine // Nary a death arrested nor a hair of harm averted // by any scrawny farrago of letters" (23). Again, those voices who would call for poetic silence during wartime emerge in Wright's narrative. The odd and antiquated diction suggests how little poetic language can do to alter the fundamental situation.

However, as anger transforms into mourning, poetry too gains a new role. In addition to the injunctions against poetry, another leitmotif in the first installment of "Rising, Falling, Hovering" is the continual count of the dead (and the inability to count the Iraqi dead): "As of Friday 850 of our members will be Forever young // [. . .] The true number of Iraqi dead to remain

officially unknown" (24). A disjunctive claim follows shortly thereafter: "A suffusion of color on a minimally disturbed surface / can calm the eyes and the nerves" (24). Color (another leitmotif) assumes a calming power. Several pages later, Wright ascribes a similar role for poetry: "The momentum of our lives shifts into the absence of thought / The first task is to recover the true words for being // In the event of our death you will have to roll your own poetry" (28). Wright thus joins together moving into the future and the work of developing awareness of the present. Finally breaking the Adornian leitmotif, Wright portrays poetry as a cigarette. The image may be humorous, but that also seems to be part of the point: Wright promises no grandiose solutions from poetry, but instead it satisfies a momentary urge. A few pages later, Wright dramatizes a cigarette as what one goes to "in the absence of any forseeable remedy" (35). Poetry's consolation emerges as a necessity when nothing will actually provide the necessary change.

By contrast with the sentimental tradition that would redeem the political with the personal, Wright presents simultaneity without suggesting any redemptive possibilities in noticing those connections. The ending of the first "Rising, Falling, Hovering" sequence begins in the first person as Wright jarringly transitions from a scene of migration across the U.S.-Mexico border to a scene of Rhode Island preparing for a snowstorm: "I was just thinking / I hadn't worn a dress in so long the current between my legs / witching [. . .] plows forming a convoy on Wampanoag Trail in advance of the whiteout / juncos blown through frantic branches snow disappearing the rhododendron" (42). The description of physically immediate sensation seems petty in comparison to the preceding scene (especially as the emphatic whiteness of the scene contrasts with the Native American name of the road). Though, in this context, the idea of witching perhaps connects the first person speaker to earlier women who did not fit into the American project. Wright transitions

from Rhode Island to Iraq by drawing a parallel between the snowstorm in New England and sandstorm in Iraq:

> Allied military reports
>
> Deadliest day for the forces Super Stallion crash not
>
> counting the number of their dead no such estimates exist
>
> sandstorms on the AccuWeather map near Ar Rutba
>
> in the western region town of 22,000 not counting their dead (42)

The final reference to Iraq continues the trope of attempting to mourn expansively for the casualties of war. Instead of the observations of birds and foliage that the first person speaker includes in her description of Rhode Island, she can grasp the landscape of Iraq only through the technological mediation of Accuweather. As an elegist, the first person persona longs for more information than she is permitted to have.

The poem shifts back to the domestic not to solve the problem of war, but rather to present the array of the persona's sensations. Wright closes with a scene of conflict between the first person persona and their teenage son. Wright depicts him earlier in a typically sentimental scene of recollection of childhood reading juxtaposed with the mothers of men killed in Iraq (32-3). There, reading emerges as a key mode in which the mother comforts the son: "Come on Keep reading Don't stop Don't ever stop / like she was saying Beauty cannot she cannot marry / the Beast" (32). Now, he is depicted isolated in his bedroom, smoking, and "freestyling to lifted beats" (42). Addressing the reader with a deictic, the first person persona concludes the poem:

> These are not the limits of my world
>
> but the limits of my words tonight He is writing something down
>
> he does not care to share folding the paper over with cold hands

to be cont. (42-3)

Linking words and world, Wright presents the first-person persona as a poet who admits awareness that her topic remains beyond her work. However, the address to the reader contrasts with this second instance of private writing. Repeating another trope from the first section of "Rising, Falling, Hovering" the final line promises that the words will continue and follow events in time even if inadequately. Wright's sentimental project emphasizes simultaneity rather than solution. Her love narrative repeats problems in different setting rather than reaching solutions, whether it be domestic or global. The only solution is continuing—an act that is perhaps not inconsequential but the very process of living with others. This continuation becomes consolatory because Wright imagines persevering with "you" her reader.

Love and War, Continued

C.D. Wright published a second installment of "Rising, Falling, Hovering" in *Chicago Review* two years after publishing the first. While the second installment still focuses on the interpenetration of the domestic and the political, the attention Wright gives to the familial relationships recedes: the female figure's relationship with the nation and the world become more significant sources of emotional tension. In one sense, Wright represents an expansive love narrative in which the female figure is imagined in relationship with the whole world. Instead of a peaceful utopia, this poem of global connectivity ushers in rage, dread, and self-hatred. While Wright shares the sentimentalist's faith that changes in feeling are necessary to create political change, she understands that this affective work will always come up short. Thus, when the poem reaches a sentimental conclusion through an image of loving harmony it is a hugely anxious ending that forces the reader to be simultaneously conscious of different resolutions to different narratives.

The opposite of an optimistic love narrative emerges not in pessimism but in acceptance of contradiction.

By contrast with the third person pronouns that dominate the first installment, the first person (both singular and plural) appears more frequently in the second. The connections intimated by the modernist juxtaposition become clearer to understand in context. The second installment opens with a representation of emotional life on the home front: "Floods of feelings / militarize our nights currents of solitude cordon off / our days" (51). Inverting the sentimental, Wright depicts emotional experience as replicating warfare and increasing isolation (even if this isolation is a collective characteristic). The home front does not appear as a space of safety, but as a place of violence and uncertainty: "the famous Carousel Bar reopened / in the Crescent City customers resumed drinking / revolving and sinking Providence continues to launch / hurtle heave its leaves" (51). Dramatizing poetry's poor fit for the horrors of the world, the assonance of these lines appears at odds with the threatening images of both seasonal and catastrophic climate change.

As readers, we are interpellated into the national community through the first persona plural pronoun. Wright attempts to interpellate her readers into a larger, international community through the act of grieving, but stages her own failure. The poem transitions quickly from the home front to the front lines, as Wright provides the fact "as of Sat Nov 12 / according to the Associated Press 2,066 / of our members will remain Forever Young" (51). Perhaps gesturing to the New Orleans of the opening, Wright ambivalently mourns them with "O when the saints go / marching" (51). Without the final "in," the spiritual turned jazz standard loses its hopeful focus on heaven and instead devolves into an image of warfare. Wright interrupts the spiritual consolation of the song by asserting "At the level of policy their kids don't exist / never did will never reach the sun-drenched shore" (51). The third person plural pronouns reinforce the separations instilled

by nationalism and Wright emphasizes that it is at the level of policy that these distinctions of who to mourn are made. While the song imagines a sunlit shore where people will be reunited, Wright points to how their existence becomes effaced by the U.S. government not only through death but also by disregard.

By contrast with the global communion of saints, Wright portrays sinister and undesired connections with the globe that haunt the first person speaker. Initially, her life might seem fully disconnected from the reality of war and climate change that opens the poem, "and now it's Monday again / I have been to Pilates I found my old coat / I took my will to the notary I found my good glasses" (51). The actions resemble a vaguely parodic to do list devoted to the care of the individual body and even an attempt to assume responsibility for what happens after death. As the first person speaker continues to recount their day, the connections between the larger world become more pronounced: "I have filled my tank I am going to the market" (51). References to oil and capitalism in connection with climate change and the Iraq War throughout *Rising, Falling, Hovering* prepare a reader to interpret this line to connect the speaker to the larger world depicted in the poem. This, in turn, affects the speaker emotionally as she jarringly asserts, "then I think I'll cut my hair off with a broken bottle" (51). The War on Terror affectively invades the domestic sphere in the form of anger even for this figure who aspires to an internationalist perspective but who finds herself nonetheless mired in her Americanness. Even in opposing the war, she gets transformed by the war. Wright posits a real material, though flickering, connection between the poet's psyche and global political events: ordinary upper middle class actions have obvious connections to the war both in terms of cause and effect (filling her tank related to larger global

issues of climate change and international relations) and the effect of violence toward the self emanating out of pent up frustration.[52]

Given the extent of her grieving, the elegiac citizen in *Rising, Falling, Hovering* might strike us as a melancholic mourner in Jahan Ramazani's sense of elegists who seek "not to override but to sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen wounds of loss" (xi) Wright further sustains anger and reopens the wounds of loss by extending the elegiac scope of *Rising, Falling, Hovering* to include not only the globe but also long accounts of world history.

> If a body makes 1 centavo per chile picked or
> 5 cents for 50 chiles can Walmex get it down to 3 cents. Pass the savings onto US.
> Will they open a Supercenter in Fallujah once it is pacified. Once the corpses
> in the garden have decomposed. Once the wild dogs have finished off the bones.
> Does the war never end. Is this the war of all against all.
> Who will build the great wall between us, the illegals, the vigilantes, the
> evangelicals
> or the ones who come back from Fallujah with four limbs and attached head.
> And the Supercenter in Teotihuacan. Is it not quietly being built at the skirt
> of the pyramids. Will the great job of the future be The Greeter.
> Thus did Montezuma open his arms to Cortés.
> In a gesture Prescott referred to as Montezuma's nonresistance to evil.
> Thus did one terrible story begin to unfold. De costumbre. (63-4)

From the body of an agricultural laborer, Wright opens to an account of five centuries of American history. The logic of the abstract diction of the opening math problem is impenetrable: no detail from the facts of the situation would allow the U.S. corporation to lower the price; it is simply their disregard of the facts of bodies that allows them to reach such conclusions. In an act of linguistic play, Wright turns the "you" who gets the savings passed on to them into "US": both her audience and her nation. Yet this is no pure linguistic play: the bodies of others across the globe are at stake

[52] In "Concerning Why Poetry Offers a Better Deal That the World's Biggest Retailer" Wright asks fellow poets "why poetry matters more now than when it mattered less than before" and quotes Ben Lerner "The scarcer the spaces for this formal exercise, the less we are asked to ask ourselves to relate part to whole, the SUV to the dirty war, the more desperately important such spaces become" (*The Poet* 37).

in this equation. Through the fulcrum of American corporations, Wright moves to the War in Iraq and portrays global capitalism as the real victor in the fight. Wright expands her argument not only transnationally, but also transhistorically: the allusion to Eliot's *The Waste Land* connects Mexican agricultural work and the Iraq War to World War I (and, given Eliot's placement of this in the mouth of a British soldier come back from Mylae, to the roots of Western Civilization in ancient Greece). Where his corpses were planted, however, these decompose; and where his wild dogs dig up the bodies, these eat them. Through these intensifications, Wright portrays a world becoming only more vicious and less generative. The allusion to Hobbes' war of all against all gives an essentialized vision of war, but Wright additionally traces out the real effects of xenophobia in contemporary U.S. politics. Wright's border wall is ultimately not even pretending to address a perceived sociopolitical problem, but is pointing to an increased desire for the atomization of society as it multiplies surreally (perhaps another allusion to *The Waste Land*). In other words, despite the interconnections that underlie the contemporary moment, Wright reveals a pervasive desire to see the self as autonomous and isolated. For all the separation, however, the situation appears fundamentally the same everywhere as the Walmart greeter becomes both the job of the future and the job of the past. The stance of this position is analogized to that of Montezuma encountering Cortés. In a radically dehistoricizing gesture, then, Wright seeks to essentialize the story of American history into a national ideology of dominance posed against a more respectful, perhaps even caring, stance towards others.

As in the essay discussed above, Wright does not champion either stance so much as she values the way language can make this struggle visible. Between dominance and passivity, Wright develops a stance of learning to share reality with others. Again assuming the first person plural, Wright describes the domestic setting:

Our lot bounded

By a busy road at the foot

Of the hill

Here and here

By burial ground #34

When a veteran—

Bagpipes and guns—

The dog throws up

On the Oaxacan rug (66).

Rather than a shared national we, this instance of the first-person plural refers to the domestic couple at the heart of "Rising, Falling, Hovering." Using the deictic here, Wright brings her reader into this first-person plural by asking us to see the funeral in the historic Rhode Island cemetery. Echoing and enacting the woman's earlier aggressive ideation, the dog's vomit does not seem entirely disjunctive but performs a disgust at the occasion of this funeral. Recalling the second poem in the volume, Wright once again present the nonlogical relationality at the heart of our relations with other, "If at the window I watch . . . It could happen like this / To someone you know" (66). Although this passage may begin in the mode of the poetry of witness, Wright links witness to a shared possibility of experiencing harm. Her address to the second person implicates the reader in a project of national mourning. Yet, the ideal response for Wright is not grief but anger: "Is rage your issue / Well is it Is it" (67). As an elegiac citizen, Wright seeks not only to instill a shared responsibility to mourn but also to instill a shared affective response to that mourning.

Wright espouses only an ambivalent faith in poetry to bring about this radical shared anger in response to mourning. Wright dares her reader to ask how to push back against well-known phrases:

> Politics are an aspect
> Business is good.
> We are rushing about to meet the demands of our lives
> How do you want your chicken
> Philosophy isn't transcendent
> Who told you that
> The imagination has been tamed
> Friendship is irrelevant
> Fragile is life
> Everyone is alone here
> History disappears
> Quality cannot be controlled
> All bets are off (67-8)

The stanza moves from clichés about socioeconomic life (and its lived experience) to clichés about individual life and the values that sustain individuality. Far from depicting neutral cycling, Wright turns to question to authority of those claims as "Who told you that" floats to cover several subsequent assertions. It frames a series of claims about solitude, fragility, and history. By asking readers to consider these truisms critically, Wright gives the power to question external discourses and to allow alternative value systems (ones that would have faith in the imagination, value human connection and being, understand the weight of history) inform our judgment. Wright gives a space for agency in resisting the values that structure external forces as she primes readers to think about who told us this and what we might want to tell the world instead. Or perhaps not. Perhaps "Who told you that" should be given no more authority than any of these other statements. In which case, Wright leaves her readers at an impasse critiquing this sort of easy linguistic solution.

Poetry can only provide ambivalent models of change because the real change needs to occur in the hearts of the powerful. Following these truisms, Wright presents the more

contemporary phrases common from the mediated coverage of the War in Iraq: "As of Wednesday morning 2,845 of our members completed the Circle of Life / Epidemiologists from here and there estimate 600,000 civilian dead / About 15,000 a month, a number swiftly dismissed by the White House" (68). Rehearsing the trope of expansive mourning that unites "Rising, Falling, Hovering," Wright names more clearly than before the force behind the unequal mourning. The sentiment she seems to wish to instill in her readers and the larger public is the feeling that one should have when one looks at the facts these disguise. While one might expect the sentimental mother figure to wish for the son to live, for the family to be together, it is instead directed at the president and his wife and an admission of the desire, "I have come / to want them, almost obsessively come to want them, to exist in this dread" (68). This is not a poet hoping to spread joy or hope to her readers, but expressing an impossible desire to instill an emotional state in the powerful. If we theorize the feeling of dread, we might imagine it as resembling anxiety or fear with the key differences being that it is ongoing, has less energy and displays a lack of agency. This political dread of Wright's elegiac citizen is different from an individual simply experiencing dread in that it is a *shared* feeling among Americans that those at the top escape. Wright does not merely express this perverse desire, but indulges in fantasy:

> for the nondescript car to pull up and disgorge the uniformed men
> with their generic words tapped out of their well-drilled heads;
> for the blunted bodies of this couple to be riveted to this dream,
> for their blunted minds to stick on this expectation as if driven into
> their bones of the natural order upended—that their twins are dead. No,
> that their twins are blessed to give of themselves so selflessly in this struggle
> for our way of life as it is so correctly, so vulgarly called (69)

What makes this poetry and not a death threat? Part of the horror of the scene seems to be not the event, but the utter lack of affect initially on the part of both the president and the soldiers. The men who give this devastating news lack agency and any will to their words: they are disgorged,

their words generic—the death cannot be acknowledged as such but only through euphemism. Describing the "blunted" bodies and minds of the Bushes, Wright suggests that they too are similarly disconnected from reality until they would receive this news. Activism here involves instilling a shared feeling: as Wright clarifies that she does not want the twins to actually die, but reiterates the wish: "I sincerely do with this couple, this very couple, the current occupants, / to exist solely, wholly, in this dread. Because we do" (69). If, as I suggested in the introduction to this chapter, we might consider Wright a socialist of sentiments for the way she wishes happiness to be shared, here we see a corollary: no one, no matter how powerful, should be spared negative political emotions.

After reaching this sentimental solution in which the problems of politics have been translated to the realm of feelings, Wright concludes the "Rising, Falling, Hovering, Cont." sequence with an image of harmony between the male and female figure at the heart of the poem. While the ending of the poem functions as an adequate conclusion to the problem raised at the beginning of the sequence, it seems wholly inadequate to the other problems that have emerged as the couple travel back and forth from Mexico during the early years of the Iraq War. Jarringly, Wright moves us from the White House bedroom to the landscape of Rhode Island roads:

> Before the landscape asserts its unexaggerated loveliness
> box buildings and a pipe fitters union hall
> its diode streaming patriotic messages
> the billboard announcing an unclaimed jackpot
> oil trucks barreling toward the company security gate
> he is the one driving
> she is absently counting storage tanks on her right
> and noting the cars pulled over at the homosexual trusting point
> the bird sanctuary void of birdsong (70)

While any of these images might function as metonyms for a politics—pro-labor, anti-corporate, environmentalist, pro-LGBTQ—Wright shifts quickly from one to the other: she emphasizes their

connections in a scene of everyday Americana rather than making any message beyond emphasizing their interconnectedness and togetherness. Wright provides a surface reading of the scene: while the poem has trained us to see connection, here they are simply enumerated. Despite these telegraphed international and political stakes, the poem closes in the intimate mode:

> his hand relaxing over the wheel saying he is glad they went glad
> to be back that he loved living
> in the old school not in but near the city
> with the wormy fruit trees the burial ground next door
> and that he thinks about our son constantly (70)

The ending of the "Rising, Falling, Hovering" sequences provides the type of closure that might offend the sensibilities of those who champion the politics of melancholic mourning: while the opening fight was about whether the couple could go anywhere and do anything about the war, here there is happiness for where they have gone as well as their return. While the male figure concludes on a note of love of his past and love of his family, this apparent resolution is undercut by the hand on the wheel: the man is situated in a context where he might be relaxing but he is adding to the use of petroleum. The adequate conclusion to the marital narrative coexists with a continuation of the destruction of the environment. Shifting as it does from third person to first person pronouns in the last line, the husband's last line suggests a collective dimension to their care. Yet that care appears inadequate to cover such a large collective. The ambivalence becomes more pronounced in the final lines of the sequence: "Later (de costumbre) / a moon would appear" (70). They appear trapped in old narratives of what happens "de costumbre." The Spanish phrase appears twice earlier in the book: once to describe the florists on Fridays who turn their flowers into a mosaic (making something unusual out of the ordinary) and once to describe Montezuma and Cortés. The moon appears earlier as something the three family members appear below (30) and as something that was supposed to be better before the war (62). As the male and female

figures at the heart of this sentimental narrative appear trapped in narratives of what happens "de costumbre," Wright implies that the loveliness of this scene belies the underlying continuation of the forces of domination at the heart of American history.

Dim Light at the End Times

Although the end of the "Rising, Falling, Hovering" sequences closes with an image of uneasy resolution as the married couple reach a moment of harmony amidst images of environmental crisis, the series of short poems that conclude the book further complicates that possibility of closure. By contrast with the tradition of feminine realist sentimentality where love is imagined to remain unchanged after being achieved, Wright portrays love as a process of learning to live with difference. As the closing short poems revise images from earlier in the book, Wright continues to insist on interconnectivity as a fundamental characteristic of life in the twenty-first century. However, in these final poems, Wright theorizes a role for poetry during wartime that contrasts with the Adornian suspicion evident in much of "Rising, Falling, Hovering." Whereas the sentimental love narrative tends to focus on the future, Wright's love narrative presents poetry as a tool for willing happiness by focusing on the present. As readers, we must navigate a series of conclusions and thus assume a stance toward time that allows for shifting and irreconcilable possibilities.

In the final set of poems following the two "Rising, Falling, Hovering" sequences, the domestic initially seems to be earned from the global in a manner that resembles the closing of the long poem. The first of these poems—"Like Having a Light at Your Back You Can't See but You Can Still Feel (2)"—reprises the second poem of the volume. In this version, however, Wright's address calls the reader into a relationship primarily with a couple preparing to go to sleep. By

contrast with the fused geographies and narratives of migration and American domesticity in the first version of the poem, Wright sets the reprisal squarely in New England. Migration gives way to routine as the first original line replaces a new journey with hyperbolic repetition: "They have been here a thousand and one times" (71). The location, too, becomes further specified through revision: "Others were out there who were drifting / It is a bay in New England / closed to shellfishing after heavy rains" (71). Wright replaces the scream of the first version of the poem with a comparatively mild (though, in Wright's mind, interconnected) danger: New England bays are closed to shellfishing after heavy rains because of increased risk of bacterial infection due to pollution rapidly entering water. And yet, as Wright locates this house "Next to the old burial ground" the wartime setting of the earlier poems appears submerged but not absent (72). Despite the shift to focus more fully on the domestic realm, Wright does not present the couple existing in isolation from the larger world.

Wright develops a vision of love as the effortful work of learning to live in proximity with otherness. By contrast with the harmonious image that closes "Rising, Falling, Hovering," "Like Having a Light at Your Back You Can't See but You Can Still Feel (2)" illustrates a point made in the middle of both versions of both poems: "Consonant with this feeling of harmony / comes another, less comfortable" (71). The poem closes describing an argument about turning off the light as the female figure wants to read while the male figure wants to sleep. The female figure pleads to finish her chapter or at least the page, but the male figure insists:

> I can still feel it, he says, I can still feel it
> streaming in my ear. Besides
> he is adamant,
> you just go to sleep at night

I go on a journey. (72)

The disagreement offers a form of resolution at the end of the poem because it represents the ongoing process of a marriage. Finally revealing the meaning of this oddly titled poem, Wright asks "you" the reader to imagine this bodily experience of another. If this poem offers an image of love as a resolution, it is an ambivalent one about the feeling of irresolution that comes through living with difference and disagreement in the domestic space and the possibility of words to help make that difference understandable and imaginable, even to "you" outside the scene who can experience it only (like the female figure in the poem) through the evocative power of words.

While the poems that conclude the volume might look similarly "lyric" in their brevity compared to the sequence, that appearance does not reflect a coherent ideology about the relationship between private and public in the poems: sometimes the domestic replaces representations of international affairs (as in the poem just discussed); other times the revision happens in the opposite direction. In "Like a Prisoner of Soft Words (2)," Wright revises a seemingly personal, self-reflexive poem about writing poetry into a poem about violence at the US-Mexico border. Exemplary of the wildly shifting pronouns in *Rising, Falling, Hovering*, Wright focalizes the first person plural in both versions of the poem: for Wright, this shift should be understood not as a progression (as it seemed in the conclusion of Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* or even in the opening poem of *Rising Falling Hovering*) but as an example of one possible stance to take toward the human condition of plurality. In both versions, Wright depicts the subjects of the poem wandering to a restaurant and becoming angry for reasons not specified within the poem. In the first version, the key source of anger might be the climatic admission of the limits of poetry: "we cannot reproduce the smell of the linden / But we can tell you when we are standing / in the sphere of its influence, its mystery, its heart-shaped leaves, its special white honey, the

precarious fabric of its protection" (46-7). Recalling the hyperbolic scene in "Rising, Falling, Hovering" in which Wright satirizes the power of whiteness, her lush description of the linden tree again undermines itself. Although this first version of this poem shows Wright supplementing the limits of poetry through descriptive language, in the second version she points to what cannot be aesthetically redeemed. No longer concerned with describing the smell of the linden, here she expresses a lack of prophetic power:

> And we cannot see how is coming, the pollos and their pollero,
> the migra, the mules, the Minutemen, the women
> who wash for the other women al otro lado.
> Or the murdered boy herding his goats after school. 6:27,
> the fell of dark, not day.

The same technique of the accumulation of details to make up for what cannot be known creates an aura of intensifying horror rather than of approaching sensory experience. Wright does not allow readers to stay in the domestic world as the poem instead presents an unpredictable flow between New England and the U.S.-Mexico border due to the interconnectedness Wright insists upon. As the poem alludes to the 1997 shooting of Esequiel Hernández Jr, the poem pulls a reader deeper into U.S. history even as Wright nears the conclusion of the volume.[53] Her concluding poems do not offer any uniform or unidirectional conclusion.

In "Like a Ghost of a Carrier Pigeon," Wright meditates on how to imagine the future without doing so teleologically—or, to use her terms from the poem "There is no sacrosanct version there is only time" (84). The setting of the poem resembles a scene from the "Rising, Falling, Hovering" sequence in which the female figure watches a soldier's burial from

[53] Wright describes this event in her second essay on the composition of *Rising, Falling, Hovering*. While working on the poem in Marfa, Texas, Wright "[drove] around in a rental car near the border—picking up stories of much earlier raids and massacres, of drug deals, illegal crossings, the border patrol and vigilantes. [. . .] Esequiel Hernández Jr., a U.S. citizen herding goats after schools, was shot by U.S. marines" (75).

the window of her living room while her dog vomited on her Oaxacan rug. Yet both Iraq and the male figure of the poem are curiously absent in this rendition as the woman's attention rests primarily on the ordinary noises of a neighborhood:

> In a couple of hours darkness will throw its blanket
>
> over the scene she will pretend to read a mystery
> the mower and hammering will cease
>
> The bees will leave the andromeda and then
>
> So much has been spent constructing a plausible life
> she did not hear the engines of dissent run down (84)

Whereas before she was interrupted by the intrusion of wartime, here it is the knowledge of the extinction of bees—presented hyperbolically as not simply leaving the earth, but leaving the whole space system (a fact that would of course be true in the case of extinction, but requires a stance above what we normally take). This interruption renders it unclear what destroys the plausible life: it is the marital strife that the rest of the volume has prepared us for? Or the global war that Wright had previously connected this strife to? By omitting these potential causes but including the bees and concluding the line with the enjambment "and then" (as if the next sentence would present the logical conclusion), Wright evokes a cause that transcends any particular effects: instead, she moves from the outer bounds of the galaxy to the interior life of the woman without any interstitial considerations. Thus, Wright develops an exaggerated sentimental in which the domestic world of a woman is connected not only to the politics of the nation but activity at the level of the universe.

Matching this expansive sentimental, Wright at first seems to develop a sense of agency through the woman's empathetic capacity. However, Wright undercuts this expansive sentimentality as the poem slowly reveals itself as elegy. Wright shifts from the mode of Auden's "we must love one another or die" to "we must love one another *and* die." Yet, for Wright, this

move is not a melancholic statement of failure but prepares the reader to construct consolation through the aesthetic apprehension of the present. Recalling the dislocated scream of the second poem in the volume, Wright asserts, "Even now if someone yells Avalanche she has one / Thoughts shudder against the ribs and go still" (84). The empathy of the first line is, of course, ridiculous: one can join another human in sadness or fear, but one cannot join a mountain in an avalanche. The first line could potentially be read as an example of Wright's dry humor that punctuates this volume, but her elaboration of this image in the second line imbues immaterial thoughts with corporeal effects. Even in stillness, the presence of this empathetic reaction remains in the body. Her empathetic concern starts with the family unit and radiates outward:

> Soon the son would be out running around in her car
> with a sore throat soon the decibels commence killing off the hair cells
>
> She checks to see if the phone is charged and then
>
> The ones responsible for slaying the dreamer are mostly in the ground
> but the ones responsible for slaying the dream
> suffer only metabolic syndrome

Once again, the enjambment "and then" introduces a logical leap as, here, Wright moves from the domestic world of the woman to Martin Luther King, Jr. As her care extends from her son's minor illness to her friend's cancer treatment to sardonic thoughts of disease, the woman's empathy leads her into a melancholic mode that she escapes only with dry humor.

While the emotional capacity of the female persona is depicted as expansive, her ability to address the sources of those feelings appears hedged. The female persona is equipped with the twinned capacity to care and a realistic acceptance of the limits of that capability. In a line that structurally recalls the one that depicted her intense empathy, Wright bestows the female persona with some power to resist the American national ideology: "Even now now that her supply of contact lenses has dwindled / she was refusing to sing the Wal-Mart song" (85). Through this

refusal, the figure opts out of the logic informing the passage linking Wal-Mart with Cortés. And in the world of this poem, that ability to resist the dominant national ideology initially seems to herald a resolution as the endangered bees return in the subsequent line. Yet, from this hint toward closure and resurrection, Wright swiftly pivots into a less resolved conclusion: "The bees would be back and then // All efforts at reconciliation aside even if everyone exchanged germs / happiness is only for amateurs" (85). Within the logic that seemed to inform the close of the poem, the floating "and then" might have been expected to introduce even more interconnected resolutions. Instead, Wright undercuts that expectation with a pessimistic reminder that even in the most inclusive and interconnected view of humanity, the utopic promise of happiness would still not be universally and perpetually achieved: Wright presents the utopic intermingling of human beings as nothing more than an opportunity to spread disease. If Wright does not offer us a utopic closure, though, she also does not completely embrace the dystopic images of climate change that haunt this narrative poem. Instead, she closes with a note of personal sorrow as the poem morphs into an elegy (perhaps for the Mexican friend whose cancer treatment is again referenced in this poem) through reference to a funerary custom: "A dress worn only once before has been hung on the door / the mirror under the cloth receives its image" (85). Happiness is only for amateurs because expansive caring leads only to more mourning. And yet, in revising this funerary custom to focus on the aesthetic image of the dress being honored in the mirror, Wright seems to end on a more limited note of consolation that anchors a reader to beauty in the present rather than imagining a utopic future. A counterpart to Wright's dry humor, this macabre beauty does not transcend the circumstances which necessitate the consolation it provides.

I read the final three poems of the book on a meditation on the agency of poetry that offers an unsatisfying yet compelling account. "Like Something Flying Backwards" focuses on the

woman's writing and the affective aid it brings to the word. The poem opens, "When a word here and there was starting to escape. // There is some hope that she may yet" (90). With the abrupt line break (not completed by an enjambment), Wright suggests that the scene of writing emerges as a scene of unspecified possibility. Less disjunctive than similar poems comprised primarily by one line stanzas, Wright picks up the thread again toward the middle "Written purely out of love for the calm it offered—for to calm someone else is calming" (90). Wright presents solace as part of a social contract: it may not solve problems on the global scale, but it does enter a network of relation and action in the world. As the poem draws to a close, the image of writing takes on an intensely personal and seemingly apolitical quality as Wright describes "Her vocabulary refined by years of looking through the screen at the lilac that absorbed / her witness" and then continues that thread:

> All of her experience still looking for a language
>
> Honestly if she were able she would haul in one of the more animate clouds
>
> The following spring she promised herself to plant a white lilac.
>
> She would take up her old position, hands folded, head back
> waiting for visions. (90)

Biographically, I find it hard to imagine Wright as a poet in this isolated latter-day Romantic mold: her book-length poems from the twentieth century are far too reliant on research and even her earlier poems—full of portraits of people—seem to arise from a more social world. Yet, it is this romantic vision of the isolated artist, witnessing nature rather than horror, that Wright imbues with agency in *Rising, Falling, Hovering*: not the poet reading the news, researching ancient Mexico and making difficult cross-genre art, but the poet in isolation trying to attain some understanding of her experiences. Yet the emphatic whiteness of the lilac connects this passage to earlier scenes in which Wright both raises and satirizes the agency of poetry. Wright seems, like Spahr, to offer

us an aesthetics of the impasse: whereas Spahr's impasse balances the possibilities of love against the demands of action, Wright instead shows the temptations of the domestic sufficing in certain cases but woefully inadequate in others.

Titled "End Thoughts," the penultimate poem of the volume seems to present itself as a conclusion to the volume. The poem presents an unusually dehistoricized and almost allegorical account of the difficulty of taking individual action. Wright opens, "In the beginning the usual dark dark of very dark / In a few years there appears a crack in the dark a very small crack / The crack as I said appears very small" (91). While the poem proceeds to make allusions to global warming ("The temperature has already been adjusted / by the state / our obsolescence built into the system") and wartime ("When the civilian words are dispensed / different meanings will be assigned"), the setting stages a sparse drama between dark and light. Wright proposes two options for this situation:

> One has a sense of something out there that needs saving
> and one ought to attach the buckle
> to a heavy-gauge wire and pull him through
>
> waking up knowing this much is not the hard part
> nor lifting the head from its existential drift
> it's the sticking of one's foot off the edge
> lowering it down to the cold floor
>
> and finding the correct instrument
> to work that crack into a big enough opening
> to venture forward (92)

The solution Wright proposes is not forming sentimental attachments and subsequent attempts at acting as a savior. Nor is it simply the consciousness raising of "lifting the head from its existential drift." The solution is both more logical and more difficult: Wright tasks the individual with enlarging the light and finding a way forward. Yet for all the extra effort of this action, Wright locates the scene in a dystopic (and biblical) world: "After the fires floods along with serpents and

bugs / After the floods years of drought / After the drought just dusk which is when everything / really begins to hurt" (92). Instead of light, Wright leaves us with dusk: the heroic action of prying the crack open to imagine a future leaves us with nothing but dim light at the end times.

"End Thoughts" concludes on a different note by turning away from the structural and resolutely to the personal as a transition into the final poem "Like Something in His Handwriting." Recalling her former turn to the "inhuman dimension," here Wright closes "and then there is the human dimension" (92). Whereas earlier the inhuman seemed to have a virtue in that it turned one's attention away from the specific and toward the structural, here Wright offers a resolution only by turning back toward the specific. The poem begins with a meditation on a photograph: "It was better back then. / No, it wasn't it had to be cooler, clouded. / A park down below where no one ever met" (93). Emphatically anti-nostalgic (by contrast with the opening of the "Rising, Falling, Hovering" sequence), Wright refuses to treat the contemporary as posing particularly worse problems. Wright describe the photograph of the woods and river as "propos[ing] a nonlocal reality / that shimmered at the instant of its own disappearance" (93). Much like "End Thoughts," the photograph in this poem offers a finite source of light. Despite this measured beauty, Wright's female persona appreciates the photograph enough to bring it into her domestic space: "She bought the picture, brought it back, propped it against drywall / where someone had penciled a message / She couldn't make out" (93). Perhaps the title refers to this penciled message and thus suggests that in this final poem the female figure is no longer troubled by the man's privacy, but chooses to cover it with something she prefers. Or perhaps the title refers to the poem as a whole in which case the female persona writes as the husband or the son.

Reprising the opening of "Rising, Falling, Hovering," this final poem closes with a scene set in the backyard. Although this one is set in fall instead of spring, Wright finally discovers optimism rather than nostalgia in this vision of the end of summer:

> The end of another summer wandered across yards
> that weren't fenced or watered.
> If it rained, it rained.
> And then the rain inebriated us.
> A yellow leaf floated toward the ground
> transmitting a spot of optimism
> through a slow intensification of color in the lower corner of the morning. (93)

The private backyard emerges as a collective space linked to neighbors and the larger seasonal changes. The passive stance ("if it rained, it rained") leads to an overwhelming sensory experience. Yet, this excess becomes managed through aesthetics. As a symbol of death and fall, the yellow leaf should appear as a pessimistic symbol (Wise 417). Yet the vibrancy of the color seems to allow it to emerge as an optimistic one (though only through a mode of looking that separates the scene from the larger world.) Rather than derive this optimism from an imagination of the future, Wright discovers it in an apprehension of the present and the use of language to shift our collective focus in order to perceive both the totality of the destructive system and the beauty of one dead leaf.

Chapter III

Elegiac Actors: Sentimentalizing Catharsis in Anne Carson's Wartime Poetics

> When I think of you reading this I do not want you
> to be taken captive, separated by a wire mesh lined
> with glass from your life itself, like some Elektra.
> Anne Carson, "Short Talk on Major and Minor" (42)

During the War on Terror, Anne Carson continually published translations and adaptations of Greek tragedy: *Grief Lessons: Four Plays by Euripides* (2006), *An Oresteia* (2009), *Antigonick* (2012), *Iphigenia Among the Taurians* (2014), *Antigone* (2015), *The Bakkhai* (2017), and *Norma Jean Baker of Troy* (2020). While Carson achieved prominence and unusual popularity as a poet and essayist following the publication of *Autobiography of Red* (1998), her wartime translations might appear as a return to her training as a Classicist. And yet, these translations are deeply engaged with contemporary American poetics and politics. In "Tragedy: A Curious Art Form," her preface to *Grief Lessons,* Carson observes that Euripides reflects or "refracts" his contemporary Peloponnesian War through the legends of the Trojan War: "he used myths and legends connected with the Trojan War to refract his observations of this woe" (8). So also Carson refracts the War on Terror through her translations of Euripidean tragedy: her Helen is a "weapon of mass destruction" and a "mass murderer" (*An Oresteia* 213, 231); her Herakles has a contract to "civilize the entire world" (*Grief Lessons* 22); she describes the Greek Project of "making the world safe for democracy and all that" (*Grief Lessons* 92); and she counsels "Another serious way to read a play like *Orestes* is as an indictment of an age and the society in which the playwright

lived. His was a time of constant warfare, imperialist greed and astonishing political corruption, rather like our own" (*An Oresteia* 178). By yoking together contemporary American politics and Greek tragedy, Carson reveals a history of the War on Terror that begins not with the middle passage (as in Rankine) nor with the discovery of America (as in Wright), but with the idea of democracy that contemporary Americans have inherited from Classical Greece. By contrast with Rankine's and Wright's new genealogies of the War on Terror, Carson's telling of history does not assume such a clear narrative form: her translations and adaptations of Greek tragedy float one time period out of the chronology of history in order to enlarge and challenge a contemporary reader's understanding of the present. While an enlarged perspective stands as a site of melancholy for Rankine and Wright given how it amplifies grief, for Carson it emerges as a form of consolation for the way it can allow for a moment of catharsis that resituates the self who grieves in relation to others.

Of course, Carson is not alone in turning to Greek Tragedy during the War on Terror. Bonnie Honig's *Antigone, Interrupted* offers a survey of writers, most prominently Judith Butler, who turn to Sophocles to find a politics adequate to the War on Terror.[54] Although Judith Butler typically frames Sophocles' *Antigone* as an exemplar of a form of expansive grieving that might oppose the War on Terror, she cannot find that same political vision in Carson's representation of Antigone.[55] Reviewing Carson's *Antigonick* (2012) for *Public Books*, Judith Butler concludes that

[54] As I discuss in greater length in the dissertation introduction, Honig critiques Butler's reading of Antigone as a form of "mortalist humanism" and offers a new reading of the play that she too frames as significant for contemporary democratic theory (35).

[55] Butler's anti-war Antigone emerges most emphatically in *Frames of Life: When is Live Grievable?* (2016). In that volume, Butler argues that the War on Terror depends on "a differential distribution of grievability" in which American lives are valued more highly than the lives of others: "The differential distribution of public grieving is a political issue of enormous significance. It has been since at least the time of Antigone, when she chose openly to mourn the death of one of her brothers even though it went against the sovereign law to do so" (38). For

Carson's version of Antigone represents "a cry of grief posed in question form, emphatic, handwritten, excessive and abbreviated and, in this sense, a measured scream that gives us some sense of who or what lives on when it is all too late." As grief turns to question, it does not oppose war but leads us to better apprehend the world during ongoing war. Carson's reception of Euripides during the War on Terror marks an even more ambivalent portrayal of the politics of mourning during war.[56] This ongoing engagement with Euripides reflects the confluence of two characteristics of Carson's oeuvre: an examination of war under the sign of gender and forms of address that insist on a continuity between Carson's text and the psyche of her reader. In Carson's translations and adaptations of Greek tragedy during the War on Terror, these two characteristics take the form of what I call a sentimentalized catharsis. By contrast with an Aristotelean catharsis that has long been imagined to purge spectators of tragedy of their negative emotions, Carson's sentimentalized catharsis is a form of address that asks readers to situate their own suffering in relation to the suffering of others in disparate historical time periods and distant national contexts.[57]

Carson develops a sentimental form of reading as early as *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986)—her essayistic debut book based on her dissertation about Classical Greek literature. In this study of love and literacy at the advent of lyric, Carson theorizes and models an "erotic" form of reading

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Butler's earlier approaches to Antigone, see *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (2002) and *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2006).

[56] While Carson is perhaps best known for her translations and adaptations of Sophocles' *Antigone* given the high profile performance by Juliette Binoche and the artist book illustrated by Bianca Stone, she has translated and adapted a greater number of works by Euripides during the first two decades of the twenty-first century: *Grief Lessons, Iphigeneia Among the Taurians*, *The Bakkhai*, and *Norma Jean Barker of Troy*. Additionally, *An Oresteia* featured translations of plays by Aiskylos, Sophokles, and Euripides.

[57] In contesting this conception of Aristotle's catharsis, Carson joins a long lineage of writers and scholars. See Philip Weller's and Leon Golden's entry on "Catharsis" in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* for a survey from Aristotle's time to Northrup Frye.

that emphasizes continuity between the reader and the written text.[58] Throughout the volume, Carson uses the term "float" to describe this relationship between the reader and the writing. For example, following her citation of Sappho's fragment 31 (a poem central to Carson's theorization of eros), Carson suggests, "The poem floats toward us on a stage set" (13). The term "float" establishes the poem as a physical, albeit ethereal, reality in the world of the reader. The term accrues greater significance as Carson uses it to suggests how the written text directs the mind of a reader:

> What is erotic about reading (or writing) is the play of imagination called forth in the space between you and your object of knowledge. Poets and novelists, like lovers, touch that space to life with their metaphors and subterfuges. The edges of the space are the edges of the things you love, whose inconcinnities make your mind move. And there is Eros, nervous realist in this sentimental domain, who acts out of love of paradox, that is as he folds the beloved object out of sight into a mystery, into a blind point, where it can float known and unknown, actual and possible, near and far, desired and drawing you on. (110)

Floating thus emerges as a form of mental action defined by its inconclusive yet alluringly processual nature in the present tense.[59] The term remains significant across Carson's oeuvre: she uses it as a title for her 2016 collection of chapbooks that can be read in any order. Consequently, the term refers quite literally to the type of action a reader can assume in reordering the pamphlets. Additionally, for my purposes, the word offers a useful way of contrasting Carson's historiography

[58] She develops this erotic form of reading in contrast with Greek norms of literacy which "[encourage] a heightened awareness of personal physical boundaries and a sense of those boundaries as the vessel of one's self" (44-5).

[59] In her contribution to the essay collection *Anne Carson: Ecstatic Lyre*, Jessica Fisher also turns to *Eros the Bittersweet* to develop an overarching account of Carson's oeuvre. To describe Carson's habit of juxtaposing apparently unlike entities, Fisher uses the term "stereoscopic poetics." This term appears in *Eros the Bittersweet* alongside the term "float": "two levels of narrative reality float one upon another, without converging, and provide for the reader that moment of emotional and cognitive stereoscopy which is also the experience of desiring a lover" (85). I prefer the term float because it better captures the relation of reading to action and because it remains important across Carson's career.

from the similar mode counseled by Walter Benjamin. Given the constellation Carson creates by floating the Peloponnesian War into relationship with the War on Terror, it would be tempting to read her as a historical materialist as theorized by Benjamin in "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Benjamin argues that revolutionary historians who perceive a unique connection between the present and a past era must be "man enough to blast open the continuum of history" (262). While Carson practices a Benjaminian mode of historiography, she does not share his revolutionary vision. By contrast with the violence of blasting, floating overlays two historical moments without changing either one. The change happens only in the mind of the reader who envisions the two floating in relation to each other.

This chapter explores Carson's development of sentimentalized catharsis in her wartime poetics. Through a more detailed reading of her preface to *Grief Lessons*, I offer the term "elegiac actor" in order to theorize how regarding literary representations of the suffering of others creates the experience of sentimentalized catharsis. Next, I turn to Carson's representations of elegiac actors in *Men in the Off Hours* (2001), a collection of poetry and prose in which Virginia Woolf emerges as an elegiac actor for Carson in several essays about the civilian experience of war and about personal bereavement. By contrasting Carson's representation of Woolf with Sontag's twenty-first-century critique of Woolf's pacifism in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), I offer a theorization of the sentimental that focuses not on palliative action in the present but on reorienting the self in relation to others across space and time. The second half of the chapter focuses on Carson's adaptation of Greek tragedy in *Red Doc>* (2013). This verse novel continues the narrative of Carson's acclaimed bildungsroman *Autobiography of Red* (1998), but shifts to focus on a traumatized veteran's return home. In its final pages *Red Doc>* turns poignantly to elegy, and I argue that this genre is central throughout this text, as Carson represents both

Autobiography of Red's Geryon (now G) and Herakles (now Sad But Great) plagued by the inability to express grief for their pasts. For both characters, cathartic reading practices allow them to find consolation by resituating their selves in relation to others. By revealing a fundamental incommensurability between the bereaved civilian and traumatized veteran, however, Carson's wartime sentimentality prompts renewed and revised attempts to situate the present. The possibility of an antiwar politics floats at the horizon of her wartime writings: while Carson never offers a normative vision of how the civilian should act during a time of endless war, each of her wartime writings enlarge a reader's capacity for considering the relationship between war and democracy.

Sentimentalizing Catharsis

Much like consolation, catharsis is an emotional experience that contemporary critics are more likely to regard as retrograde for political and aesthetic reasons.[60] In her study of twentieth-century aesthetic emotions *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai contrasts her non-agential categories (such as envy, irritation, and paranoia) with the action inherent in the Aristotelean model of catharsis as purgation: "the feelings I examine here are explicitly *a*moral and *non*cathartic, offering no satisfactions of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release" (6). In other words, one of the hallmarks of ugly feelings are that they do not lead to action in the way Ngai attributes to Aristotelean catharsis. However, as I have argued throughout my dissertation, the form of consolation created by elegiac citizen constitutes a form of action because it reconfigures human

[60] As I discuss in my introduction, consolation appears as a politically or ethically fraught project in the work of Spargo, Nelson, and Butler. More recently, critics have begun to rethink the possibilities of consolation. See Fuss, Zim, James and Park.

plurality.[61] This disagreement about the possibilities of catharsis reflects a different understanding of history: Ngai relies on a (pervasive) understanding of history that Carson's sentimentality inverts. Ngai justifies the need to replace aesthetic emotions such as catharsis given the changed nature of global politics in modernity: "in the transnational stage of capitalism that defines our contemporary moment, our emotions no longer link up as securely as they once did with the models of social action and transformation theorized by Aristotle" (5). In saying so, Ngai offers a model of aesthetic emotions in which modernity is understood as a rupture with the past. By contrast, Carson's sentimentalized catharsis redefines modern subjectivity by providing the reader with historical precedent from Classical Greece in order to understand their present. Demonstrating that the link between catharsis and action was troubled even before Aristotle, Carson provides a modern reader with a significantly expanded corpus of texts that illuminate the emotional component of contemporary democratic citizenship.

By "floating" the Peloponnesian War onto the War on Terror, Carson stages a reception of Euripides in which the struggle of the elegiac citizen reflects the structure of democracy during wartime. For my purposes, the essential similarity that Carson poses between herself and Euripides is that the idealized form of Aristotelian catharsis appears impossible for both playwrights. As she writes in her introduction to her translation of *Hekabe*, "Aiskylos looked at the story of Agamemnon and saw a parable of human grandiosity and tragic *katharsis*, leading through bloodshed and strife to an eventual restoration of civilized order. Euripides looked at the same

[61] In developing my understanding of consolation as action in the introduction, I rely on Arendt's understanding of action: "Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on earth and inhabit the world. While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically *the* condition—not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam*—of all political life" (*Human Condition* 7).

story and saw smeared make up [. . .] There is nowhere in these characters to dig for profound reversal or revelatory recognition" (*Grief Lessons* 93). According to Carson, the difference between Aiskylos and Euripides can be attributed to the effect of the latter living during the Peloponnesian War (*Grief Lessons* 92). What catharsis does exist in Euripides (at least in Carson's wartime representation of him) does not bring restitution, but is a compromised strategy for dealing with a traumatic reality. Among the things that wartime does violence to, perhaps one is the very capacity to hope for a social order in which the polis can be restored. Recalling the heartbroken protagonist of Carson's "Glass Essay" (1995) who finds some consolation in realizing her griefs are "not uncommon" (8), sentimentalized catharsis consoles by reminding readers that there is no ideal antebellum past to restore. There is only the work of apprehending the present more fully.

Similar to the poets I study in the preceding chapters, Carson also stages the reading of poetry as a route to consolation. She theorizes the act of reading most directly in her preface to Euripides' tragedies in *Grief Lessons*. Opening with an address to her reader, Carson both theorizes and dramatizes a sentimentalized catharsis: "Why does tragedy exist? Because you are full of rage. Why are you full of rage? Because you are full of grief" (7). Through address, Carson floats the reader into a relationship with the origin of tragedy and frames her reader's grief as the reason for the existence of an art form that predates contemporary readers by two and a half millennia. She sentimentalizes her argument by implicating her reader's emotional life in its development. In Carson's understanding of tragedy, grief cannot ground a vision of politics (as in Butler's typical presentation of Antigone) because it turns too quickly to rage and violence: "Ask a headhunter why he cuts off human heads. He'll say rage impels him and rage is born of grief. The act of severing and tossing away the victim's head enables him to throw away the anger of all his

bereavement" (7).[62] Carson imputes the same emotional trajectory to her readers and this astonishingly self-aware and articulate headhunter who provides a precise account of the emotional motivations behind his macabre actions. Carson anticipates a desire on the part of her readers to distance themselves from the headhunter, "Perhaps you think that this does not apply to you. Yet you recall the day your wife, driving to your mother's funeral, turned left instead of right at the intersection and you had to scream at her so loud the other drivers turned around to look. When you tore off her head and threw it out the window, they nodded, changed gears, drove away" (7). Although Carson ostensibly provides this additional example to counter the reader's resistance to being compared with the headhunter, this example stages the same trajectory of emotions and actions only in a modern setting. Her use of address more emphatically forces a reader to understand a continuity between the figure represented and themselves. For all the specific details of the scene, Carson's address again insists that she describes "you."

The headhunter and the man on his way to his mother's funeral are examples of what I call elegiac actors: although they are distinct from the reader, the act of address makes their grief and rage serve as surrogates for the emotional experience of the reader. The experience of learning to see one's own suffering in the suffering of another creates a sentimentalized version of catharsis:

> Grief and rage—you need to contain that, to put a frame around it, where it can play itself out without you or your kin having to die. There is a theory that watching unbearable stories about other people lost in grief and rage is good for

[62] Carson cites Renato Rosaldo, "Grief and the Headhunter's Rage," *Text, Play, and Story* edited by E.M. Bruner. The essay can also be found in Rosaldo's more widely available *Culture & Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*. Carson's description of the headhunter appears almost verbatim in the anthropologist's essay: "If you ask an older Ilongot man of northern Luzon, Philippines, why he cuts off human heads, his answer is brief, and one on which no anthropologist can readily elaborate: He says that rage, born of grief, impels him to kill his fellow beings. He claims that he needs a place 'to carry his anger.' The act of severing and tossing away the victim's head enables him, he says, to vent and, he hopes, throw away the anger of his bereavement" (1). By contrast with Carson's framing of this figure as an elegiac actor whose emotions the reader is imagined to understand, Rosaldo states that "for the longest time I simply did not [understand it]" (2).

> you—may cleanse you of your darkness. Do you want to go down to the pits of yourself all alone? Not much. What if actors could do it for you? Isn't that why they are called actors? They act for you. You sacrifice them to the action. And this sacrifice is a mode of deepest intimacy of you with your own life. Within it you watch [yourself] act out the present or possible organization of your nature. You can be aware of your own awareness of this nature as you never are at the moment of experience. The actor, by reiterating you, sacrifices a moment of his own life to give you a story of yours. (7)

The theory that Carson references at the beginning of this passage is Aristotle's theory of catharsis. While Aristotle (in Carson's gloss) theorizes the emotions of tragedy in terms of the pity and fear that the audience feels *for* the actors, Carson imagines a "reiterative" communion: the grief and rage of the actor reflect that of the spectator. Linking tragedy to grief, Carson depicts it as an elegiac art form. The distance afforded by watching an actor allows a spectator to develop a form of self-awareness that they cannot achieve in the time of their own existence. Although Carson primarily theorizes a theatrical concept, I argue that the technique of address (a technique she relies on so heavily in this passage and emphasizes in the brackets around [yourself]) functions analogously because it forces the reader to imagine continuity between themselves and the text. Through address, Carson sentimentalizes the logic of catharsis by implicating her reader in its development. Reading leads to action *within* the psyche of the reader rather than *by* the reader.

In *Red Doc>*, Carson conspicuously links textual address and theatrical spectatorship through a chorus-like figure called the Wife of Brain who appear periodically throughout the volume to help readers understand the context for the dialogues and samples of consciousness. Recalling Carson's representation of Sappho's fragment 31 in *Eros the Bittersweet*, they ask us to imagine the book as something beyond the text as they address us as if we are spectators: "We enter we tell you / we are the Wife of Brain" (6). While this name never becomes fully elucidated, it implies a feminized counterpart to rationality. Their form of non-rationality is aimed at the imagination as they ask readers to imagine a chorus entering and speaking directly to us. They

describe what we are seeing as a theatrical piece, "a red man unfolding his wings is how it begins then the lights / come on" (6). Yet this theatrical element is immediately undermined as it appears impossible to enact in any real theater: they continue to describe how the lights might come on: "or go off or the stage / spins" (6). In reality, stage directions would have to call for the lights to go on or off; a spinning stage is surely possible but is fantastical and difficult, not something to simply suggest with an "or." Recalling Carson's historical form of floating or "floatation," the Wife of Brain variously direct mental movements rather than describing the workings of a real theater. Still, they treat Carson's characters as actors in front of the readers: "*omnes* / to their places / but / remember / the following faces" (6). By referring to their faces, the Wife of Brain suggest a demonstrable reality to the characters that they proceed to introduce and direct our vision asking, "what's he done to his hair" and warning us that Sad But Great "looks kind / beware" (6). They ask us to pretend that we look not at a book but at the beings described in the book. The disjunction between the "you" that we are as readers of Carson's book and the "you" created by address foregrounds the form of narrative imagination mandated by this literary text. While the personae in the elegiac citizen poetry of Spahr, Rankine, and Wright initially exhibit misery, rage, and anxiety when facing the discrepancy between what is possible in literature and what is possible in life, Carson instead seems to relish the cathartic possibilities of considering the world of reception in tandem with a perspective available only through literature. Much like the oddly plural Wife of Brain, reading turns "you" into more than an isolated subject.

The feminized idea of the Wife of Brain connects *Red Doc>* to Carson's career-long but oblique work on gender. In several essays published in the nineties and early aughts, Carson explores how ideas of gender contribute to the classical organization of the public sphere as well

the contemporary ramifications for this history.[63] I want to focus on "The Gender of Sound" because it allows us to consider the feminist element of Carson's theorization of catharsis. In this essay, Carson describes how certain sounds have been gendered female in order to be dismissed as culturally suspect. By contrast with these unruly female sounds, the Greeks value the practice of self-control (or sophrosyne) that creates language that is appropriate for the public sphere. Carson connects this Classical ideal to modernity via Freud:

> In *Case Studies on Hysteria* Freud and Breuer use the term 'katharsis' and also the term 'talking cure' [. . .] Whether we call it chimney sweeping or aischrologia or ritual funeral lament or a hullabaloo of females or having a laugh like a beefsteak, the same paradigm of response is obvious. As if the entire female gender were a kind of collective bad memory of unspeakable things, patriarchal order like a well-intentioned psychoanalyst seems to conceive its therapeutic responsibility as the channeling of this bad sound into politically appropriate containers. (134)

In this Freudian notion of catharsis as cure, the function of psychoanalysis is to create appropriate forms of language by refining mere sound. While some of these examples are simply described in terms of so-called unpleasant sounds, others (the funeral lament, the collective bad memory) describe content that fixates on the past and loss. Carson pursues a feminist analysis of the patriarchal gendering of sound and the conclusion of the essay asks us to think beyond the binary of masculine and feminine constructed by patriarchal thinking: "I wonder about this concept of self-control and whether it really is, as the Greeks believe, an answer to most questions about human goodness and the dilemmas of civility. I wonder if there might not be another idea of human order than repression, another notion of human virtue than self-control, another kind of human self rather than one based on dissociation of inside and outside. Or indeed, another human essence

[63] These include "The Gender of Sound" from *Glass, Irony & God* (1995) and "Dirt and Desire: Essay on the Phenomenology of Female Pollution in Antiquity" from *Men in the Off Hours* (2001). Additionally, the same themes can be found in several scholarly essays, "Wedding at Noon in Pindar's *Ninth Pythian*" (1982), "Putting Her in Her Place: Woman, Dirt, and Desire" (1990).

other than self" (136-7). This conclusion continues the sentimental form of reading Carson first developed in *Eros the Bittersweet* with its focus not on the self but on the boundaries between the self and the world that creates the self. Floating the self in relation to that which is outside the self leads to a fuller understanding of the human than possible in understandings of the self as an autonomous unit.

Reading the Pain of Others: Virginia Woolf during Wartime

While Euripides serves as Carson's key literary influence in her examination of the War on Terror, *Red Doc>* also continues Carson's earlier consideration of war under the sign of gender in *Men in the Off Hours* (2001). Indeed, *Red Doc>* recalls *Men in the Off Hours* structurally: both volumes begin by pairing wartime and domestic scenes and both abruptly conclude with maternal elegies. In *Men in the Off Hours*, Virginia Woolf serves as Carson's primary elegiac actor when writing about war. Carson's wartime sentimentality can be productively illuminated by contrasting her vision of a wartime Woolf with the one Susan Sontag develops in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003). While Sontag critiques the pacifist Woolf of *Three Guineas* (1938) who believes that knowing the truth about the horrors of war can lead to the end of war, Carson focuses instead on Woolf's dramatization of wartime complicity in the short story "The Mark on the Wall" (1917) and Woolf's references to transformations of civilian life in *A Room of One's Own* (1929). If we follow Tricia Lootens in reading *Three Guineas* as part of the tradition of turning to Antigone for a pacifist politics, we see that Carson's chosen texts reflect not only a stance toward Woolf but also a stance toward sentimentality.[64] While Sontag critiques the form of sentimentality she finds

[64] Lootens' study of *Three Guineas* serves as a conclusion to her chapter in *Political Poetess* on the model of the separate spheres in which she traces a tradition from Hegel's Antigone through Virginia Woolf: "*Three Guineas* long stood as the definitive feminist pacifist text. Here, through

in Woolf for its lack of agency, Woolf serves as an elegiac actor for Carson because Woolf's words allow Carson a consolatory experience. Anticipating Carson's reception of Euripides, her reading of Woolf allows her to float disparate historical moments into relationship with each other in order to construct a self who can articulate the experience of suffering.

Sontag begins *Regarding the Pain of Others* by critiquing the pacifist logic of Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas.* While Woolf believes that photographs of war can contribute to ending war by revealing the truth about the effects of war on the human being, Sontag argues that Woolf's pacifism rests on inadequately politicized and dehistoricized understandings of particular struggles and rejects the belief that regarding the pain of others will lead to peace.[65] Sontag's critique of Woolf can be understood as part of her broader critique of the feeling of sympathy typically associated with the sentimental. As she argues later in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, "Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. To that extent, it can be (for all our good intentions) as impertinent—if not an inappropriate response. To set aside the sympathy we extend to others beset by war and murderous politics for a reflection of how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may—in ways we might prefer not to imagine—be linked to their suffering" (102). For Sontag, feelings of sympathy eclipse the necessary understanding of complicity. Situating this argument in terms of Sontag's "unsentimentalism," Deborah Nelson illuminates the influence of John Berger's thinking on Sontag and argues that "What both Sontag and Berger require when witnessing suffering in the photograph is the

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a reading of Woolf's work as deeply concerned with, if not obsessed by, Victorian poetry, I read that polemic as, above all, a meditation on the barely post-Victorian cultural lives both of 'Victorian femininity' and of the fantasy of suspended spheres" (23).

[65] Sontag argues, "To read in the pictures, as Woolf does, only what confirms a general abhorrence of war is to stand back from an engagement with Spain as a country with a history. It is to dismiss politics" (9).

possibility of agency on the part of the viewer" (109). For Carson, *reading* (rather than *regarding*) the suffering of other does allow for the possibility of agency on the part of the reader: while the reader cannot alleviate the past suffering of others, the cathartic possibilities allow for a transformation in self-understanding that is distinct from the form of sympathy critiqued by Sontag. While Sontag's model seems to assume that the viewer looks at photographs from their own historical moment, Carson draws the past in relationship to the present. Indeed, we might say that Woolf in that way serves as an elegiac actor for Sontag given her twenty-first-century use of Woolf's twentieth-century plea for peace.

Instead of the pacifist Woolf of *Three Guineas*, Carson turns to Woolf's "The Mark on the Wall"—a Woolf that would be more at home in Sontag's project of considering the connection between privilege and suffering, if not for the failure of the story to offer any avenue for agency. Woolf's short story depicts a woman staring at a mark on the wall and free associating about what it could be until she is interrupted by a man who identifies it as a snail immediately after he enters the room while proclaiming an outburst about the war. Interpreting the story as a dramatization of civilian complicity, Paul Saint-Amour reads Woolf's short story as "literature that stages a mental avoidance of war even as it preserves and eventually foregrounds war through a failed attempt to cancel it out" (236). However, by basing his reading on the idea that the wartime context is only fully revealed at the end of the story, Saint-Amour neglects the point Woolf makes not only about civilian experience but distinctly *female* civilian experience. A passage in the first half of the short story reveals, more subtly, the wartime context:

> How shocking, and yet how wonderful it was to discover that these real things, Sunday luncheons, Sunday walks, country houses, and tablecloths were not entirely real, were indeed half phantoms, and the damnation which visited the disbeliever in them was only a sense of illegitimate freedom. What now takes the place of those things I wonder, those real standard things? men perhaps, should you be a woman; the masculine point of view which governs our lives, which sets the standard, which

> establishes Whitaker's Table of Precedency, which has become, I suppose, since the war, half a phantom to many men and women, which soon, one may hope, will be laughed into the dust bin where phantoms go. (2084)

Woolf presents Victorian hospitality (and, presumably, the entire feminine sphere attached to the house) as a casualty of World War I. While Woolf's protagonist suggests that entities that she considers masculine (presumably because of their publicity by contrast with the domestic realm of the story) such as Whitaker's Table of Precedency have replaced the pleasures of the domestic sphere, she describes both as "phantoms" that have been obliterated by war culture. The masculine vocabulary replaces the feminine in wartime, but the meaning of both has been destroyed. This passage echoes one in *A Room of One's Own* that Carson quotes at the end of *Men in the Off Hours* and alludes to in *Red Doc>*: "Before the war at a luncheon party like this people would have said precisely the same things but they would have sounded different, because in those days they were accompanied by a sort of humming noise, not articulate, but musical, exciting, which had changed the value of the words themselves" (12). Woolf then turns to the poetry of Tennyson and Rossetti in order "set that humming noise to words" (12). By contrast with Carson's sentimentalized catharsis which expands the reader's understanding of the present by reading historical literature, Woolf seeks and fails to find an easier form of consolation that would reanimate the past in the present.

Articulating a feminist analysis of war in *Men in the Off Hours*, Carson draws upon the Woolf of "The Mark on the Wall" and *A Room of One's Own*. The opening essay—"Ordinary Time: Virginia Woolf and Thucydides on War"—both establishes and then relentlessly troubles a binary between feminine and masculine ways of knowing wartime. Seeing the war from a viewpoint that Carson associates with masculinity and asking his readers to look from that viewpoint as well, "Thucydides sets us on a high vantage point [. . .] so that we look down as if at

a map of the Greek states and see lives churning there—each in its own time zone, its own system of measures, its own local names. Soon this manifold will fuse into one time and system, under the larger name of war" (3-4). Carson emphasizes how this mode of telling time from a vantage point detached from ordinary experience affects the vocabulary of the historian devoted to narrating from such a vantage point: "'The events of the war have been recorded in the order of their occurrence, summer by summer and winter by winter,' he says at the beginning of Book II (2.1.1). Naturally he locates the affair of the Thebans who entered Platea, which triggered the war and so came just before the first summer, 'at the opening of spring . . .' (2.1.2)" (4). Through the juxtaposition of these two sentences, Carson illuminates the incapacity of Thucydides' vocabulary (limited in wartime to winter and summer) to capture the details of reality as he could before the war started. Woolf offers an alternative way of relating to time that Carson associates with the feminine. Describing the wartime context of Virginia Woolf's story "The Mark on the Wall," Carson compares the two authors: "She too begins with chronology. But she does not, like Thucydides, rise above ordinary time to a high point and look down on other people, other people's reckonings. She stays in her own time. She stays right in the middle" (4-5). Inverting paradigms of literature that privilege the masculine experience of war, Carson associates the masculine perspective of war with separation from the environment and the feminine perspective of war with immersion in ordinary time.[66]

While part of Carson's feminism involves taking seriously this feminine point of view, she offers her reader something distinct from either possibility through her form of address. Carson's essay begins with an affinity with Woolf as the first-person voice remarks that she likes

[66] For an account of these gendered paradigms, see my discussion of Susan Schweik's *A Gulf So Deeply Cut* in the introduction.

Thucydides' representations of local timekeeping (the very thing he later omits). However, Carson's affinity with Woolf erodes as she questions what she means by the middle of time: "How do you know what is the middle? As time it is vague. Its borders reach to the edges of what one saw from where one sat" (5). By transitioning from discussing Woolf in the third person to addressing her reader in the second person, Carson's persona adds a third element to the comparative analysis by asking her reader to be the site on which these two views of wartime, each with their own lacunas, coexist. In other words, Carson does not merely compare Thucydides and Woolf but floats them together for "you." Part of the challenge of reading this essay—a challenge that emerges again in *Red Doc>*'s dual focus on the love-stricken civilian and the traumatized soldier—is learning to regard seemingly opposing figures as possible elegiac actors for the reader. That is to say, Carson's form of address asks readers to go beyond easy acts of "relating" in order to discover elegiac actors in various and unlikely figures.

As "Ordinary Time" continues, Carson focuses on language by depicting the process of becoming gendered as a creation of lacunas in the individual's vocabulary. Through citation, Carson stages a conversation between Thucydides and Woolf in which each gives language to what the other cannot articulate. The beneficiary of those insights is, of course, neither of the deceased writers but instead Carson's contemporary readers. Initially, the feminized commitment to ordinary time primarily serves to describe what the masculinist vision cannot name. This happens numerous times throughout the essay. For example, in summarizing Thucydides, Carson explains that the Thebans' "plan had been clear: to attack immediately. Instead they grounded their arms in the marketplace, sat down, and proclaimed a negotiation. Why? It was the beginning of their death. Thucydides offers no explanation—'what an accidental affair this living is after all our civilization,' says Virginia Woolf" (5). While the masculinist historian can detail the events, he

lacks the attention to the psyche which would allow him to explain the motivation behind world-changing decisions. The citation from Woolf does not offer an explanation, but it does capture a sense of amazement at this state of human confusion (in Woolf's story, it appears in a series of exclamations the protagonist makes about her inability to identify the mark on the wall). In the opposite direction, Carson provides citations of Thucydides to explain the eponymous mark of Woolf's story:

> youth—which was abundant in the Peloponnese, abundant among the Athenians—youth (due to its inexperience) embraces war. (2.8.1) Time embraces youth, youth embraces war. See the circles fit one upon the other. See them move and slip turning around a center which gradually becomes emptier, gradually darker, until it is as black as a mark on the wall. (7)

Carson links Woolf's mark on the wall to Thucydides account of the origins of warfare. By doing so through the imperative, Carson asks her reader to envision Woolf's mark on the wall and to imagine it not as a snail but as an emblem of a cycle of youth turning to mortality. Carson thus expands her readers' sense of war by drawing on disparate accounts that cut across historical time periods and geographic boundaries. Carson's readers become the sites on which feminized and masculinized modes of knowing can meet and sharpen the insights of the other and thus create a new sense of self floating in space and time.

The conclusion of Carson's essay focuses particularly on the language used to describe civilian experience of wartime. She returns to the disappearance of spring, but this time through reference to Pericles's funeral oration. Carson quotes from Aristotle's account. Whereas Thucydides' version of Pericles' funeral oration focuses on the way in which the casualties of war secure the future of the democratic polis, Aristotle's Pericles expresses mourning without such nationalistic consolation: "he is said to have remarked that the vanishing of young men from the

country was as if the spring were taken out of the year" (8).[67] Perhaps, then, Thucydides' limited vocabulary reflects not only his stance above ordinary time, but, paradoxically, the affective impact of wartime's loss as his Pericles does not linger on the loss of the young men but attempts to evade that melancholia by focusing on the future. His loss of the word spring reflects a mourning that he does not put into words. Carson abruptly transitions from quoting Pericles' oration to quoting Virginia Woolf describing the process of writing "The Mark on the Wall" in a letter to composer and women's rights activist Ethel Smyth: "I shall never forget the day I wrote "The Mark on the Wall" all in a flash, as if flying, after being kept stone breaking for months . . . and then Leonard came in and I drank my milk and concealed my excitement" (8). Much like the protagonist of the short story, Woolf describes her interior life being interrupted by a man's entrance. Confiding her concealed excitement in a letter to a woman, Woolf describes the thrill of finding words after months of "stone breaking" silence. Carson asks us to notice this doubling of Woolf and her protagonist by preceding this quote with one from "The Mark on the Wall" that she attributes to Woolf as speech rather than writing. Woolf's character becomes an elegiac actor for Woolf the writer, dramatizing a lacuna in communication that stems not from ignorance but from silencing.

As Carson dramatizes herself as a reader of Woolf in the concluding essay in *Men in the Off Hours*—"Appendix to Ordinary Time"—she presents Woolf as an elegiac actor that allows Carson's persona to reach a catharsis that does not rid her of her grief but renders it common. In turn, this allows her to live with grief without it turning, as it did for the headhunter and the man

[67] In *American Mourning: Tragedy, Democracy, Resilience*, political theorist Simon Stowe argues that Thucydides' depiction of "[Pericles'] oration was less a lament for the fallen than an occasion for the speaker to offer an idealized vision of the city—a storehouse of myths—that sought to bind the polity together in the face of mass death" (4).

on the way to his mother's funeral, into anger and violence. While the title of the final essay suggests continuity between the opening essay and the last, "Appendix to Ordinary Time" concerns familial elegy as it begins, "My mother died the autumn I was writing this. And *Now I have no one*, I thought" (165). The initial reaction appears almost citational in its genericity (a citational practice that will emerge again in *Red Doc>* as Carson's protagonist faces his own mother's death) which speaks to a fundamental and collective attachment to the figure of the mother.[68] Even as Carson expresses solitude and abandonment, she finds company in reading and citing Woolf:

> 'Exposed on a high ledge in full light,' says Virginia Woolf on one of her tingling days (May 1, 1937). I was turning over the pages of her diaries, still piled on my desk the day after the funeral, looking for comfort I suppose—why are these pages comforting? They led her, after all, to the River Ouse. Yet strong pleasure arises from every sentence. In reflecting on the death of her own father, she decided that forming such shocks into words and order was 'the strongest pleasure known to me.' (165).

Carson's odd word choice "tingling" implies an ambiguous sensation on the edge of pain and vibrancy which imbues Woolf's suicidal depression with an intensity that has a visceral effect on the reader of her diary. The comfort that Woolf finds in articulating the experience of losing her father defines that type of consolation the also bereaved Carson finds in literature: the work of accurately committing grief to language and form. For Carson, this is a collaborative act and which, in "The Gender of Sound," appears particularly feminine. Yet, Carson extends Woolf's understanding of this pleasure in writing by remarking, "And who do we have to thank for this pleasure but Time?" (165). Rather than valuing the human work of articulation, Carson shifts the

[68] In this way, Carson echoes Barbara Johnson's account of address in "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion" in which Johnson draws on Lacan theorization of the vocal development of the infant in order to argue for "a deeper link between motherhood and apostrophe than we have hitherto expected" (539).

focus to the natural passing of time—at once the cause of the pain (human mortality) and the only way in which the living can experience an abatement of grief. By attaching pleasure to the passing of time rather than the work of writerly invention, Carson emphasizes the shared nature of this experience. Carson includes her reader through using the first person plural, but this inclusion elicits not sympathy but reconceptualization of the self along a shared timeline from Ancient Greece to World War I to twenty-first century North America. Whereas Sontag imagines that viewing the suffering of others should lead to an intervention that ends that suffering in the present, Carson dramatizes how reading of the past suffering of others expands the reader's understanding of the present.

For Carson, poetry offers an intimation of immortality through its relationship to time. Carson situates her reader firmly in the present tense of writing—"It grows dark as I write now"—and yet this present tense includes visions of the deceased, "I see my mother as she would have been at this hour alone in her house, gazing out on the cold lawns, and turned earth of evening, high bleak grass going down to the lake. Or moving room by room through the house and the silverblue darkness filling around her, pooling, silencing" (165). The verb "see" implies the perceptibility of the merely imagined, echoing the Wife of Brain's injunctions to Carson's readers of *Red Doc>*. The act of remembrance brings the past into the present in vibrant details and various possibilities. For Carson, articulation offers pleasure not only because it allows one to apprehend one's experience but also because it floats the past into a relationship with the present. This is not an unrealistic, fantastical feat: in an image of time's passing, Carson's persona remains aware that "Under a different dark sky, the lake trickles on" (165). The mother's lifetime and the time after her death co-exist in this attempt to articulate the experience of bereavement. As I will show, these images strongly recall the final scene of *Red Doc>* in which time's passing is simultaneously

insisted on and undercut by the poem. Writing seems particularly well-suited to capture this sense of time passing and not passing because, for Carson, writing contains the dead. Looking at crossouts in Virginia Woolf's manuscript, Carson finds a secondary moment of consolation, one not of pleasure and comfort but of understanding:

> Reading this, especially the crossed-out lines, fills me with sudden understanding. Crossouts are something you rarely see in published texts. They are like death: by a single-stroke—all is lost, yet still there. For death *although utterly unlike life* shares a skin with it. Death lines every moment of ordinary time. Death hides right inside every shining sentence we grasped and had no grasp of. Death is a fact. (166)

While Carson earlier finds comfort in Woolf, this passage marks a more thoroughgoing moment of consolation through sentimentalized catharsis because her reading of Woolf's manuscripts recasts her entire understanding of her place in reality. Indeed, we might even say that it is a less comforting moment as Carson turns from the work of articulating loss to a perception of the omnipresence of death. And yet, it provides a deeper form of consolation because it reframes the experience of loss.

Consolation involves not only articulating the experience of grief but also a changed relationship to time. By the end of the essay, Carson finds consolation less through reading Woolf and more through reading what she otherwise could not in Woolf's manuscripts: "Crossouts sustain me now. I search out and cherish them like old photographs of my mother in happier times. It may be a stage of grieving that will pass. It may be that I'll never think of sentences unshadowed in this way. It has changed me. Now I too am someone who knows marks" (166). With the final sentence, Carson might seem to associate herself with the man in "The Mark on the Wall" who correctly identifies the snail. Yet, she also takes a feminized stance in ordinary time that she earlier associated with Woolf and arrives at a form of knowing that transcends identifying a snail by drawing on a variety of reading experiences. Reaching out to her reader, Carson concludes the

essay with the deictic "Here is an epitaph for my mother I found on p. 10 of the Fitzwilliam Manuscript of Virginia Woolf's *Women and Fiction*:

> *such*
>
> *abandon* ~~Obviously it is impossible, I thought, looking into those~~
>
> *ment* ~~foaming waters, to~~
>
> *such* ~~compare the living with the dead make a comparison~~
>
> *rapture* ~~compare them.~~ (166)

In *A Room of One's Own* (what *Women and Fiction* would become), Woolf uses "such abandonment such rapture" to describe feelings inspired by poetry before World War I such as that of Christina Rossetti and Alfred Lord Tennyson (14). Consequently, mourning for the mother parallels mourning for a world lost in war because both are inspired by a longing for a past that is not available in the present except through the experience of sentimental reading. While Woolf presented the reading of nineteenth-century poetry as a nostalgic effort to restore the past, Carson instead finds a more thoroughgoing form of consolation that renders lost feelings present even as it simultaneously reminds the reader of the need for that consolation and the awareness of an irretrievable past. *Men in the Off Hours* concludes with a photograph of Carson's mother. By contrast with the photographs Sontag analyzes in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, it is not an image of suffering that asks for sympathy, but a scene of ordinary pleasure that we know belongs only to the past. The sentimental appeal of the photograph does not encourage sympathy for the suffering, but rather demands a perspective that watches the lost past float onto a diminished present.

Reading Cathartically: G with Marcel Proust and Daniil Kharms

Sentimental reading practices fueled by identification are frequently understood in diametric opposition to critical approaches that emphasize separation between the self and the text.[69] However, Carson's sentimentalized catharsis instead demands that the reader identify with the text without wholly obliterating the boundaries between self and text. Carson's protagonist in *Red Doc>* models this sort of reading. We might consequently see him as our actor. As a bookish figure experiencing heartbreak and, later, bereavement, G might seem like an obvious candidate for the type of sentimental identification popularly referred to as "relating." However, the formal difficulties and deeply intertextual nature of *Red Doc>* stymie attempts at identification. The text of the volume appears in narrow column formatting due to a word processing error that Carson decided to retain (similarly, *Red Doc>* owes its name to the default title given by the word processing program.)[70] With the exception of the Wife of Brain sections which are all marked as such, it is extremely difficult to identify the voices in the dialogues or to attribute the monologues to a particular character. However, close attention to detail and repeated rereading allow a reader to resolve those difficulties. Additionally, another difficulty is posed by the multilayered intertextuality of *Red Doc>*. Carson floats authors such as Marcel Proust, Daniil Kharms, and Christina Rossetti as well as references to her own works in relation to the narrative of G and Sad. For these reasons, *Red Doc>* has not yet received much critical attention despite Carson's framing it as a sequel to her beloved and acclaimed *Autobiography of Red*. Consequently, this chapter

[69] See Isobel Armstrong's "Textual Harassment: the ideology of close reading, or how close is close?" for a discussion of so-called "distant reading" practices in contrast to affectively engaged reading practices.

[70] See Sam Anderson's *New York Times Magazine* feature on Carson "The Most Exciting Thing to Do with Your Head: The Inscrutable Brilliance of Anne Carson" for an account of the composition of *Red Doc>*.

offers quite detailed readings of *Red Doc>* in order to offer a guide to the verse novel as well as to illuminate how it develops a set of themes that are central to Carson's oeuvre as a whole.

As the book begins, G has just finished a seven-year commitment to Marcel Proust which emerges as a love elegy that helps him to manage the loss of his lover Herakles (from *Autobiography of Red*) who reappears here with the new name Sad But Great (often shortened simply to Sad). When G leaves for a road trip with Sad, he appears so dependent on his Proustian love elegy that accidentally taking the poetry of Russian avant-gardist Daniil Kharms instead constitutes a catastrophe. While Proust's stream of consciousness narrative emerges as an "extra unconscious" that leaves G melancholically and inarticulately lingering on his past love for Sad, Daniil Kharms' avant-garde poetry from the Siege of Leningrad instead offers an interlocutor that helps G imagine himself in rhetorical situations by imagining an audience (4). This lesson in reading in turn allows G to revise the boundary between himself and Proust and to articulate the limits of his readerly identification. Cathartic reading interrupts G's melancholic attachment to love elegy by allowing G to find a vocabulary to describe himself and his relation to others in the world. If G becomes our actor through his mode of reading, the way in which his narrative intersects with war (through his friendship with a traumatized veteran and his reading of Kharms) reveals the limits of the type of catharsis than can be found through regarding the suffering of others. Carson presents those limits not in the spirit of critique, but to illuminate the bounds of individual agency in a larger war culture.

For G, reading Proust leads to such a complete identification that he loses his ability to articulate the connections he sees between Proust and the world and, consequently, he struggles to interact with interlocutors in his environment. As his mother warns him not to let the traumatized soldier near his herd, G abruptly changes the topic of conversation as if using Proust as a psychic

defense against considering his present situation with Sad. Note that Carson uses slashes ("/") to indicate a change of speaker in dialogues in *Red Doc>*:

> did I tell you I finished Proust / oh yes /
> seven years / can you
> reach me
>
> those matches behind you / reading it every day /
> thanks was like having
> an extra unconscious" (4).

G offers a striking simile to describe the reading practice invited by Proust's long narrative: the seven-year commitment was like being two people mentally. The fictional self eclipses the self in lived reality as G evidently goes through the motions of listening to his mother (handing her the matches), but continues to talk about Proust even though she seems disinterested.[71] The unusual way in which Carson indicates distinct voices in dialogue forces her readers to do the work of understanding where different voices begin and end, thereby giving us practice drawing boundaries between different voices: G's voice and his mother's voice blur together to create one unified conversation but we must find the points of separation in order to make sense of scene. In stark contrast to G's reading practice which hinders his ability to articulate the connection between the fictional world and the world of reception such that he assumes the former as his own, Carson asks

[71] G's mother tries to enter the conversation by discussing her own literary preferences, but G talks past her: "well I'm | not fond of those multivolume things / there's the | part where he's comparing his Tante Leonie to a | waterlily / || she's a swimmer / no she's a neurasthenic / I don't get | it / well she's old nervous | lives in a single room | trapped in her little || train of habits the pills the pains the spying out the | window / hmmm / a | waterlily caught in a | current he || says" (4). The mother struggles with metaphoric thinking: she interprets the image of the water lily very literally (an, in fact, nonsensically since water lilies have little in common with swimmers given their immobility). Even in unpacking this metaphor, G does not adequately connect the tenor to the vehicle: he enumerates the elements of Tante Leonie that make her like a water lily but leaves unsaid how those connections actually function. So taken by the tenor is he, he fails to connect it adequately to the real-life vehicle.

her reader to participate in imagining a social world as a spectator rather than allowing pure identification with G.

Identification with Proust's fictional self replaces G's sense of himself in time because he reads Proust elegiacally to manage a traumatic loss of love. When G glimpses Sad, the sight sparks "love's long lost / shock" which catalyzes a memory of the last time they were together: "Memory sucks it all / backward . . . Memory is exhausting. G / sits down on the ground" (14). G experiences a traumatic rendition of Proustian involuntary memory. Present life with a veteran suffering from PTSD might seem challenging enough, but these two appeals to memory locate the real difficulties of Sad's return in a deeper shared past rather than his current politicized role. By referring to memory as exhausting rather than painful, Carson emphasizes the physical drain of this form of mental life. The narrator posits a physical metaphor to describe the effect of Sad on G: "That man had been his / oxygen once. When he left / there was no oxygen" (14). While this metaphor initially presents the beloved as essential for the lover's life, Carson develops it into a more complicated and redemptive conceit: "But cell death can confer / advantages" (15). As Carson proceeds to explain how fingers and toes are the result of embryonic cell death, she suggests that this absence of oxygen might have transformed G into something better able to function in the world. Her use of the first person plural at first invites her reader to identify with G: "We all make good use of / separate digits in our life / but then (so Proust) catch / sight of an old glove and burst into tears" (15). In this version of Proustian involuntary memory, it is not merely that an object spurs memories of a detailed past but that the object itself bears the marks of painful experience. Instead of leading to the composition of *In Search of Lost Time*, G's involuntary memory leads to an inarticulate and intense emotional response that reveals confusion about the source of his sadness: "G weeps / thinking of Proust" (15). In the conceit's logic, he should be weeping for Sad. Instead,

the novel—G's extra unconscious—replaces his private history with a generic understanding of the mechanism of painful memory. By shifting from the first person plural to the third person over the course of the passage analyzed in this paragraph, Carson invites and impedes readerly identification. Instead, we are asked to maintain distance as G finds no form of articulate consolation but only the comfort of animal warmth: "The / oxen arrive softly around / him" (15). Unable to name his pain, G finds consolation in oxen imperfectly replacing his oxygen. The failure to find language leads to an inadequate consolation that comforts temporarily but does not fundamentally resituate G's understanding of himself.

Without a cathartic reading practice, G resembles the headhunter whose grief turns to rage. As G and Sad embark on a northward road trip, G's fixation remains on Proust and he misplaces his anguish from Sad onto his reading materials when he realizes he has accidentally taken the poetry of Daniil Kharms instead of *In Search of Lost Time*: "Weighing it in his / hand he pauses then / throws it across the room. / Does he hate *Today I* / *Wrote Nothing: The* / *Selected Writings of Daniil Kharms* translated / from the Russian by / Matvei Yankelevich for / some good reason or for not being Proust" (35). Initially, G attempts to manage this rage by trying to read Kharms in the same elegiac fashion he read Proust as he turns to it for consolation after a moment of sexual rejection from Sad reminds G of their past. Instead of replacing G's unconscious, Kharms' performative attitude offers a rejoinder to Sad's dismissal of G by imagining a broader audience:

> Whose courage? Is
> anything serious? Daniil
> Kharms used to lie down
> on the highway to see if
> traffic would stop (it did)
> then walk away. G stands
> up from the table. He will
> make his way to the town
> swimming pool and see
> what they think of his

rather majestic redwinged
breaststroke. (36)

Reading about Kharms pulls G out of the interior of a second unconscious and into a rhetorical situation of performance in front of an audience. Instead of thinking about feelings (such as courage), he thinks about reactions and admits an element of play and performance into his behavior. As his focus turns from Sad to the people by the swimming pool, G's reading allows him to again see himself in his proper environment.

While reading Proust provides G with consolation through the act of replacement, Kharms challenges the grounds of possible identification because of the extremity of his experience during the Siege of Leningrad. Driven to seek consolation, G attempts to identify with Kharms. Arrested by a glimpse of his aging face in the mirror as he prepares to go swimming, G notes "no longer young no more / beauty impact" and wonders "Did Daniil Kharms have this / particular rug pulled out / from under him one day in / a bathroom in Leningrad it / seems unholy to ask" (37). As the sentence turns from a wish for consolation to a sense of the "unholiness" of seeking that type of identification in Kharms, G's knowledge of Kharms' political situation creates a boundary between himself as a reader and Kharms as a writer. However, part of the value of Kharms' poetry appears in the way it challenges commonsense understandings of historical catastrophe:

Destitute hungry hounded
by the police he wrote
What big cucumbers they
sell nowadays! in a poem
about a man who beat
another to death with a
cucumber during the siege
of Leningrad. Miraculous
to have a friend like Daniil
Kharms a release from
causality. (37)

Kharms' poetry releases the reader from causality by redirecting the reader's focus from what might seem to be the central problem (the misery of Siege of Leningrad, where most deaths were from starvation) to more peripheral details. Kharms' poetry shifts a reader's focus from rage to the absurdity of the situation that gives way to rage. Given that G, in the reality that he cannot quite face, does in fact have a friend who is much like Kharms in his psychological suffering due to wartime experience, Kharms becomes an inarticulate stand in for other rather than self.

By shifting to the second person, Carson dramatizes G's attempts to imagine the suffering of others at the same time as she poses this challenge to her readers as well. There is a desire, she suggests, to enact a critical boundary between the sufferer and the reader or witness: "But other people's suffering you / want to boil it down / theorize it historicize it / make it go away" (37). Theorizing and historicizing are reading strategies that impute a level of intellectual mastery that Carson suggests work by minimizing the reality of suffering. They are methods of creating boundaries between oneself and one's reading by building a unique context around the suffering of others. G does not completely obliterate the boundaries between himself and Kharms as he did with Proust, but his tendency to read with poor personal boundaries adds an affective dimension to his attempt to understand the poetry: "G does / not like to think of DK / lying on the floor of his / cell in the psychiatric ward of a Soviet prison / hospital" (38). The thought of Kharms' suffering catalyzes a negative affective response in G that he does not attempt to minimize. Again, Carson's narration turns to the second person and might apply at once to G and to Carson's reader: "No Jesus to / cleanse it or koan to throw / it off a bridge no Zeus to / blast it to Tartaros. You / look at your face your face / is old but suffering is older" (38). Judeo-Christian, Zen Buddhist, and Ancient Greek traditions are all rendered similarly impotent in the face of the reality of human suffering. While the glimpse of an aging face might have seemed "unholy" to compare to the experience of

one who died in the Siege of Leningrad, this longer and varied historicization illuminates a constancy of suffering as a defining and persistent characteristic of what it means to be human. Sontag might critique G's practice of sympathy, but Carson emphasizes the temporal disjunction and shows him in this midst of floating an historical time period onto his present. Perhaps the apparent unholiness of G's question actually honors the suffering by not isolating it in a particular historical situation, but instead regarding history as a record of suffering that cannot be contemplated unemotionally. Akin to the anti-sentimentalists such as Sontag described by Deborah Nelson, Carson offers a vantage point that accepts suffering as part of the human condition. And yet, Carson's reliance on address makes the logic of this passage quite sentimental as she creates continuity between the reader and G, our actor, whose suffering and attempts to reckon with the suffering of others we are made to share as Carson floats together Kharms, G and "you."

For G, Kharms comes to stand in for Sad much as Proust had replaced his sense of self. As a reader of Kharms, he finds a consolatory fantasy by imagining that he might have been able to save the poet. As G and Sad continue their drive northward, the sight of the sky sparks a memory of a line of Kharms' poetry. G again wishes "To have a friend like that" and imagines "himself / saving DK's life - / swooping low in the / window of the state prison / hospital with a bowl of / steaming soup" (42). By contrast with the Proustian identification, G here imagines poet and reader interacting. He imagines how his unique capabilities—his ability to fly—might have saved Kharms. While G imagines a momentary success in which he would "Stay just / long enough to see the / broken eyes shine up at / him then be on his way" (42), the facts of history intervene in his fantasy: "But the dark fact is no / bowl of soup could have / sustained Daniil Kharms / through the remaining / days of the siege of Leningrad and a sudden / astonishing quiet descends on the car" (42). The demands on the hero would have to be ongoing. The realization of his inadequacy

returns G to his physical setting where he is, although he seems unable to realize it, participating in the ongoing work of saving Sad's life. In the final mention of Kharms in *Red Doc>*, G has a barely sublimated dream about being in a car with Kharms and, despite the close echoes of his recent history with Sad, still wakes up exclaiming "Daniil Kharms could / have been saved!" (83). G's mode of reading prevents him from seeing the role he is playing in his environment because even the more participatory attitude granted to him by Kharms obscures his proper reality and invites him to imagine acting in the world of the writer.

It is only by returning to Proust with the reading style he has learned from Kharms that G can find consolation for his elegiac situation because it is this type of reading that allows G to interact with his past self. Toward the end of *Red Doc>*, G appears newly able to disentangle himself from his identification with Proust and to maintain a distinction between the two unconsciousnesses: the two still blur, but the author does not wholly replace the reader. Consequently, G can interrogate the porous boundary rather than accept it purely. G begins in a nostalgic mood and he enters a rhetorical relationship with Proust by offering a playful reproach: "Thinking about / Proust to pass the time. / What a scamp that Proust. / That Albertine. Does / anyone really believe the girl stays asleep for four / pages in volume V while / Marcel roams around her prostrate form and / stretches out beside it on / the bed" (88). While G had initially found the depiction of individual consciousness compelling in Proust, the unbelievable interpersonal situation that Proust depicts provides G with an opportunity to have an opinion of Proust that does not match that of the protagonist. The distance also allows him some emotional separation from the novel as well as he articulates a judgement of the protagonist's suspicion of Albertine: "Poor / Marcel. What is there to / know" (88). This pity in an instance of having an emotional response that is not sanctioned by the book and is perhaps invited more by G's personal

history. As a reader, G's response to this passage had previously been unarticulated: "With a red pencil G / had underlined the / sentences where Proust / observes the momentarily / impaired surface of the / eye of a person who has / just had a thought she will / not tell you" (89). The address to the second person floats beyond the depicted scene and into an appeal to the reader as Carson closes this passage with the imperative: "Watch the wake" (89). With this imperative, Carson breaks narrative immersion in order to counsel emotional awareness in one's own interactions and thereby asks us to read G remembering Proust in the fashion of Kharms' rhetorical situation.

For G, this becomes a cathartic reading practice because it allows him to articulate his distance from Proust: "G could never / bear to watch Sad / sleep" (90). G refuses to identify completely with Proust. After this moment, G seems newly able to interact with Sad. Proust's narration gives G space to use literature to investigate narratives of his own life and to change his stance toward others. As our actor, G models a form of reading that necessitates self-aware identification that involves both identifying connections and also identifying limits. Consolation comes not in replacing self through identification, but in how identification allows for new forms of self-awareness. G and Sad might seem to be opposites. However, Carson uses a strikingly similar form of catharsis to depict the management of Sad's wartime traumas.

Becoming Tragic: From Herakles to Sad But Great

While G is our actor in the sense that he models a form of reading, Sad emerges as a more standard tragic protagonist. Thus, we have a parallel relationship to him that G has to Kharms: both are lessons in regarding the suffering of others. Sad strongly recalls the figure of Herakles from Euripides' tragedy of the same name that Carson translates in *Grief Lessons*: in both, heroes become weakened and nearly destroyed psychically by the knowledge of who they have killed.

Both are paralyzed by deaths that seem impossible to elegize and need to find ways to move forward with their lives despite the pull of these memories. Roy Scranton reads Sad as a "crude cliché" of a "traumatized veteran" (211) and consequently finds G's storylines more affecting and compelling. However, I argue that Carson's representation of a traumatized veteran should not be read as a realistic portrayal of an historical experience but as a challenge to her readers to learn to regard the suffering of others. Carson's form of address asks her reader to regard Sad's suffering not with pity but with honor as we watch him work to create a sense of the self that combines memories of the past with life on the home front.

Whereas G struggles with the memory of his relationship with the character named Herakles in *Autobiography of Red* who emerges with the new name Sad But Great in *Red Doc>,* Sad (as he is nicknamed throughout Carson's sequel) primarily struggles with articulating his mourning for a woman whom he killed in war. This elegiac situation is rendered political not only by the context surrounding the death, but also because of the institutional forces that shape the traumatized soldier's vocabulary. As signaled by his change of name, Sad's limited vocabulary not only affects the way he regards the killing but also the way he regards himself. Although this character is clearly continuous with the figure of Herakles in *Autobiography of Red*, he now introduces himself to another patient in the doctor's office:

> I'm
> Sad / why / no it's my
> name Sad But Great. (18)

Mixing strength with pain, this name succinctly defines the archetype of the tragic hero as the great man brought down. Sad specifies that this name was given to him in the army ("army makes you have a certain everything.") His civilian interlocutor (improbably, G's companion Ida) seems concerned by this change: "but your name is / your fate you can't take orders / on that" (18). While

Sad believes that his identity has been changed absolutely by the army, Ida believes in a continuous identity that precedes and supersedes any individual experience. This disagreement over the possibility of renaming reflects a broader examination of the relationship between language and mood: as Sad's army therapist M'hek suggests, "how we / talk how we are allowed to talk is / the most part of happy or not" (29). To address his traumatic memories and the way it has reshaped his understanding of himself, Sad requires a new vocabulary that will help him to elegize both the woman he killed and his past identity in order to gain a fuller sense of his self—in all its discontinuities—over time.[72] By contrast with the purgation of Aristotelean catharsis, Sad instead learns to move into the future despite his awareness of the suffering and damage he caused in the past. Sad might appear as a candidate for the type of agency imagined by Sontag—if only he had felt pity for the woman before shooting her instead of only after. Instead, Carson frames his apparent responsibility as a more diffuse form of complicity as the soldier appears less culpable than the vocabulary given to the soldier.

Even though Sad no longer shares a name with Herakles as he did in *Autobiography of Red*, he resembles Euripides' depiction of the legendary figure in the eponymous play translated by Carson in *Grief Lessons*.[73] In Euripides' tragedy, Herakles returns from his labors only to be led by Hera into a divine madness in which he murders his wife and children and destroys his household. Introducing her translation of *Herakles* in *Grief Lessons*, Carson provides a gloss of the play that emphasizes how these events force a reconceptualization of the role of the hero and, indeed, the whole tragic genre. She allows that the first part of the play is rife with clichés of

[72] In this way, Sad resembles the historical veterans that Simon Stow describes in *American Mourning: Tragedy, Democracy, Resilience*. In opposition to a "nostalgic" form of homecoming that expects the veteran to return to their pre-war self, Stow advocates a "tragic" form that includes the veteran's wartime experiences as part of their sense of self.
[73] In *Autobiography of Red*, Herakles was loosely based on Stesichorus' Geryoneis.

domestic drama, but promises her reader, "if you stay you will see Herakles pull the whole house of this play down around himself, tragic conventions and all. Then from inside his *berserker furor* he has to build something absolutely new. New self, new name for the father, new definition of God" (14). As a tragic hero, Herakles portrays an intense rage that allows for the creation of a new vocabulary. Carson suggests that the most innovative element of these reinventions is the realization that Herakles cannot succeed alone:

> [Herakles'] task in the last third of the play is to rise from this prostration, which he does with the help of Theseus. Euripides makes clear that Herakles exits at the end leaning on his friend. Herakles' reputation in myth and legend otherwise had been that of the lonehand hero. Here begins a new Heraklean posture. Meanwhile through the play this image of collaborative heroism is embodied, movingly in the tableau of the chorus. They are old men; they lean on sticks or on each other. All mortals come to this. (16-7)

As I will show, Sad faces a similar reliance on others, albeit psychologically rather than physically. The figure who so valorized freedom and independence in *Autobiography of Red* requires others in order to fully understand himself in *Red Doc>*.[74]

I would add that, in Carson's translation of Euripides' tragedy, Herakles also redefines the nature of action. Throughout Carson's translation of Euripides' *Herakles*, the chorus laments their inability to provide help to the hero's family due to their incapacity to act meaningfully: "Had I strength in my arms and someone where assaulting you, / I'd stop it. / But I am nothing" (32). Similarly, after Herakles kills his children and wife, the chorus laments that they do not know what to do or how to articulate what has happened: "AIAI! [*cry*] / What groaning, / what lament, / what

[74] The resonances between Herakles and Sad are also apparent in the similar language Carson uses to describe the two texts. Just as she refers to Herakles in *Grief Lessons* has having "reaching the boundary of his own myth" (14), the jacket cover of *Red Doc>* ends with the observation "To live past the end of your myth is a perilous thing." In exploring these issues, both texts examine the tragic turn of heroes returning home after serving a martial role and the difficulty of developing a sense of self that imagines a future beyond that heroic sense of self.

song of death, / what dance of Hades / shall I do?" (62). The chorus experiences their inadequacy both in terms of action and in terms of language and physical gestures. By contrast with these expectations of what constitutes help, Herakles requires a conversation with a friend to convince him how to proceed with his changed life. Earlier in the play, Herakles compares himself to a boat towing his wife and children when he went to save them (45). At the conclusion, he comes to see himself in an opposite role: "So I, a man utterly wrecked and utterly shamed, / shall follow Theseus / like a boat being towed along. / Whoever values wealth or strength / more than friends is mad" (84). The plot of *Herakles* thus ends with an affirmation for the need for collaboration. Curiously, the chorus appear not to hear the lesson: "We go in pity, we go in tears, / For we have lost our greatest friend" (84). The old men who have lamented their weakness throughout the play remain unable to recognize this new form of heroism because they are committed to an individualistic model of action. Instead of seeing Herakles recognize his losses and imagine new possibilities for action in friendship and collaboration, they mourn their lost friend.

By contrast with the depiction of Herakles in Carson's translation of Euripides' tragedy, *Red Doc>* psychologizes *Herakles* as the hero of Carson's verse novel returns from his labors already in a state of psychic pain: Euripides' Herakles suffers because of what he does once he returns home, but Carson's portrayal of this figure in *Red Doc>* suffers at home because of the traumatizing memories of what he did at war. From the outside, he still appears as a vision of physical splendor and strength: "Big gold lion head / comes loping along. / Army pants bare chest / barreling down the / towpath just misses Ida. / She yells and jumps. / Takes on a glow" (13). G, too, is filled with "Love's long lost / shock" (14). These characters perceive Sad in his greatness, but the Wife of Brain reveal his discordant inner life by offering a portrayal of Sad's PTSD. As the Wife of Brain address the second person, they call Carson's reader into this jumble of

temporalities that characterizes Sad's traumatized memory of war. And yet, readers may feel blocked in their ability to read Sad sentimentally because it is impossible to place ourselves within the rapidly shifting scenes. The Wife of Brain's account of Sad's symptoms and memories devolve into impenetrable syntax with capitalized and italicized letters with no clear pattern of meaning: "hits the floor if a Truck / backfires can't / stand the smell of diesel or rain in May you ever see / their order were to mow the children no one / *let* A pig in the in the shape of a down pig Bleed would he" (16). Into this fragmented dissolution, drugs appear as a stabilizing and narrativizing force: "would he / Ever *let* a pig bleed to / spared at such evening your nightfall bleed drugs in / they / come with the death in a padded bleed" (16). Herakles finds cure by effacement as his drugs are linked with death and violence: "*I have to* / *Let* the pain the blades the steeds the brittle children / carving / Vicodin methadone Paxil *let* a big X / Drank / out a nightfall across his belly / *let* Cut / sweet Out / *the pain out*" (16). As a tragic hero transposed into a verse novel, Sad's task is an internal and personal one to fix himself rather than the world through finding narrative stability in language.

Sad requires a vocabulary vaster than the one he was officially allowed to have by the army. Carson's narrative allows her readers to hear Sad recount his wartime experience as well as his attempts to transcend the vocabulary he has to tell it: "I've seen a lot of warplay / he'd say. Warplay had me / pumped all those years" (9). By calling his actions warplay, Sad removes the seriousness of the endeavor and obscures the mortal stakes. Even with this framing, however, trauma surfaces: "Flipswitch / inside. / She hit the ground / 75 saw the white bag 75 / bullets tore her head off I / saw her hand. I wasn't / going to tell anyone back / home about it. Oh it found its / way out it surfaced" (25). If a euphemistic vocabulary allows Sad to perform as a soldier, it is this encounter with the brutality of his actions that counters the repressive power of his vocabulary.

Although tragedy classically centers on recognition and reversal, in Sad's case the recognition of what he has done is with him from the very beginning and it is the wartime vocabulary and control mechanisms that make him try to repress it. He cannot mourn this killing because the vocabulary of the army will not allow him to see it as such: "You read a hundred / military manuals you won't / find the word for kill they trick / you into killing You get / over it it's ok. You have to. / Fear not tolerated" (25). "You" presumably refers to G who is recounting his conversations with Sad, but, in a more general sense, the address shows how civilian mentality can be transformed into soldier mentality through the army's vocabulary. Given Sad's limited vocabulary and difficulty with syntax, he develops a fragmented account of the traumatic event: "Her eyeglasses in / the grass. Standard / questionnaire. Fine just / say fine. Numb yourself. / Wire-frame" (25). The details of the event remain central in Sad's memory even as he describes how he tries to block them to perform normality for the army. Again, the appeal to the second person shows how it is not a personal problem but a functional one that reflects how he has been affected by the military manuals that created his identity as a solider. Like G's reading of Proust, the military manuals define Sad's consciousness.

Or *almost* define: where Sad's vocabulary fails, his knowledge of history provides a way of understanding. After discussing how warplay was initially fun, Sad turns sharply to antiquity and describes the Carthaginian practice of putting torches on the horns of oxen for night fighting. While the technique successfully confuses and scatters the Romans, Sad wonders:

> But what
> about I'm asking what
> happens when the torches
> burn down to the horn to
> the hair to the head to the
> bone beneath. So much
> human cruelty is simply
> incidental is simply

> brainless. Simply no
> common sense. You could
> take the entirety of the
> common sense of humans
> and put it in the palm of
> your hand and *still have*
> *room for your dick*. (26)

Floating ancient Carthage onto his present, Sad uses the crass diction of the army against itself as he reveals humanity's limited capacity for forethought and the immense capacities for brutality thereby allowed. In using the term cruelty, Sad identifies a more basic term than that which the army actively disallows (i.e. killing) and thus distills his understanding of the military to a more basic statement of the problem. With its reliance on address while narrating a long historical continuity, the structure of this scene anticipates G's thoughts on Kharms' suffering. As it seems unclear whether Sad understands himself as the ox or the general, the brutalized or the brutalizer, the scene also asks us to notice a split in Sad's perspective between the one who suffers and the one who causes suffering.

Before he leaves with G for the psychiatric clinic, Sad's life includes much weeping while reading Christina Rossetti alternated with donning his army uniform. Reflecting the split between the unrestrained female lamenter and the well-controlled, male citizen of the polis, Sad appears split between the masculine role of the solider and the feminine role of the poetess. As I suggested in my reading of "The Gender of Sound," the elegiac stance would allow Sad to evade this division by reuniting and supporting a diminished, traumatized and broken self. The Wife of Brain open a choral description of Sad by informing us that emotional tears have higher levels of manganese than irritant tears and depicts Sad's emotional life without judgement or pity but with tenderness and honor: "all those bowls / of secret milk he weeps / easily we / simply note this" (95). By calling the tears secret milk, the Wife of Brain implies that they are treasured, palliative and perhaps even

strengthening. Turning tears into a seminal fluid, the Wife of Brain present a vision of masculinity that opposes the hopes Sad's father harbored for him in the military: "oh / his Dad had hopes a little / *warplay* / might straighten stiffen / darken whatever / that yelp of his / to something like / backbone" (95). The father hopes for a stronger, steadier song from his son and attaches those hopes not to war but to warplay—the army diction that removes the mortal stakes of combat. His father's hopes are fueled by any specific historical circumstance, but by a notion of what a man should be. These hopes are unclear and give way to an unspecified whatever. Yet the chorus directs us to another form of strength evident in the veteran Sad, "but watch him / go crawling / plank to plank / and the big Zeus eye / drilling his every noon / *hello torn soul* is too / easy to say here's the picture he falls through the / picture eventually / he has to climb back up / it is the Climbing that exists" (95). The Wife of Brain present the apparent weakness of crawling as strength in action—the work of hoisting oneself back into a shared conceptual reality. As with Euripides' Herakles, this happens primarily through friendship and community. By contrast with the chorus in *Herakles*, however, Carson's Wife of Brain articulate the value of what Sad must do. Through their address, they ask us to honor Sad even at a moment when his greatness appears gone. As a representation of the soldier, Carson's Sad performs work that yokes together masculinized and feminized roles and shows how the masculinist bias in war literature might efface elements of soldier's experiences back on the home front.

From Tragedy to Elegy: Being Sad with Others

Just as Euripides' Herakles raises from his prostrate posture with the aid of his friend Theseus, Carson's Sad But Great fundamentally relearns how to be himself with others. Mirroring G's readerly journey from Proust to Kharms and back to Proust, Sad appears dependent on Christina Rossetti at the beginning of *Red Doc>* as a way to block memories of his wartime

experience. By contrast with G's melancholy, Sad attempts to disavow mourning. At the psychiatric clinic, one of Sad's fellow veterans—the minorly prophetic 4NO who can see several seconds into the future—stages a production of his tragedy *Prometheus Rebound* which inadvertently causes Sad to confront the memories he tries to repress. Sad turns a tragedy into a riot because he is too full of grief and rage to stay still as a spectator. Ultimately, it is only through taking an elegiac stance that allows him a longer perspective on his past that Sad is able to achieve Carson's form of catharsis because that stance allows him to achieve self-awareness of the roots of his grief in domestic socialization. This sentimentalized catharsis, in turn, allows him to be with others in time instead of invested in isolating fantasies of an idealized past.

Tragedy (or tragedy as practiced by 4NO) assumes that suffering is easy to articulate fully and universally. Yet, a scene that juxtaposes Sad suffering from insomnia with 4NO rehearsing his play reveals the limits of this assumption for Carson's tragic hero. Carson juxtaposes Sad muttering inaudibly and moving about the room awkwardly with 4NO "with arms held / wide" proclaiming, "*Behold I am* / *Prometheus! O roaring universe that aches and* / *sings! You see me suffer at* / *the hands of gods and I a* / *god!*" (72). By contrast with Sad's unarticulated and bumbling suffering, 4NO's performance draws on myth to assert and articulate suffering in a manner that he imagines as universally legible to his audience. Despite 4NO's aesthetic model, Sad remains mired in his personal memory:

> Sleeps tilt inside
> him all the old stale unslept
> sleeps of the years since
> he looked and he was lost.
> Lie still at night he could
> not he cannot. Every flap
> to be peered under every
> crevice to be crept into
> every chustling memory
> there they go like

> cockroaches. Memory tore
> at his father in him and he
> weeps in a sort of fury
> turning to the wall he
> cannot bear people saying
> this (a sort of fury) people
> have no idea. What things
> are like for him physical
> things this blacker and
> blacker spiral down it goes.
> His looks are gone.
> Strength broken. He hates
> pity. A current of blacker
> flows through him.
> Impairment and he lie
> down on the floor. Arms
> throw themselves over
> himself. (72-3)

Sad offers a radically different archetype of human suffering than that of the traumatized veteran: the emphasis on the weight of memory and the relationship with the father rather than war trauma correspond instead to a Freudian model. Far from Prometheus' articulated grievance, Sad experiences "a sort of fury" in response to the language that others use to describe him. Instead of pity from others, he seeks to comfort himself. Carson depicts Sad, like G, as neglecting the dialogic element of human experience—his sense of plurality comes only from an alienated view of self that makes his impairment and arms seems distinct from himself as a whole.

Reflecting this monologism, Sad finds greater force in the personal fantasy constructed in poetry than in the language of 4NO's tragedy. Whereas G's reading of Proust created a melancholic form of mourning for his lost love, Sad's reading of poetesses like Christina Rossetti and Emily Brontë offers a momentarily successful but ultimately inadequate form of mourning that provides consolation without facing loss. Reacting to his suffering, 4NO's Prometheus wishes for justice: "Prometheus is still / addressing the universe / *Where are your eyes*? / *What is your justice? You see my gripping this frayed* / *rope-end of pain for the last* / *ten thousand years! Who / will free me*

finally? (73). With this apostrophe, Prometheus (given voice by 4NO) imagines an other who can end his suffering by conferring justice. These lines seem to have no effect on Sad who instead responds by reciting portions of Christina Rossetti's "Birthday," a poem about supreme happiness upon the arrival of her love (presumably, Christ): "*My* / *heart is like a singing bird*. / Does he say this. 4NO has / crossed the room and is standing above him. Get / your head out of your butt / 4NO says nudging a boot. Sad views him upside / down. *Whose nest is in a water'd shoot* no one hears" (73). The poem transforms the traumatic memories of shooting into an idyllic image of nature. Juxtaposed with the feminized work of constructing a fantasy of happiness that comes with love, 4NO urges Sad to action using masculinized, unsympathetic diction reminiscent of the military. As discussed above, Virginia Woolf cites this poem in *A Room of One's Own* as an example of the "humming noise" Woolf remembers hearing before the war and which, when recollected after the war, inspires a momentary by unsustainable fantasy that fall had turned to spring (14-5).[75] The poem plays a similar role for Sad as it surfaces in contrast to his traumatic memories. The love poem and 4NO's call to action meet as they morph into dance: "[Sad] staggers upright. 4NO / starts to hum. They waltz" (73). Without articulation, 4NO assumes the vocalization that Woolf associates with the prewar period and Sad is supported in a standing position through this companion. Although 4NO's tragedy fails to move Sad, his humming engages Sad in a dance that momentarily eases his suffering by fusing the past (in the form of the humming sound) with his agony in the present.

Ultimately, the persistence of personal suffering prevents Sad (as well as the other audience members) from experiencing tragedy in the cathartic way theorized by Aristotle because it renders impossible the uniformity of audience perspective. As 4NO's production of *Prometheus Rebound*

[75] Woolf has a recurring interest in Rossetti. See her essay "I am Christina Rossetti."

is supposed to start, Ida (G's companion who surfaces in the clinic for treatment for her kleptomania in order to avoid being prosecuted for stealing) emerges in the doorway holding a white plastic bag full of pots. Carson depicts the various members of the audience interpreting this strange sight differently: some see her as the protagonist of the play; the doctor is too busy greeting the donors to notice the sight; the donors, in turn, are too busy with their phones; other patients have more idiosyncratic views such as seeing her as "A startled stick in / a plaid sports coat" or "confused by the plastic bag think of / groceries and miss their / life at home" (105). For Sad, the view of Ida inverts catharsis: rather than allowing the actor to dispel the spectator's grief and rage, the sight of Ida spurs him into action. Carson theorizes catharsis as a moment in which one can see oneself reflected in the different life of an actor, but this scene of anti-catharsis is a psychoanalytic scene of reliving. While 4NO flashes forward, Sad flashes back. A memory of his past spurs Sad to action in the present, as the sight of Ida makes him see instead:

> the most
> grievous day of his life
> rematerialize before him
> nor will it come one more
> grievous the wave of war
> bearing him along the
> sound of his rounds going
> out the trigger breaking crisp
> in his finger. (105-6)

The accidental tableau sparks a (Proustian?) memory in Sad who builds from one shared characteristic (the white plastic bag) a whole scene of his past. Sad appears unable to simply be a spectator because his melancholic attachment to his past leads him to recreate his past through the process of reception.

Titled *Prometheus Rebound*, 4NO's play returns the Romantic celebration of daring against the gods (exemplified in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*) to a more somber tragic form. In 4NO's

version of the myth, Prometheus seeks to help humans burdened by awareness of their mortality: "Once upon a time / (according to myth) each / person was born with an / exact knowledge of the / day and hour of their own / death. Poor souls could / think of nothing else. They lived breathless with / terror" (108). Knowledge of the future turns humans into melancholic mourners of their own eventual deaths. The summary of the play takes a pitying stance toward these "poor souls" and presents Prometheus' actions as a heroic intervention: "Then Prometheus / arrived bringing with him / the amazing gift that is the / subject of 4NO's play" (108). By contrast with the heroic intervention, however, 4NO's audience witnesses a lyrical one: "A / roomful of people ready / for *Prometheus* now gaze / astonished at the / trembling man tackling / Sad in the doorway even / as Ida bursts into song" (108). Instead of the reversal and recognition of the tragic hero, the audience sees a weaker man taking down the stronger one and hears a song, ill-fit with tragedy and with the scene. However, the song makes an offering similar to what Prometheus gives humanity because it presents a form of hope that does not reckon adequately with the pressure of the past. On the following page, Carson presents a page of the script and explains why this tragic figure must be "rebound." In conversation with the chorus, Prometheus admits that he "went a bit too far" when he "stopped them from seeing death before them" by "plant[ing] blind hope in their hearts" (109). In opposing knowledge of death with "blind hope," Prometheus makes these poor souls ignorant of reality; like Sad's poetess performance, it turns melancholy too optimistically toward the future. He corrects their negative view of the future with an optimistic one, but in both cases time is not a concern for these subjects. The chorus questions him about his motive and Prometheus explains, "they were breaking" to which the chorus respond, "you fool" (109). If the original *Prometheus Bound* is punished by a god while *Prometheus Unbound* is freed by his inward turn, this Prometheus is rebound by his own knowledge of the problematic nature of what he has done to

relieve human beings of their suffering by negating their melancholy without acknowledging the weight of mortality.

Song emerges as a similarly incomplete way of coordinating art and life. In an impersonal voice that sounds authorial but that is soon revealed to be that of the CMO talking to a reporter about a riot that broke out at the clinic during the performance, the narrative shifts to praise Ida's song over the action of the trembling man:

> What is a culture? A
> culture is what approves
> or disapproves of the
> actions in its midst. Yet
> how rare for approval to
> be unanimous. Ida's
> instinct to sing is right on
> the money. She ionizes
> the room as a Taoist
> rainmaker raises his voice
> to the clouds at the very
> moment the dragons come
> charging out. All sing.
> Patients sing. Nurses sing.
> Kitchen staff sings. Even
> the donors sing. (110)

As the entire audience participates and become unified in their collective action, Ida forges a public with her singing. While the polis might be a place to display and memorialize action, this public—termed culture by the CMO—reacts to action. Ida's agency is likened to ionization, a conversion at a molecular level. Like 4NO's redefinition, the sort of agency practiced by Carson's characters is a subtle one. Despite the unification in the act of singing, the affordances of that action are not identical for each member of the public: "Numb / normal vanishes. Hopes / float free – macaroni for / supper let the catheter not / slip true love new meds / play the cello again" (11). By contrast with the generic and blind hope of Prometheus, these specific hopes arise as solutions to particular predicaments and personal histories. This form of cathartic reaction by the audience arises not

from watching the tragic hero brought low, but from watching Ida try to persevere through a change in fortune. Without offering new language to describe the past, however, this form of catharsis does not offer the sort of consolation that comes with thinking past, present and future together.

The problem is not with song nor with tragedy, but with the mechanism of hope. The CMO explains, "And yet hope turns / out to be let's face it / mostly a delusion a word / derived from Latin *ludere* / meaning 'to play a game / with oneself or with others'" (111). By etymologically associating the act of hoping with playing a game, the CMO emphasizes the need to construct and willingly enter the state. Carson shows us Ida's difficulty in reaching hope through song: "Her main memory of / the doorway is Sad / lunging up from the floor / to come at her with / murder in his black eyes. / Sad full of hate. Sad as a / stranger. She kickboxed / him flat and kept singing" (112). For Ida, song appears as a method for removing the weight of memory: its fabrication allows Ida to redirect her focus from what troubles her to a performance that helps her to transcend, at least partially, the struggle of relationality. Song thus relies on an insufficiently sentimental mode of reading that attempts to inhabit the aesthetic instead of reality. By contrast, elegy would coordinate song and tragedy, allowing its audience to manage suffering without transcending the challenge of relationality.

Elegy's sentimentalized catharsis offers Sad an alternative to the tragic anti-catharsis that landed him in the straitjacket. As with the previous moment of anti-catharsis, this later moment of sentimentalized catharsis shows the memory of the past being triggered in the present. Whereas the tragic presentation of catharsis in Ida's barely mediated image of the woman Sad killed simply makes him more inarticulate and unwell, sentimentalized catharsis fills Sad momentarily with hopes as he revises his self-understanding based on an encounter with G's mother. The hope comes

not from a vision of the future but from a revision of the past. The mother resembles Sad as the narrator describes her in her hospital bed as "full / of helpless fury" (150). Yet, from this place of weakness, she remarks, "Left your / pearls at home today. // Her voice thin / enough to see through. / She had caught him by / surprise he doesn't answer" (150). The experience of surprise leaves Sad unable to inhabit only the present, but directs him to a past different than the one he has melancholically devoted himself to since his return from war. In a Proustian fashion, the mention of the pearls reminds him first of the general time in which he wore them ("Of course he remembers / the pearls. They went / with the lizardskin pants. / It was the year of his audacity the year he / decided to be a *lion of* / *himself* not just a bad influence") and then of a specific moment of his own mother one "marvelous" day when they drove around the lake: "He / felt like a whole person / with her that day. Perhaps / it was the car – to sit / peacefully side by side / and talk or not talk and let / time go in and out the / windows. At home they / all seemed caught in a badly blocked play and / faces put on wrong" (152). The singular memory (which seems sparked not only by the mention of the pearls, but more specifically by this other mother's memory of him) allows Sad to remember a past self not defined wholly by the family's domestic roles and, consequently, allows Sad to access a narrative of himself distanced from the influence of his father. One mother blurs into another as he is brought back from his memory into the present: "But / now the little mother in / the bed is gazing hard at / him. How are you really? / she says. Bad he says. / Do you have help? she / says. Some he says. *Get* / *better help* she says with / the last of her voice and he / almost salutes. Yes / ma'am he says and for a / minute he believes he will / do it" (152). Answering G's mother with a rhyme of his new name, Sad articulates his feelings with a new level of forthrightness. For the first time, he appears able to acknowledge his current struggles without irony and distancing. This is not a satisfyingly transformative or fully cathartic moment: Sad

appears aware that this new plan for the future will not be realized. However, this mutual participation in acknowledging limits in the present and creating plans for the future helps shift his focus from melancholia to resolve. In breaking off his salute, Sad recognizes that these orders are not military and, indeed, the mother inverts the tendency of the army by urging him not to ignore but to address his problems. The passage ends noting, "they exit" (52). By emphasizing the dramatic context, Carson foregrounds at a pivotal moment the discrepancy between the imagined theater of *Red Doc>* and its reality as a book.

Following his sentimentalized catharsis, Sad turns to poetess poetics not as an escape from reality but as a means of joining in conversation. Instead of turning away from the people around him, he is able to participate in the "tiny burnished world" created by conversation (91). Walking to the bus stop with Sad, their voices difficult to distinguish until they refer to each other by name at the end of the passage, Ida remembers her deceased father:

> you know once my Dad
> set up a stop motion
> camera on the corner
>
> of our house so we could
> see the wind when we're
> not there and cats come
> and go. (157)

This recollection of an idiosyncratic domestic innovation reminds Sad of Emily Brontë's "Hope" which he quotes for Ida, "*she would // sing while I was weeping / if I listened she would cease*" (158). Like the wind that cannot be seen but that the dad tries to capture, Brontë's vision of hope does not allow for the emotional experience to exist in isolation from the misery that leads to its development. For Sad, this hopeless poem allows for a playful conversation in which small hopes for the near future can be created and shared:

> it's from a

poem / cool beans / did
you say cool beans / yes / Ida you crack me up / do
I / so is this the 2 for 1 day
at Ray's / I sure hope
so. (158).

As if preternaturally equipped to fill in the lacunas of Sad's speech, the unnamed subject of the quoted poem emerges in Ida's last line. The boundaries blur not only between poetess and her reader, but between readers themselves: Sad and Ida arrive at a shared vocabulary. If this seems like a mild conclusion to Sad's narrative, perhaps that is the point: no grand catharsis is possible, only the ordinary work of finding ways to pass the time with others without being mired by the past yet while still bringing the past to bear on these present relationships. And perhaps we can also locate healing in this moment as G witnesses the coupling of Sad and Ida and whose attention remains focused on his mother.

Crossing the Lines

If Sad resembles a tragic protagonist, what type of sentimentalized catharsis do Carson's readers experience by reading the narrative of his suffering and regarding him as an elegiac actor? For the majority of readers of *Red Doc>*, Sad's experience, like that of the grieving headhunter and the man driving to his mother's funeral, might appear simultaneously foreign from and representative of the self. The Wife of Brain encourage Carson's readers to recognize a link between themselves and Sad as they defend framing *Red Doc>* as a tragedy. In a choral interlude describing G's and Sad's arrival at the clinic, the Wife of Brain explain: "first reversal they've come / by mistake to a private clinic beside a glacial lake" (62). According to Aristotle's *Poetics*, reversal is a key element of the tragic plot and is the moment when the protagonist's fortune changes from good to bad (18). By using Aristotle's diction to describe the plot of *Red Doc>*, the

Wife of Brain encourage us to read it generically as tragedy. However, by referring to this as the *first* reversal (implying more are to come) the Wife of Brain signals Carson's break from the ideal tragic plot's compactness. The Wife of Brain continue defending their use of the Aristotelean term, claiming it "is // arguably no fake 'reversal' because little snags come tumbling out of the text like what it's like / the be a prophet (a 4NO) and would you decide / to act your age / if you really could see what's next" (62). For the Wife of Brain, what ultimately makes this a reversal worthy of the name is the effect it has on Carson's readers. Reversal is often paired with recognition, but the recognition here becomes the responsibility of the reader rather than that of the tragic protagonist because of these "snags" or moments in which the surface of the reading exceeds itself and leads to metaphysical questions about how to act when the future appears foreclosed. We could consider the sudden shift from wartime tragedy to maternal elegy at the end of the book to reflect a second tragic reversal. As Carson links her readers with a traumatized veteran through a process of sentimentalized catharsis, she leaves us with a sense of the continuity and incommensurability of the different genres of grief.

Enacting the fluid relationship to temporality that allows for articulating cathartic consolation, Carson does not provide her readers with chronologically smooth transition between the two portions of *Red Doc>*. Following the riot in the rec room, G, Sad, Ida and 4NO escape and almost drive into a volcano until G (following the generic conventions of his story as set by *Autobiography of Red*, expectations that the Wife of Brain encourages readers to experience "don't say you weren't / expecting a volcano") flies with his musk ox Io (hallucinating from eating fermented gorse) and the bats from Batcatraz (119, 123). After this triumphant moment, Carson returns her readers to a scene in the clinic in which G receives a note to call his mother and has to continually "ca[tch] his breath" as he registers that the unknown number belongs to the hospital

where his mother had surgery (142). Carson mediates this abrupt transition by breaking her reader's narrative immersion again with a passage that meditates on the nature of time. Organized around an anaphoric series of statements, the interlude defines time in different and sometimes irreconcilable ways: "Time passes time / does not pass. Time all / but passes. Time usually / passes" (143). The statements become progressively detailed and Carson inserts a second-person address into this otherwise alienating passage: "Time when / you were six the day a / mountain [. . .] Time for a dog in an alley / caught in the beam of your / flashlight [. . .] Time if you / are bankrupt. Time if you / are Prometheus. Time if / you are the all the little tubes / on the roots of a gorse / plant sucking greenish / black moistures up into / new scribbled continents" (143). The latter two offer understandings of time for "you" that differ but coexist in the book, imaginatively in the case of Prometheus and as a small detail in the case of the gorse that the musk oxen eat. This passage on time also includes some of the few instances of the first person in *Red Doc*>: "Time I don't remember . . . Time passes oh boy. Time / got the jump on me yes it / did" (143-4). As the passage concludes with this evocative description of aging, as if time moved faster than the "I" could, the first person persona seems oddly foregrounded, as if the emotional experience of the surprise of time's passing undercuts all other possibilities raised in the passage. Yet this passage is emblematic of the sort of cathartic consolation Carson creates: poetry cannot undo or alter reality, but it can allow the reader to think of the present alongside different possibilities and experiences of time and to understand time anew.

While G turns continually to Proust to help him to manage his memories, he cannot find language in the seven volumes of *In Search of Lost Time* appropriate to reckon with the present scene of witnessing his mother's death. He shifts from the intimate personal boundaries with Proust to an identification with language that has a wider, generic circulation. Left alone with his mother

while she sleeps attached to an oxygen machine, G wonders "Does Proust have a verb for this" (153). G instinctually looks to Proust to articulate his experience for him, but the narrative registers G finding more utility in what sound like popular song lyrics:

> This
> struggle she faces now her
> onetime terrible date with
> Night. First date last date
> *soulmate*. Old song lyrics
> scamper in him. He moves
> the chair back to the
> window. *She* counting
> *my soulmate* gasps of
> *make my heart beat at a*
> *fast rate*. Oxygen. He
> dozes. Waking to her avid
> gaze. Wide open. (153)

The understated and incongruously ordinary metaphoric idea of death as a date with Night gives way to an association of generic terms and phrases about falling in love. Carson's intertexts in *Red Doc>* are frequently easily identifiable (even Ida's almost unbelievably titled reading *You'll Never Be Lost Again: The Complete Guide to Improving Your Sense of Direction* refers to a real book). However, I cannot find any source for these clichéd but unusually technical sentiments of song lyrics. They are simultaneously too generic to be real (with the rhyming trope of soulmate and heart rate) and too technical and specific to be real (the heart beat too closely echoing the mother's actual need for the oxygen machine). Somewhere between the generic and the specific, G finds a language to describe the situation. If the generic quality of the song lyrics points to the general condition of G's predicament, then the boundaries of situation are also blurred: the mention of oxygen makes the earlier conceit about Sad as G's oxygen all too concrete; the mother's witnessing G's waking turns her into the Proustian figure watching Albertine sleeping and watching the wake. Carson presents porous boundaries not simply between the reader and her book but more generally

in the form of floating and fleeting overlaps and echoes between supposedly individual selves as represented in these literary characters. Like Sad's final scene, this linking together of various tropes does not resolve into any grand finale but simply the mother asking G to tweeze her facial hairs so she can maintain appearance even as she approaches death.

As the narrative proceeds in a logical, chronological way through the mother's death, her funeral and the early period of G's mourning, it is his consciousness rather than the narrative organization that develops an erratic relationship to time. After G demurs from the Sisyphean task of tweezing his mother's chin hairs causing his mother to worry about how she looks, G reassures her that she does not look awful but his choice of words causes her greater pain than the act of tweezing had: "you look / like my Ma. Now she / winces. In later years this / is the one memory he / wishes would go away and / not come back" (154). In a slight, domestic, familial echo of Sad's trauma, Carson presents this moment as one that G returns to even as time passes. He experiences guilt at causing her psychic pain and disrupting the way she wanted to imagine herself presented to the world. Yet in the moment, Carson depicts G's consciousness absorbed by the present: "And the / reason he cannot bear her / dying is not the loss of her / (which is the future) but / the dying puts the two of / them (now) into this / nakedness together that is / *unforgiveable*" (154). In the present-tense scene of the hospital, the problem with death seems to be neither the trauma that brings G back to his past nor the sense of an emptied future, but the question of how to withstand the intensity of witnessing death. By referring to the mother's death as a shared nakedness, Carson emphasizes the shared mortality. For a character who struggles so much with original articulation, the word forgiveness here is notable for its strangeness. Who could be forgiven this moment? Not the mother, not G, but whoever made human beings mortal. This unusual word choice allows Carson to present the son and mother not simply accepting death but

facing it with purpose: “They do not / forgive it. He turns away. / This roaring air in his / arms. She is released” (154). While turning away had earlier been associated with Sad’s rejection of intimacy with G and Ida, here it reflects not a breaking of a community but a recognition that a communion is itself dissolving. The image of the roaring air recalls G’s flying “Front body / alive in a rush of freezing / air” rendered more powerful even as it describes the moment of death. Past, present, future; Sad, G, the mother: all overlap and echo each other’s past actions.

The liberating autonomy that other poets have found following the death of the mother offers a model of the future that G cannot imagine. Following a short funeral scene full of surprisingly cliché and suddenly religious moments (“The priest speaks about / the woman’s good life her / exemplary son her souls / situation in the palaces of / God”), G’s reflects on a surprising feeling of freedom once her coffin is taken away: “And the / freedom stuns him. Here / is the promising clearing / where great stags are / running at liberty” (155). In this moment, G seems to conform to the unconventional model of family elegy Ramazani identifies in confessional poets like Sexton and Lowell.[76] G embarks on an anti-mourning where he breaks free rather than experiencing loss. Of course, freedom is an ambivalent category in Carson and especially in the Geryon books: when Herakles ends his relationship with Geryon, Geryon thinks “Don’t want to be free want to be with you” (74). The stags in the clearing evoke a hyperbolic scene of male freedom. Fittingly, G is suspicious of this possibility: “Say a / man has been carrying a / mother in front of his / life all these years now / she is ripped off now his / life light as air – should he believe it?” (155). As this passage gives way to one in which G longs to see his mother, Carson seems to answer no: physical death does not break the bond of expectation that was forged in a familial

[76] In his chapters on modern family elegy, Ramazani shows how “denunciations of the dead will become all the more astonishing when later American poets like Lowell, Plath, Berryman, Ginsburg, and Sexton openly turn them on their dead parents” (6)

relationship. This answer applies not only to G, but also to "you": "Look at / the hours stacked ahead of / you bales of time shining / in the sun – just reach your / arms in she must be there / *somewhere*" (156). By imputing G's experience to the addressed reader, Carson blurs the lines not only between characters but between the world of the narrative and that of the reader. If the possibility is generalized, the particular failure is presented as singular as Carson shifts back into the third person pronoun within the span of a single sentence to depict G's fantasy of seeing his mother "at / the kitchen able in the red / velour bathrobe" but instead sees "only the screen door of the / vestry and a row of trash / cans and a bicycle. Some / big old black crow just / now shuffling itself off / into flight" (159).

Even as the turn to the third person returns the scene to Carson's character rather than the expansive reach to the reader, the ending blurs the line between book and world as (for the dedicated reader of Carson) the world of the characters appears oddly coincident with that of Carson. (And, indeed, G's preoccupation with Proust echoes Carson's *Albertine Workout* in which she suggested that the possible overlap of author and character is not an end of analysis but a "spark" to think differently.)[77] Sorting through his mother's papers, G "turns / up an old B&W / photograph of her posed / in dashing swim costume on / some long ago back porch. / One leg forward like a / Greek *kouros* a cigarette / in the other hand she / glows as a drop of water / glows in the sun. She looks / sexually astute in a way / that terrifies him" (159). This description resembles, but does not perfectly match, images of Carson's mother in *Men in the Off Hours* as well as a similar image in *Nox*: both feature grainy photographs of Margaret Carson reclining on

[77] In *The Albertine Workout*, Carson critiques the biographical reading of *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu* as a stale analytic, but also suggests that it can open the reader up to forms of thinking that are otherwise unavailable "Granted the transposition theory is a graceless, intrusive and saddening hermeneutic mechanism; in the case of Proust it is also irresistible. Here is one final spark to be struck from rubbing Alfred against Albertine, as it were" (20).

a chair in a swimsuit in front of a body of water.[78] Despite this gestalt resemblance, the details differ: Carson does not hold a cigarette; both photographs feature a child, a detail not mentioned in *Red Doc>*; neither the glow nor the sexual astuteness seem obvious to this viewer. While I behold it dispassionately, searching for some meaning to make of this correspondence, the son beholds the photograph emotionally:

> all at once
> the grainy photograph the
> early marvel of her life
> flung up at him a thing
> hardly believable! knocks
> him to his knees. He grips
> his arms and weeps. Pain
> catches the whole inside
> of him and wrings it.
> Oddly now remembering
> his grandmother's wringer (159)

In this moment of intense pain, G experiences the structure of a Proustian memory with none of Proust's content: it is as if the memory is too physically painful to leave space for another unconscious as the physical sensation of wringing reminds him of his grandmother's wringer. And yet, as a deflected portrait of Carson's mother, the unstable boundaries seem to still exist, only now for the author instead of the character. This Proustian memory leads into a story of mother talking to estranged grandmother before her death, both taken by asthma. Once again, overlaps between characters are emphasized. The photograph returns us to Sontag. Whereas Sontag critiques the political efficacy of photography, Carson does not present a normative vision of the role of photography in times of war. Instead, the description of the photograph reveals a network of circulation where viewers (or imagined viewers) not only simultaneously contemplate past and present but are transported to other places and networks of relation.

[78] The mother also appears as a central character in "The Glass Essay."

Contradictory Conclusions

At the end of *Red Doc>*, Carson offers two contradictory visions of consolation: on the one hand, the passage of time leads to the diminishment of mourning; on the other, poetry creates consolation by preserving the past in relation to the present. The final scene of the fabula occurs in the antepenultimate vignette of the book and depicts G slowly developing the first type of consolation: "The / weeping has been arriving / about every seven / minutes. In the days to / come it will grow less" (161). In a linear conception of time, the mourning becomes less intense. However, a final Wife of Brain vignette intensifies mourning by pluralizing the domestic drama. With a metrical regularity unusual for Carson, the Wife of Brain begin three four-line stanzas where the first three lines contain the same number of syllables and each begin with the word mother: "Mothers in summer / Mothers in winter / Mothers in autumn / Mothers in spring" (162). In naming all the seasons, the Wife of Brain evoke the omnipresence of mothers. As their chorus breaks from chronology, Carson allows the chorus a reprieve from the linear passage of time. The descriptions of mothers become increasingly nonsensical and divorced from anything specifically associated with the maternal:

> Mothers at altitude
> Mothers in solitude
> Mothers as platitude
> Mothers in spring
>
> Mothers banking their shots
> Mothers grackling their throats
> Mothers dumped from their boats
> In spring (162)

Meaning arises primarily from the continual repetition of spring at the end of the stanzas, pointing to persistence in time across these different situations. It is difficult to make too much meaning out

of any one line (even ones as suggestive as mothers dumped from their boats) except to notice the sheer variety of possibilities. The chorus is not only nonsensical, but self-contradictory: "Mothers as ice / Or when they are nice / No one more nice / In spring" (162). The emotionally cold mother and the emotionally open mother are both joined together in refrain of springtime. Springtime arrives at new meaning in final stanza:

> Mothers ashamed and Ablaze and clear
> At the end
> As they are
> As they almost all are, and then
> Mothers don't come around Again
> In spring (162)

As the presence of mothers in spring is denied in this final stanza, this choral elegy suggests that loss of the mother is primarily the loss of a consistent presence across time. The capitalized "Ablaze" honors the figure of the dying mother by making it an image of passion and liveliness. It casts G's mother shame into a more powerful fury at being mortal. This emphasis on spring may reflect a reworking of Aristotle's account of Pericles's funeral oration, quoted at the beginning of *Men in the Off Hours*: "he is said to have remarked that the vanishing of young men from the country was as if the spring were taken out of the year" (8). In *Red Doc>*, Carson substitutes mothers for these young men. The spring is still there, but it is emptied and impoverished. Carson draws a clear connection between war culture and the home front. However, they again appear incommensurate. The shapes of mourning are various: Carson depicts many avenues for grief but does not equate those routes.

As the narrative shifts back to the characters, it seems to end on the consolation of passing time. The final pages of *Red Doc>* initially seem continuous with G's mourning as both scenes contain pouring rain. Yet in this final scene the unnamed female figure is alive: "Her history hums along / the veins and balanced on the beam of her" (40). The human body thus becomes not an

individual but a vessel through which history continues to take form in the present. As this female figure looks out the window, she feels a combination of intimacy and estrangement which comes to define family life:

> Familiar to be
> suspended in the lives of
> others and still not. She
> with her unspilled cup of
> love her perfect stench her
> vague knowledge of them.
> Them with their plink and
> twang and uncontrollable
> shivering and their clever
> hands their tendency to
> torture cats. To threaten to
> be threatened is addictive
> for them. She has seen a
> cat with pawpads
> ripped off. And yet they
> wipe one another's tears or
> sweat they have good days
> they roll in the snow. (163)

The scene evokes a deep flashback to a scene of watching children and glimpsing their confusing combinations of cruelty and kindness. Despite the emphasis on the familiarity of the scene, the children appear almost as strangers given their unpredictability and unknowability—like Sad, they appear as both brutal and brutalized. The mother's solution is to face them with love despite their variability. From these observations, the mother concludes, "Caution is best. Luck / essential. Hope a / question" (164). In imagining the future, she relies on caution as a guiding principle in a world in which hope can only ever be a question. Yet this is not a tragic solution for the mother: "Down the street / she notices a man in his / yard in his undershirt / standing looking up at the / rain. Well not every day / can be a masterpiece" (163). She accepts a variable and imperfect reality. "This one sails out and out / and out" (164). These final words, presented in isolation on the next page, point to the inextricable passage of time. But poetry, or at least Carson's poetry here, presents the

past in present tense and allows the consolation of thinking times together. Carson floats together not only disparate times and spaces but also contradictory visions of consolation.

CODA

Objects of Inquiry, Methods of Inquiry: A Reflection on Sentimental Reading

I, like many Americans, found W.H. Auden's "September 1, 1939" uncannily relevant reading in the twenty-first century. Very much in keeping with the reasons that Jonathan Culler offers for the poem's popularity after September 11th, I identified strongly with the persona in Auden's poem.[79] However, I have no recollection of encountering the poem in the weeks following the attacks by Al-Qaeda. Instead, Auden seemed to speak for me during the years in which the War on Terror receded from headline news and became instead an unseen, unremarked upon, and yet unceasing conflict. I identified with Auden's persona for the way he depicted himself emotionally affected by events he could neither witness nor document given their location on the other side of the globe and, indeed, their origins that long preceded his lifetime. Rather than consider his distance from war a problem in the poem, I admired the persona's willingness to contemplate his complicity in global systems of power even as he sat "in one of the dives / On Fifty-Second street" (ll.1-2). I identified, too, with a consciousness whose contemplation of complicity led him only to revise the hopeful and resolved "we must love one another or die" (l.88) into the disappointed and melancholic "we must love one another and die." In the miniscule revision of a conjunction, I saw my own trajectory from optimistic engagement with the anti-war movement to a recoiling following my glimpse at the structures of power that limited the agency

[79] As I discuss in greater detail in my introduction, Culler argues that "convergences [between the poem and 9/11] led readers to take this poem as particularly apt, particularly true" (*Theory of the Lyric* 341).

I had previously believed democratic citizens to hold. For all that moved me as a reader of Auden's "September 1, 1939," I could not find a way to approach it in writing at that time because my interest rested neither in the language of the poem nor in the archival context but primarily in the way the poem moved me emotionally. In other words, my reception of the poem was a quintessentially sentimental reading motivated by my identification with a literary representation of emotional experience during a historical crisis.

Perhaps it was for the best that I never attempted to write about the poem during the years in which I most strongly identified with Auden's persona. My sentimental engagement with the poem rests on an untenable parallel between the beginning of World War II and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Furthermore, it rests on a naïve sense of Auden's revision as the idiosyncratic choice of an individual poet rather than as a reflection of a larger reading culture. The original version of the poem hardly supports a thesis that "we must love one another or die." Instead, the authority of the quoted line rests on a type of sentimental reading practice that seeks optimism, hope, and easy consolation from emotional engagement with literature. In retrospect, it seems fitting that I formed an attachment to this Auden poem at the same time that Juliana Spahr, Claudia Rankine, and C.D. Wright composed the works that I study in my dissertation and at the time Anne Carson published many of her translations of Euripides. They, too, spent the war years reading: Sappho, Stevens, Celan, Oppen, H.D., Euripides, Kharms, Woolf. As sentimental readers, Spahr, Rankine, Wright, and Carson may seem to practice the same untenable historicism that informs my attachment to Auden's "September 1, 1939." However, Rankine, Wright, and Carson do not dehistoricize their readings as much as they turn to historical texts in order to develop a conceptual apparatus to describe an affective element of democratic life. In my chapters, I attended to forms of address in Rankine, Wright, and Carson as a scholar of poetics in order to delineate genres of contemporary

sentimentality. To conclude, I wish to consider the works of these poets not as *objects* of inquiry but as *methods* of inquiry in order to suggest a model of sentimental reading that is conditioned on viewing them not primarily as poets but essentially as researchers who show how a sentimental engagement with historical texts can serve readers in the present.

Regarding a slightly different canon of experimental women poets, Sianne Ngai observes a similar uncertainty about the role of the critic in relation to the role of the poet. Writing about women poets influenced by Language writing's emphasis on deconstruction, Ngai observes that "the now academically routinized notion of the open, polysemous, and endlessly self-differing text, as initially developed in post-1968 post-structuralist readings of canonical literature, often feels belated with post-1968 language-centered writing" (*Ugly Feelings* 306-7). Steeped as they are in the same intellectual discourses, poet and critic can only repeat each others' discoveries. We might identify a continuation of this trend in the critical championing of Juliana Spahr's *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* (indeed, Ngai examines Spahr's 1996 volume *Response*). For Rankine, Wright, and Carson, however, deconstruction's insights about the nature of the person are grounds for deeper inquiry into what it means to say "I" or "you" in a poem. The belatedness that Ngai notes does not similarly haunt me as critic of these three poets because they regard the constructedness of the person as a prod to further inquiry rather than as the last word about interiority. Additionally, Rankine, Wright, and Carson are interested in exploring this form of subjectivity as it is contextualized in particular circumstances such as war, xenophobic violence, and the corruption of the national polis. They explore shared emotional states in addition to shared intellectual discourses.

The form of poetic inquiry that Lyn Hejinian develops in *Language of Inquiry* (2000) serves as a useful foil to the sentimental inquiry I identify in Rankine, Wright, and Carson because

Hejinian's poetics embody the dynamic of belatedness that Ngai describes. Drawing on post-structuralist notions of "flow" and "process," Hejinian asserts "the language of poetry is a language of inquiry" as readers become active participants in meaning-making (3). In Hejinian's account, reading Language poetry becomes political for the way it demolishes traditional hierarchies of knowledge-production:

> The 'open text,' by definition is open to the world and particularly to the reader. It invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies. It speaks for writing that is generative rather than directive. The writer relinquishes total control and challenges authority as a principle and control as a motive. The 'open text' often emphasizes or foregrounds process, either the process of the original composition or of subsequent compositions by readers, and thus resists cultural tendencies that seek to identify and fix material and turn it into a product; that is, it resists reduction and commodification. (43)

Yet, for Rankine, Wright, and Carson, the supposed hierarchy between reader and writer is less important to examine than the shared situation of elegiac citizens in sensing impeded agency in the face of state power. As a form of opening the text to the reader, address for these poets calls "you" into awareness of this (unevenly) shared position. Whereas Hejinian describes "Faustian longings" to know everything (52), elegiac citizens instead foreground the dizzying range of world history that a reader would need to know in order to take responsibility for their present. I have focused on the particular problem of wartime in these poets' oeuvres because it stands as a limit to imagining the politics of poetry given the distance between the poet and the realm of possible intervention. To conclude, I want to turn to moments in other works by Rankine, Wright, and Carson in order to show how they theorize reading as a mode of inquiry for the way it stages the sentimental engagement of the individual reader as a mode of self expansion which connects "you" to the histories which formed "you."

Although address emerges as a central feature of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, Rankine's subsequent volume *Citizen* (2014) theorizes "you" more explicitly. From the earliest reviews to the latest scholarly assessments, Rankine's critics identify the political power of this volume in the rhetorical effect of her use of address.[80] Overwhelmingly, the scholarly account has built upon Virginia Jackson's concept of lyricization in order to argue that Rankine's innovative use of address defies the universal identification associated with the practice of lyric reading.[81] While interpretations of Rankine's "American Lyrics" through the framework of lyricization have done much to define the mode of subjectivity that Rankine develops in these volumes of poetry, I would add that we need the discourse of sentimentality in order to describe the mode of inquiry modeled in Rankine's poetics. Rankine's form of address defies New Critical models of lyric reading not only by deconstructing the universal (implicitly white and masculine) reader but also by requiring sentimental reading strategies that insist on a continuity between the world of the reader and that of the text. Crafting an emotional transmission from the poem to the reader, Rankine replaces the universal lyric reader with the sentimental citizen.

In the oft-cited opening sections of *Citizen*, Rankine's addresses to the second person situates the reader in a racial identity that they may or may not share. In the fifth section, Rankine's address situates the reader particularly within a racialized *poetic* consciousness. Staging a debate with Robert Lowell (one that might be understandable to Hejinian), Rankine offers a

[80] For early critical approaches that focus on address in *Citizen* see Erica Hunt, "All About You" and Evie Shockley, "Race, Reception, and Claudia Rankine's 'American Lyric."

[81] Anthony Reed argues that Rankine is part of a tradition in recent Black experimental poetry that "chafes at the confidence that the other is a surrogate self, 'the' reader, reliably thinking and feeling in ways identical or even 'kindred' to the self in the poem" ("The Erotics of Mourning" 27). Kamran Javadizadeh similarly argues that "the 'you' of *Citizen* remains skeptical of its ability to locate a stable referent in the reader who holds the book in hand" (481). See also Nikki Skillman and Walt Hunter.

deconstructive reading of his first person: "Sometimes 'I' is supposed to hold what is not there until it is. Then *what is* comes apart the closer you are to it. / That makes the first person a symbol for something. / The pronoun barely holding a person together [. . .] You said 'I' has so much power: it's insane" (71). For Rankine, the pronoun "I" has no straightforward signifying purpose: people are too diffuse and too determined by external forces for such a belief. This becomes a particular problem for the poet and puts the poetic "I" in relation to "you": "the first person can't pull you together . . . Tried rhyme, tried truth, tried epistolary untruth, tried and tried / You really did. Everyone understood you to be suffering and still everyone thought you thought you were the sun—nevermind our unlikeness, you too have heard the noise in your voice" (71). By narrating her poetic development in the second person, Rankine asks her readers to assume her intellectual and aesthetic trajectory. By acknowledging the unlikeness between referents of the two pronouns, Rankine foregrounds the difficulty of address yet defends it by pointing to a shared sense of incoherent subjectivity. And the incoherence reflects a shared historical inheritance: "it's a strange beach; each body is a strange beach, and if you let in the excess emotion you will recall the Atlantic Ocean breaking on our heads" (73). As the Atlantic Ocean evokes the slave trade, Rankine suggests that by letting in excess emotion and allowing ourselves to be sentimental readers, we arrive at a stance beyond empathy where we can literally "recall" horrors that did not occur to us and understand them more deeply. Rankine develops a sentimental reading practice in which the creation of new feelings leads also to an apprehension of the historical forces that cause those feelings.

Wright's *Rising, Falling, Hovering* is part of a movement later in her career toward book-length poems that depend heavily on research in order to explore themes of civic significance. The preceding book in her oeuvre *One Big Self: An Investigation* (2003) theorizes the relationship

between Wright's "I", her "you," and the world she represents in writing. Situating herself in a manner that self-consciously calls attention to her privilege vis-à-vis her subject matter of mass incarceration, Wright states, "I am going to prison in order to write about it. Like a nineteenth-century traveler" (xv). By presenting herself in this antiquated role, Wright emphasizes the apparent distance between her life and those of her subjects. This ironizing self-description follows a more fractured reckoning with the implications of her poetic project: "Not to idealize, not to judge, not to exonerate, not to aestheticize immeasurable levels of pain. Not to demonize, not to anathematize. What I wanted was to unequivocally lay out the real feel of hard time. I wanted it given to understand that when you pass four prisons in less than an hour, the countryside's apparent emptiness is more legible" (xiv). The anaphora of negations shows Wright rejecting possible roles for the prison writer: these various roles might be unified in that they all imply a stance that the writer takes toward their subject. Wright wrests herself from this problem by considering her reader instead: she writes less for the sake of her subject and more for the possibility of giving her reader a sense of a subject that would otherwise be unavailable. By moving from claims about representing feeling to an address to the second person, Wright develops an aspiration to bring "you" to a place in the world where you may not be able to go.

For Wright, this form of address has a possible social significance:

> The popular perception is that art is apart. I insist that it is a part of. Something not in dispute is that people in prison are apart from. If you can accept—whatever the level of discipline and punishment you adhere to momentarily aside—that the ultimate goal should be to reunite the separated with the larger human enterprise, it might behoove us to see prisoners, among others, as they elect to be seen, in their larger selves. If we go there, if not with our bodies then at least with our minds, we are more likely to register the implications. (xiv)

Wright's use of the first person plural suggests a way in which the act of reading joins reader and writer together. Wright defines the action of reading through the way it moves minds. Wright does

not promise that her writing will lead to a deed such as prison abolition, but ascribes to it the more modest goal of being able to enlarge readers' understanding of the world to include what they cannot see. Wright's sentimentality trains her readers to move from the seen to the unseen. Her aspiration to inspire shared dread in *Rising, Falling, Hovering* might thus be seen as part of a larger project of introducing relatively privileged readers to a fuller understanding of the shared world. Her sentimentality inspires not pity but awareness of the obscured elements of a reader's present.

Sentimental reading practices are a defining characteristic of Carson's style from her first work *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986) onwards. In her study of love and literacy at the classical advent of lyric, Carson defines eros as a "foreign" force and "enemy" that overwhelms afflicted individuals while, paradoxically, also allowing individuals to become conscious of their own boundaries as they inevitably meet frustration while reaching for a foreign object outside of themselves (4, 32-3). Literacy emerges as an analogous practice for Carson. Contrasting the norms of an oral culture in which an individual is in "a continuous interaction linking him to the world outside him" (43-4), she argues that literacy "encourages a heightened awareness of personal physical boundaries and a sense of those boundaries as the vessel of one's self" (44-5). To repel these strangers, eros and literature, lovers and readers must work to maintain the boundaries of which they have become newly aware. Reading with this form of self-control (or, in Greek, sophrosyne) allows literature to become a technology that produces sovereign subjects: "As separable, controllable units of meaning, each with its own visible boundary, each with its own fixed and independent use, written words project their user into isolation" (50). This anti-sentimental form of literacy resists the stranger by keeping the text separate from the self that reads.

But you cannot read Anne Carson in that way. Throughout her oeuvre, Carson punctuates her books with sharp turns to address the second person in which she calls forth a variety of reactions: vocal responses, imaginative or contemplative exercises, or simply self-awareness in the act of reading. Consider how she frames her critique of this anti-sentimental form of literacy in *Eros the Bittersweet*. Offering a reading of Plato's *Phaedrus* in order to define a different response to eros in love and reading, Carson explains: "Sokrates' central argument, as he goes on to reevaluate madness, is that you keep your mind to yourself at the cost of closing out the gods. Truly good and indeed divine things are alive and active outside you and should be let in to work their changes. [. . .] Madness is the instrument of such intelligence. More to the point, erotic mania is a valuable thing in private life. It puts wings on your soul" (155). On the one hand, this passage offers an academic argument where Socrates serves as evidence to define and champion the experience of eros. However, Carson's decision to present Socrates' argument in the second person sentimentalizes her logic by implicating her reader's emotional life in its development. If "you" are to attend to the language of this text and come to understand its reliance on address, "you" must let this stranger define "you." From the protagonist in the "The Glass Essay" who "feel[s she] is turning into Emily Brontë" (1) to depictions of readers of Marcel Proust, Daniil Kharms, and Christina Rossetti in *Red Doc>*, sentimental reading emerges as a form of self construction for Carson. By contrast with avant-garde theories of self construction as happening ambiently and generically through late capitalist culture, Carson turns her eyes to sentimental reading practices as a form of becoming a self by interacting with a stranger. For Carson, lack of a self is not a given, but a state achieved through intellectual labor: as she articulates it in *Decreation*, "to undo self one must work through self" (179). Reading is a way of realizing one's own plurality.

In the poetics of Rankine, Wright, and Carson, address emotionally implicates their readers and demands a sentimental engagement. In addition to shaping readers' encounters with their work, their forms of address also teach readers to feel addressed by works of literature that may not contain such explicit references to "you." Their forms of sentimentality thus train readers to see and value continuities between historical texts and the present scene of reading. Far from a dehistoricizing reading practice, this sentimentality insists on the historical situatedness of both the literary text and the reader of literature. Consequently, emotional identification emerges not as a transhistorical communion of souls but as a hint toward how we as readers might understand the forces that shape our emotional needs, and especially our need for consolation, in the present.

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