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Poetics of a Black Revolt

Abstract: This essay is written as a response to the compounded crises of police brutality and the Covid-19 pandemic, in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement reignited by the death of George Floyd in 2020. It aims to show how anti-blackness and capitalism are the common denominators contributing to mass death in both crises. The essay explores the possibilities for poetry as radical practice, particularly the work of Black women poets such as Audre Lorde, Ericka Huggins and Warsan Shire. What becomes evident is the centrality of the Black body in reimagining the future, despite its historical emergence from the slave body. I argue that we must return to and reaffirm the bodies that Judith Butler calls abject within theory and poetics, in order to better protect the lives that inhabit them.

Keywords: Blackness, Poetics, Black Lives Matter, Black Body, Marxism, Afro-Pessimism, Crisis Capitalism, Covid-19, Police Brutality

Resumé: J'ai écrit cet article comme une réponse aux crises de la pandémie et de la brutalité policière, au contexte du mouvement social de Black Lives Matter déclenché par la mort de George Floyd. Je dispute que l'anti-blackness et le capitalisme sont les éléments fondamentaux des deux crises. J'examine les possibilités de la poésie dans la pratique radicale, particulièrement le travail des poètes femmes noires: Audre Lorde, Ericka Huggins, et Warsan Shire. Ce qui devient évident est la centralité du corps noir par la re-imagination du futur, malgré leur origine historique au corps d'esclave. Nous devons affirmer et revenir aux corps que Judith Butler appelle "abject" dans la théorie et la poétique, ainsi nous pouvons protéger les vies qui les habite.

Mots-clés: Blackness, Black Lives Matter, le corps noir, le marxisme, l'afro-pessimisme, le capitalisme en crise, Covid-19, la brutalité policière

I.

The blacker the berry the sweeter the juice
A kid dies, the blacker the killer, the sweeter the news
And if he's white you give him a chance, he's ill and confused
If he's black he's probably armed, you see him and shoot

–– Dave, "Black"

What do we mean when we speak of the Black body? I think of a scene from Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight*; Terrel forces Kevin to play "knock down, stay down" and Chiron (whom Kevin nicknames "Black") is chosen as the victim. The game is as much a test of the resilience of the victim, as it is of the cruelty of the perpetrator: it ends once the former can no longer stand up after being knocked down. On the fourth blow, Chiron stays down. When Chiron rises up again, it is to return the violence back to its orchestrator: Terrel. Chiron is taken away by the police, and reappears in the next scene as a hardened adult. It is an apt analogy for the treatment of History's other in general, and of the criminalisation of blackness and poverty in the United States in particular.

When I think of the Black body, I think of George Floyd, "a 46-year-old African American man who was killed when he was arrested by four Minneapolis police officers and one knelt on his neck" (Lutz/Pengelly 2020: para. 1). George Floyd, the Black father and friend and whose death has reignited a movement in the United States, online, and across the world. The images of anger and retribution have an air of the apocalyptic, particularly against the backdrop of pandemic and mass death. When the world as you know it feels like it's coming to an end, and all you can do is write an essay, you inevitably write about the end of the world.

The people of the world are facing capitalist realism, racial terror, environmental and humanitarian crises (Yemen, Syria and Palestine to name just a few). Nor can we forget that we are often on stolen land, or that our own land was stolen from us, or that that land is now at risk from a climate crisis. I write against a history of catastrophe that must come to an end, or else leave us dead in the wake. I offer up this essay as a poetic study of life when life seems impossible: so that we may understand what it means to fall into the black hole of the present and emerge out of the other side. I offer up my words in the tradition of Maya Angelou, Ericka Huggins, Angela Davis, and Audre Lorde. Above all else, this is a love letter to murdered ancestors and stolen potential.

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II.

Don't hold me, don't hold me
When niggas is dying and dying
And I'm afraid of the dark
Blue and the white
Badges and pistols rejoice in the night
And we watch the news
And we see him die tonight

–– Noname, "Casket Pretty"

In a live teach-in hosted by Rising Majority, Naomi Klein and Angela Davis discussed the early lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic that was just beginning to take hold of the west. Against an upsurge of online eco-fascism that declared "nature is healing" now that human beings are (for the most part) confined to their homes (or dying), Klein urges us to see capitalism rather than humanity as the problem (Klein, in Rising Majority 2020: 6'54''). She insists that the pandemic is symptomatic of "our war on nature" that it is an expression of an "economic system built upon the willingness to sacrifice life" (*ibidem*). Her claims are, of course, well founded. Uri Friedman, in *The Atlantic*, reports that in 2017 (then) US President-elect Donald Trump's officials were shown a model of a "flu pandemic that halts international travel, upends global supply chains, tanks the stock market, and burdens health-care systems—all with a vaccine many months from materializing" (Friedman 2020: para. 3). Friedman attributes the unpreparedness to "systematic failure… [of] successive administrations" (*idem*: para. 8), falling short of declaring, as activist Loan Tran does, "Covid-19 is the virus. Capitalism is the crisis" (Tran, in Rising Majority 2020: 56'03'').

How do we distinguish between a "systematic failure" and a "willingness to sacrifice life", particularly in the context of Black lives, who have been overrepresented in both Covid-19 deaths in the West and in incidents of police brutality? The common denominators in both crises are anti-blackness and capitalism, and the relation between the two. Annie Olaluka-Teriba's essay, "Afro-Pessimism and the (Un)Logic of Anti-Blackness" published in *Historical Materialism*, aims to "address the emergence of Afro-pessimism" (Olaluka-Teriba 2018: para. 8). Olaluka-Teriba understands the central tenet of afro-pessimism (particularly of Wilderson) "to dis-analogise the violence of white supremacy and that of anti-blackness" (*idem*: para. 4). A theory that is opposed to the radical politics of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton, who understood "the black/white antagonism within the context of a broader critique of the USA's imperialism, intercommunalism conceived of blackness as historically contingent and aspired to the abolition of race altogether" (*idem*: para. 6). Olaluka-Teriba argues

that the danger in the afro-pessimist conception of blackness is that "this account of how the world works genuinely believe that these identities – and the conflicts which they purportedly entail – are insurmountable" (*idem*: para. 66). That is, if blackness is understood as beginning with slavery (as the US-centric model implies) then there is no real possibility of overcoming that condition, since "blackness [is] unmoored from time and space by a ruthless disregard for material historical processes" (*idem*: para. 10). The historical materialist camp would prefer that we understand blackness as symptomatic of the dominance of white supremacist capitalist imperialism that emanates from the United States and Western Europe. I argue that we should not abandon the theory of anti-blackness as a specific form of racism foundational to the world system but rather understand it within the broader context of historical domination of the subject. The afro-pessimistic model of (anti-)blackness as foundation can offer valuable insight into why Asian-American police officer Tou Thao could stand idly by while Chauvin slowly murdered an already handcuffed Floyd.

Why Black people were so long ago marked as the ultimate target of white supremacy is beyond comprehension, but the relation between anti-blackness and capital has long been documented. Ava Duvernay's documentary *13th* (2016) details the history and present of mass incarceration in the United States: arising out of a need for labour in the aftermath of the (formal) abolition of slavery and evolving into a for-profit industry that incentivises criminalisation. The (increasingly privatised) prison system, like slavery before it, has always been inextricably linked to the system of capital that has become the global socioeconomic norm. Marquis Bey summarises "to be Black is to always be guilty of crime" (Bey 2015: 6).

The loss of Black freedom (to slavery, poverty and the prison system) and Black lives (at the hands of the police or doctors that deny their pain) is all of the evidence we need to conclude that the loss of life is the system succeeding, not failing. Angela Davis adds that "global capitalism is responsible for the inability to counter this pandemic", since it is fundamentally disinterested in human life (Davies/Klein 2020). Her reading parallels Jameson's understanding of the transnational history of capitalist domination that has been unfolding throughout the modern age, and has catapulted us into postmodern existence. Jameson describes that "postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good" (Jameson 1991: ix). The sentiment is echoed in a poem by Black Panther member Ericka Huggins, featured in Angela Davis' incendiary collection on the US prison system, *If They Come in the Morning…*:

> the oldness of new things
> fascinate me like a new
> feeling about love about people
> snow, highways that

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sparkle at night, talk,
laughter…
that old longing for freedom
that this place constantly
renews -- it all makes
me know that humankind
has longed to be free ever forever
since its break from the
whole
maybe the longing for
freedom will soon make
others homesick for our
natural state in/with
earth, air, fire, water
but living
not dead
not asking for freedom --
but free --
(Huggins, in Davis 2016: 117)

Though historically predating the era that could be strictly termed the "postmodern", Huggins' poem has many of the features Jameson has argued are indicative of the postmodern condition and aesthetic. The fragments that appear broken and scattered across the page seem to start in the middle of a thought Huggins had, that the reader could not hear – reflective of both the fragmentation of the subject and the resulting impossibility of communication (Jameson 1991: 14). There is the recognition that "love" and "freedom" are feelings that belong to the past; that our separation from nature is ultimately our death, and that salvation lies in our return as free beings. What remains in Huggins' present is the longing for change, manifesting as homesickness and yearning. In a similar vein, *Lemonade* will bemoan "I don't know when love became elusive: what I know is that no one I know has it" (Warsan Shire, qtd. in Knowles 2016). I would caution against reading Huggins' emotional response from the most deprived conditions, the prison, as empty pastiche. Although this may seem like the legitimate reading in order to establish her work amongst postmodern literature that is liberated from all feeling, "since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling" (Jameson 1991: 15), I propose instead that we understand the yearning that calls out of Huggins' poetry as a desire to feel, for there is still a memory of the self that is denied. The self as "whole" and one with nature, remains as an idea that has tremendous strength. It is an idea that Huey P. Newton defends against the logic of the prison:

> Because the human whole is much greater than the sum of its parts. The ideas will always be among the people. The prison cannot be victorious because walls, bars and guards cannot conquer or hold down an idea. (Newton, in Davis 2016: 64)

The similarities between the prison and the concentration camp need no exaggeration. This is particularly evident during the Covid-19 pandemic when "a three-month sentence is tantamount to a death sentence" (Davis/Klein 2020: 14'00''). The prison has always been a site of enslavement and death, where the fate of the prisoners is ultimately decided by the guard. To say that there is nothing outside of the prison is to understand that "the prison sits at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression and facets of society and when you map it out we're all in that web" (Kaba and Nichols 2020). The camp is no longer the exception but the rule, and it has a multitude of manifestations: the prison, immigration detention centres, Xinjiang "re-education" camps, and Gaza. Its "logic of totalitarianism" (Davis 2016: 44) extends beyond its formal borders into the ghetto, the city, and embedding itself in our social and economic relations. Considering life "After Auschwitz" (the camp), Adorno concludes: "There is no getting out of this, no more than out of the electrified barbed wire around the camps" (Adorno 2004: 362). And yet we still write poetry since "perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream" (*ibidem*).

How then should we understand Huggins' poetry in relation to her revolutionary politics? Keston Sutherland follows on from Adorno's conception of art as an expression of suffering, to an understanding of poetics as "how everything [we] do and suffer continues to exist in a vexatious and existentially demanding relationship to beauty" (Sutherland 2006: 120). The discipline of poetics, as an ontology of the present, is thus always a study of life lived in the prison: how we continue to exist in spite of the camp, and how the subject might survive their own death.

III.

> *So what are you gonna say at my funeral, now that you've killed me? Here lies the body of the love of my life, whose heart I broke without a gun to my head. Here lies the mother of my children, both living and dead… Her heaven will be a love without betrayal.*
>
> –– Warsan Shire and Beyonce, "Apathy", *Lemonade*

Writing on the poetry of Lemonade (2016), *New York Times* culture critic Amanda Hess describes the film as an "exploration of family, infidelity and the black female body" (Hess 2016: para. 2). Such a reading minimises the tremendous scope of the *Lemonade* project, and the accompanying poetry by Warsan Shire. Hess's explanation fails to account for the feminist maxim that the personal is indeed political. While *Lemonade*

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is a deeply personal account of the destruction and reconstitution of a marriage, the work finds political basis in the words of Malcom X: "the most disrespected person in America is the Black woman… the most neglected person in America is the Black woman" (Knowles 2016: 13'35"). Self-described Blackgirl advocate, Dominique Hill, asks us to understand the condition of black womanhood, not simply as the overlap of two distinct oppressions (anti-blackness and misogyny), but as the intersection (following on from Kimberle Crenshaw's distinction). She maintains that, "Blackgirl one word rejects compartmentalization of Blackgirls' lives, stories, and bodies and serves as a symbolic transgression to see them/us as complex and whole" (Hill 2019: 276). She refers to herself as a "Blackgirlwoman" to emphasise how her formative experience as a Blackgirl is the foundation of the woman she is today. Her research continues in the tradition of "Black feminism [that]… posits the Black female body as a site of injury and possibility. Black females and our bodies are bound to history" (*idem*: 277). It is within this context of Blackgirlwoman-hood that we ought to understand the poetry and politics of *Lemonade*.

The inherited and intergenerational trauma, both individual and collective, inflicted on the Black woman is the focus of *Lemonade*. Shire's poetry is critical of this historical condition of Blackgirlwoman-hood: "The past and the future merge to meet us here. What luck. What a fucking curse" ("Intuition", in Knowles 2016: 3'07"). "Here" is a specific locale in both space and time, the present moment is understood as embodied in the Black woman, in life and perhaps more so in death.

Breonna Taylor was a 26-year-old Black woman, whose name, like so many others, the world learned after she was murdered by the police. *The New York Times* reports that the police entered Taylor's home "shortly after midnight on March 13th" and "after a brief confrontation, they fired several shots, striking her at least eight times" as she lay in her bed (Oppel 2020: para. 3). Louisville police entered the premises as part of an investigation of "two men who they believed were selling drugs out of a house that was far from Ms. Taylor's home" (idem: para. 4). In a conversation between Saidiya Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson III on the issue of the (anti-)blackness, Hartman invokes Achille Mbembe's distinction: "essentially, he says, the slave is the object to whom anything can be done, whose life can be squandered with impunity" (Hartman/Wilderson 2003: 188). It seems that in the criminal justice system of the United States, the Black body has hardly evolved beyond the slavebody. In the aftermath of Breonna Taylor's murder, no action was taken against her perpetrators until the public outcry against police brutality following the public execution of George Floyd. To be a Blackgirlwoman is to be neglected in conversations on the machinations of both race and gender; to be completely at the mercy of all. To reecho Warsan Shire's words, "what a fucking curse" (Shire, in Knowles 2016).

Despite the trauma, we cannot forget the "potential" that exists at the site of injury that is the Blackgirlwoman's body. Hill concludes her exploration with the following statement:

> To go beyond (re)memory to return in an embodied sense to that space is to both (re)member and celebrate Black girlhood as a space of knowing. To, as a woman, (re)member one's Blackgirlness then, is to recover those things displaced in the process of becoming adult, becoming woman. Furthermore, this process engenders a new orientation to Blackgirls and self. (Hill 2019: 281)

The notion of embodiment has a multitude of applications across fields, from medicine and psychology to philosophy and poetics. Jennifer Lewis reads a "phenomenology of embodied experience" in the nineteenth century writing of escaped slave and abolitionist, Frederick Douglass. Lewis argues "to read Douglass fully" is to read "the ways slaves were perpetually made to experience their bodies as burdensomely present, rather than vanishingly transparent: as skin and hair, and fragmented, fragile, corporeal material that constantly demanded attention" (Lewis 2019: 1661-2). And given that Hartman and Wilderson both theorise that the Blackbody (in the present) has its origins in the slavebody, the ontological condition of blackness is in itself connected to the experience of the slavebody. Thus, an exploration of blackness is an examination of the ways we have been historically conditioned to experience our bodies, and vice versa, how the experience of our bodies determines our sense of self as Black people.

The idea of embodied experience is carefully considered in the work, and indeed life, of (Black, lesbian, mother, lover, warrior, poet) Audre Lorde. Margaret Kissam Morris reads Lorde's prose and poetry in conjunction with Rosi Braidotti's theory of the body "at the intersection of the biological and the symbolic" (Braidotti in Morris 2002: 168). The experience of the Black lesbian woman's body in Lorde's writing, is "the beginning of political action" (Morris 2002: 173). It is the body she constructs in "To the Poet who happens to be Black and the Black Poet who happens to be a Woman", the body "born in the gut of Blackness/from between my mother's particular thighs" (Lorde 2001: 813). The poem opens with this grounding of the self in the Blackbody, not just her own but also her mother's. Blackness is seen as a condition of birth, from a lineage that can be traced back through generations, ultimately arriving at the slavebody out of which it emerged. The stanza continues, "her waters broke upon blue-flowered linoleum/and turn to slush in the Harlem cold" (ibidem). The image of the holy water of the womb consecrating the concrete is a ritualistic binding of her body to the immediately hostile cold ground.

In "Making Love to Concrete" the cold ground returns again, to mould and shape its inhabitants, both body and mind. Lorde warns "you cannot make love to concrete/ if you cannot pretend/concrete needs your loving" (Lorde 1991: 41). "Making love" as a physical act of intimacy that goes beyond just sex, is infused with the symbolism of romance, passion, warmth that the concrete cannot return. The poem is a guide to survival in the city as much as it is an appeal to a lover on how to love someone who has been hardened by the brutality of the ghetto. The symbolic and the corporeal combine to form the concrete self. As the poem continues the concrete erodes, the "abutment"

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becomes a "barrel" repurposed to support a wooden beam. A barrel that can be filled, a barrel that can hold, a barrel that will eventually decay and return to the earth. A delicate bridge between the self and the other, that is what is needed for "making love" once we are beyond (the) concrete. This is a reconstruction of the self within words, Morris asserts that this is "wholeness beyond the destructive effects of oppression" (Morris 2002: 170). It does not just arise in erotic love, it is also buried in the memory of a love shared in a past life:

> The first time I touched my sister alive
> I was sure the earth took note
> but we were not new
> false skin peeled off like gloves of fire
> yoked flame I was
> stripped to the tips of my fingers
> her song written into my palms my nostrils my belly
> welcome home
> in a language I was pleased to relearn.
> (Lorde 2001: 813)

The idea of the whole recurs again, as it did in Huggins' poem: not as something we discover but to which we return, or "relearn". A history that is written into the "palms", "nostrils" and "belly". Marquis Bey's reading of the body asks us to understand it as "a text onto which scripts and meanings are inscribed. Bodies are the ways in which we constitute the knowledge of the world" (Bey 2015: 6). I imagine the empty spaces that separate the words in the poem ("sure the earth" and "language I was") not as breaks, but gaps. The empty spaces serve as placeholders for words we have not yet learned how to say with our pens or our mouths, yet the gap remains to remind us that that knowledge awaits our rediscovery. We enter that world through poetry and metaphor – powerful linguistic tools against the reduction of meaning in existence – but also at the meeting of bodies, sisters, in love and solidarity. Psychologist and academic Lynne Jacobs understands metaphor as "the meeting of that which is spoken and that which is not"; she continues: "all metaphor refers us to our bodies, and that our embodiment orients us, which is our starting place for all experience" (Jacobs 2011: 210). The body and the poem, both occupy liminal space as embodiments of experience, emotion, politics, philosophy and History. The fragmentation of both is indicative of the violence done against the subject (as Black, as woman, as trans-). Drawing on personal experience and psychological theory, Jacobs remarks that "a notable exception to a sense of the fluidity and wholeness of my experience is when I am in a traumatized state of mind" (*idem*: 209). As I have shown, with Douglass, Davis, Hartman and many more the experience of blackness is inherently traumatic –– we live in spite of being marked for

death. Since "mortality has racial and gender connotations" (Morris 2002: 174), "Women of Color in America", says Lorde,

> have grown up with a symphony of anger, at being silenced, at being unchosen, at knowing that when we survive, it is in spite of a world that takes for granted our lack of humanness, and which hates our very existence outside of its service. (Lorde, in Morris 2002: 170-1)

All of these racist phenomena exist in relation to the prison and the criminal justice system as a site of exploitation[2] and extermination, and we all live as "potential victims of the fascist terror" (Davis 2016: 43). It is a wonder we still live at all.

IV.

Let us start with the glass walls of the greenhouse, as a demonstration.
Let the rage that says I cannot speak not speak.
Let it suck speech into its terrible maw and leave us shuddering in silence.

Tsitsi Ella Jaji, "To Bless the Memory of Tamir Rice"

The idea of the body has been problematic for radical politics, especially with (un) concern for black, disabled, and trans people. In response, contemporary feminist theorists have tried to liberate the self from the body, to remove the body from political and philosophical discourse. Instead Judith Butler calls attention to the "abject" bodies:

> The abject designates here precisely those "unlivable" and "uninhabitable" zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the "unlivable" is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. (Butler 1998: xiii)

In Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's Becoming Human, the figure of the Black mater is the matrix over which the subject can inscribe and assert itself. Butler and Jackson both affirm the need to return to the body, the abject body, the Black body as foundational to theory since "bodies in fact carry discourses as part of their own lifeblood" (Butler, in Meijer/ Prinje 1998: 282). Or as Marquis Bey insists, "there is no life without the body. That is to say, Black lives can only matter if Black bodies matter first" (Bey 2015: 7).

Jackson argues that the "black mater holds the potential to transform the terms of reality and feeling, therefore rewriting the conditions of possibility of the empirical" (Jackson 2020: 101). Lorde's poetry can be read as the praxis to this theory: centering and reimagining the body as a site of potential, to reconstruct it not in the shadows, but in the light. This continues on in a long tradition of radical poets, from Neruda to the present.

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Roland Bleiker declares the task of the poet as beyond representation: "The poet's task is to help us see familiar things in new ways, to make us recognise how we have constituted our vision of the world and, by extension, the world itself" (Bleiker 1999: 1140). He argues this with respect to Neruda's more overtly political works, such as Canto General, though as Jorge Heine notes "Neruda himself insisted that not only his poetry but also his personal life and his politics formed an indivisible whole" (Heine 2013: 285). And so, in turn we must read all of Neruda's work and life in relation to politics. Emerging, begins with an exploration of the human condition and its social commitments, as experienced as a weight on the body and as silencing the tongue:

> It seems as if we don't know how to speak;
> it seems as if there are words which escape,
> which are missing, when have gone away and left us
> to ourselves, tangled up in snares and threads.
> (Neruda 1974)

The act of speech is itself a form of embodiment. To speak is to take ownership of language and thought, to (re)create those familiar sounds first in the throat, on the tongue and teeth, finally escaping out of the lips. Black poets rebel against the pressure to be silent, even as they surrender to it: "slowly did not speak another word" (Shire, in Knowles 2016). Even as we continue to part our lips and make sounds, it is no longer rooted in the body, no more can I say that these words are my own, since all movement, all action, all speech has become "impossible" (Neruda 1974). Our bodies are no longer our own, they are "caught up" in the web "of other beings", to whom we are bound at the expense of us all:

> one thread wraps itself around our necks,
> another entwines a foot, and then it is impossible,
> impossible to move except in the well
> (*ibidem*)

This image of bound and fragmented bodies, not whole but an assortment of necks and feet, does not lead Neruda to despair. The final stanza ends on an image of hope that can only be achieved by a reclaiming of what is within us:

> And therefore when you sleep, you are alone in your dreaming,
> and running freely through the corridors
> of one dream only, which belongs to you.
> Oh never let them come to steal our dreams,
> never let them entwine us in our bed.

> Let us hold on to the shadows
> to see if, from our own obscurity,
> we emerge and grope along the walls,
> lie in wait for the light, to capture it,
> till, once and for all time,
> it becomes our own, the sun of every day.
> (*ibidem*)

The poet recognises the revolutionary potential of illegibility ("obscurity"). The bound, abject body that exists in the "shadowy regions of ontology" (Butler, in Meijer/ Prinje 1998: 277) uses this darkness as its strength. In the darkness we learn to see with our hands, as we "grope along the walls" in search of escape from "the well". Our bodies, our visions, and our unity will be our salvation. To reecho Huey P. Newton, "the prison cannot be victorious because" wells, graves, concrete "cannot conquer or hold down an idea" (Newton, in Davis 2016: 64).

V.

> *But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams*
> *his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream*
> *his wings are clipped and his feet are tied*
> *so he opens his throat to sing.*
>
> –– Maya Angelou, "Caged Bird"

What is poetry? Writing in the wake of the Arab Spring, John Lundberg insists that "If you have any doubts as to the power of a great poet's witnessing, you need only look at the impact of Al-Shabi's century-old words on Tunisia, and on Egypt and beyond" (Lundberg 2011: para. 12). Poetry proved a powerful tool for the insurgent people during the uprisings that took place in the last decade, particularly in Tunisia, as noted by Mohamed-Salah Omri:

> Poetry or poetic acts were everywhere in this revolution. All of it is worth recording, regardless of aesthetic judgment. For this has been a remarkable moment for poetry and a triumph of a new way of formulating demands and aspirations. (Omri 2012: 140)

Omri's insistence on the value of the poetry that fuelled the revolution "regardless of [the] aesthetic" flies in the face of the aesthetic formalism of the New Critics. This is suggestive of a necessity for a more politically involved mode of criticism, or an

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"understanding of poetry as a political practice, and of politics as both a field of poetry and a danger to it" (*idem*: 156). Lundberg terms such poetry "protest poetry", and places Al-Shabi and Hesham al Jakh in a long global tradition stemming from Freneau and Shelley (Lundberg 2011: para. 6). Though Omri cautions against too distant a reading of the poetry and politics of the Tunisian revolution – "for such a local revolution, imagination had to be local" (Omri 2012: 152) – National revolutions in the Global South are often immediately successful, but the new states tend to combust internally or suffer from external imperialist forces. Hence why Angela Davis argues "one can't really be a true revolutionary without being cognizant of the need to link up with forces all over the world battling with imperialism" (Davis 2016: 190). So to paraphrase Omri, for such a global (queer Blackgirlwoman) revolution, imagination has to be global. Rather than ask what poetry is, we should perhaps ask what poetry could be?

At its best, poetry offers new visions of the world, a world that starts with the embodied whole self. In the face of the abjection, the silencing, and the policing of bodies, we affirm that these bodies and the lives that inhabit them, matter. To be sure, when we speak of the "body", it is not to be biologically essentialist or determinist, but to understand the body as both biological and symbolic matter, caged by external discourse and prison walls. Marquis Bey urges us to return to this body, our bodies: "we must hold in front of us the corporeal, not the abstracted heavenly afterthoughts of pristine, eulogized lives" (Bey 2015: 7). It is on the basis of this corporeal reality that Audre Lorde constructs her identity "that she attempts to render in both her prose and poetry" (Morris 2002: 168). Poetry can uplift, celebrate, reconstruct the bodies "deemed fundamentally invalid, uninhabitable, thus in need of extermination in order to preserve the order of things" (Bey 2015: 14). Whether those are the bodies of transwomen, or Black people, or Black transwomen who are disproportionate victims of state and interpersonal violence. Poetry reminds us that our bodies are concrete and real, yet malleable, fluid. Poetry allows us to create a new body, and with it a new self fully whole and fully embodied in the poem, that screams for us when we no longer have air to breathe, let alone speak. This is a body that survives its own torture and death at the hands of the white supremacist capitalism system, this is the Black body. Though we may be bound (physically, socially, economically), there still remains a memory of the self that could sing.

NOTES

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[1] Just as Haraway prefers to term our modern epoch the "capitalocene" rather than the "anthropocene", stating that "the "Anthropos" did not do this thing that threatens mass extinction, and that if we were to use only one word for the processes that we're talking about, it should be the Capitalocene (cf. Haraway 2016: 47).

[2] The Incarcerated Workers Organising Committee reports that "Prisoners that work in prisons have no rights to organise, no contracts, no pensions, no right to to choose what they do – they have no use of the gains that workers have fought and died for over centuries" ("Prison Labour" [s.d.]).

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