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# "Beyond Consolation": Or Strangeness, Estrangement, and Strange-ing in the Elegy for the Black Body, 1955-Present

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“Beyond Consolation” Or *Strangeness*, *Estrangement*, and *Strange-ing* in the Elegy for the  
Black Body, 1955-Present

by

Naomie Jean-Pierre

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the Masters of Literature  
degree in English in the Graduate College of  
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Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Lyn Di Iorio

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I would like to first acknowledge all the brown and black bodies, the fruit of strange racial violence, who were not able to make these pages, and for whom these pages exist. By writing these letters, I say your names.

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*for  
Middle  
Passengers,  
Thomas Shipp,  
& Abram Smith,  
E m m e t t T i l l,  
Four Little Girls:  
Carole Robertson, Cynthia  
Wesley, Denise McNair &  
Addie Mae Collins, Medgar  
Evers, Malcolm X, Martin  
Luther King, Jr., Fred  
Hampton, Clifford Glover,  
Denver A. Smith, Leonard  
Douglas Brown, MOVE  
Philadelphia and the Africa  
Family, Osage Street, Tupac  
Shakur, Amadou Diallo,  
Aiyana Jones, Troy Davis,  
Trayvon Martin, Tamir  
Rice, Michael Brown, Eric  
Garner, Jordan Russell  
Davis, John Crawford,  
R e n i s h a M c B r i d e,  
Sandra Bland, Philando  
Castille, Walter Scott, Alton  
Sterling, Tanisha Anderson,  
Aura Rosser, Freddie Gray,  
Jordan Davis, Rekia Boyd,  
Michelle Cusseaux,  
Megan Hackaday  
x, x, x, and  
many,  
many  
more.*

## ABSTRACT

*The Elegy for the Black Body* examines the mid-twentieth to early-twenty-first-century poetic justice crafted by African American poets to eulogize individual African Americans whose deaths were the result of racial and political violence. In the age of lynching, mass shooting, and police brutality, I argue that an African American poetic tradition persists that, while not entirely beholden to the ancient elegy, is its distant relative, along with the English and American Elegy. I argue further that while the contemporary American elegy has undergone for the last six decades intensive study, from the notable studies done by Peter Sack's in *The English Elegy from Spencer to Yeats's* to Melissa Zeiger's AIDS and Cancer study,<sup>1</sup> few have canonized the African American elegiac tradition<sup>2</sup>. This study leans on criticism of Jahan Ramazani, whose pioneering exploration of the variations and renovation found in a continuous string of poems by African American elegists provides a case for the elegy, not simply by African Americans, but elegies for the *black body*. The elegy for the black body micro-analyzes a selection of poems from 1955 to 2017, pulled from various styles and periods, but unified by theme and response to a racially violent narrative. So what constitutes the elegy for the black body? Is it what Jahan Ramazani calls the "lynching elegy" of Langston Hughes' *blues elegy*? Is it the persisting protest aesthetic of the post-Hughes blues elegy, the anti-consolatory *martyr* poem of the Black Arts Movement? Is it entangled in the protest poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks and Audre Lorde, whose *justice* elegies embody a maternal literary tradition of mourning that resists racial and sexual hegemonic violence? Is it inclusive of communal bodies and spaces as in Sonia Sanchez' *communal* elegy for the Philadelphia Osage Street bombing? Could it survive the 90's apathy towards slain famous black bodies as seen in the *fame* elegy for Tupac Shakur, or does it resurface in the microaggressions of a post-racial Obama America as seen in the *conceptual* elegy of Claudia Rankine? Does it extend into the *meta-elegies* for Eric Garner and Michael Brown as exemplified by Ross Gay and Danez Smith? These and much more constitute the elegy for the black body. Beginning with the blues oral tradition, this text highlights an *extractable* period of literary poetic response to the murder of black bodies. A long list of poets, major and minor spanning over six decades of African American poetry, tacitly respond to the horrific and racially violent deaths of black individuals, including children. These poets include, but are not limited to Langston Hughes, Sonia Sanchez, Amiri Baraka, Haki R. Madhubuti, Gwendolyn Brooks, Audre Lorde, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Claudia Rankine, Ross Gay, and Danez Smith—who together construct a compelling form for what can be termed the elegy for the black body. While adhering to traditional formulations of the elegy as a poem that is occasioned by death, the elegy for the black body distinguishes itself from other species of the elegy by going beyond sentiment and towards dissent. While it embraces grief, it also subverts it. While it approaches consolation, it also converts it, using tools both familiar and 'strange' to investigate and interrogate society—ultimately inscribing black bodies into literary meaning.

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<sup>1</sup> Melissa Ziegler explores gender elegies, the Aids elegies and Audre Lorde's cancer elegies in "Beyond Consolation: Death, Sexuality, and the changing shapes of Elegy".

<sup>2</sup> Jahan Ramazani explores the African American Elegy in his book, "The Poetry of Mourning"

“And I hate to do it here.  
To set myself heavily beside them.  
Not now that they’ve proven  
The body a myth, a parable  
For what not even language  
Moves quickly enough to name.”

-Tracy K. Smith, from *Duende*

"This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."  
Luke 22:19

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Strange Fruit<sup>3</sup>

Southern trees bear strange fruit  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root  
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze  
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees

Pastoral scene of the gallant south  
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth  
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh  
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh

Here is fruit for the crows to pluck  
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck  
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop  
Here is a strange and bitter crop

Written by Abel Meeropol  
Recorded by Billie Holiday in 1939  
*"Bitter Fruit," 1937*

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<sup>3</sup> First published in *The New York Teacher* magazine under the title "Bitter Fruit" by Abel Meeropol in 1937.

## INTRODUCTION: A BRIEF SURVEY OF THE ELEGY

The need to put mourning to poetic verse, to memorialize and lament individuals who have passed away is a human, not exclusively elegiac (Greek or English) inclination. The elegy, as the earliest extant category for “short poem[s], usually formal or ceremonious in tone and diction, occasioned by the death of a person,” has for centuries been the most recognized poetry of mourning. It has been practiced throughout the world, its earliest literary record in Ancient Greece (Preminger and Brogan 354). Other definitions of the elegy place it as “a poem of mortal loss and consolation” that “exists in all languages and poetries” (Hirsch 1). To that, the Oxford English Dictionary recognizes several Western translations for the term: the Irish *keen* and *whillaloo*, the Scottish *coronach*, the Jewish *threne*, the New Zealand *tangi*, the French *requiem*. Ruth Finnigan recognizes several African oral traditions such as the *zitengulo* songs of Zambia, the Akan *funeral dirges* of Ghana, the Yoruba *praise poetry* and Ibo funeral songs of Nigeria, the Ngoni *lament* of Southern Africa, the Sudanese funeral poetry and the general African *panegyric*—all of which serve as examples of the global varieties of the elegy (Finnigan 146-149). To add to its complexity, Karen Weisman, editor of *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*, submits that the elegy “inhabits a world of contradiction [...] In its adjectival form it is all-pervasive in literary criticism, and yet few scholars would profess certainty in knowing precisely what elegiac denotes” (Weisman 1). That is, despite the overwhelming amount of scholarship that exists on the elegy, (currently, there are a number of viable discursive frames around the elegy) the boundaries of the genre are elusive. In this brief survey, we will have to circumvent some key theories and criticisms. We will have to bypass Gregory Nany’s findings on the competing forms and traditions within the origin of the elegy. It will have to bypass a

discussion on the similarity of themes, structures, and sensibilities that permeate literature as revealed by scholars from Michael Roberts to Bonnie Costello. It will even have to circumvent Peter Sack's in-depth study of the English and pastoral elegy (Weisman). Suffice it to say that the elegy's definition, history, and practice may vary depending on the scholar, but the basic conventions that remain widely include a case for the elegy for the black body. *The New Princeton Encyclopedia for Poetry and Poetics* further defines the elegy as "a poem of meditation, usually on love or death [...] distinct from the dirge, threnody, obsequy, and other forms of pure lament or memorial [...] and more expansive than the epitaph, the elegy frequently includes a movement from expressed sorrow toward consolation" (Preminger and Brogan 322). Further studies in the elegy conclude that the traditional function of "the elegy were three, to **lament**, **praise**, and **console**. All are responses to the experience of loss: lament, by expressing grief and deprivation; praise, by idealizing the deceased and preserving her or his memory among the living; and consolation, by finding solace in meditation on natural continuances or on moral, metaphysical, and religious values" (NP 324). The question here is whether there should be a small amendment to these definitions to include poetry of mourning from a litany of cultural backgrounds and literary traditions. More specifically, for the elegy for the black body, there is this question of how inclusive the overall genre has been to various styles of mourning, particularly the black poetry of mourning. In his essay, "Getting the News from Poems: Poetry as Genre," Jahan Ramazani lays out the ensuing questions around a given genre's border-control. Ramazani poignantly asks a question to which the essay will attempt to attend and, if not attend, *extend*.

“What gets included and shut out by “British,” “American,” or “modern”? Does “sonnet” mean any fourteen-line poem, or are specific meters and stanzas and themes also prerequisites, and what about near-sonnets? Does “elegy” include only poems of mourning for individuals or also blues poems and group laments and works of self-mourning?” (Ramazani 4).

In light of Ramazani’s question—does the “elegy” include only poems of mourning for individuals or may it also include blues poems and group laments and works of self-mourning?”—this text asks what can the elegy *include* when it considers the cultural memory of violent, unjustified death of black bodies? What can it *exclude* when it is subject to what this essay calls, “strangeness,” that is when it considers the dialectical lineage of black poets writing from a specific tradition that responds to state sanctioned violence<sup>4</sup>?

To answer this question, I will rely on scholarship concerning the black lynched body as offered by the iconic blues song, “Strange Fruit” (1939). Despite its fame in the musical genre—despite being termed haunting, harrowing, and a song of the century that propelled the Civil Rights movement forward—few would ever call it elegiac. I point to this lapse in elegy studies not to suggest that “Strange Fruit” is indeed an elegy, but to posit it within the range of elegiac writings that have perhaps been disregarded. If for centuries human beings have sought artistic mediums for addressing loss, and if the subject of mortal loss has been explored through elegies perhaps far more than any other poetic genre, then it goes without saying that African American poetry, by virtue of an American experience of unparalleled loss, would garner an overwhelming amount of discourse in elegy scholarship. It has not. At the same time that the

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<sup>4</sup> State sanctioned violence is used to describe the racial violence that is either predicated by the state directly or supported by the state through cover-up, neglect, etc.

iconic blues singer Billie Holiday sang ‘Strange Fruit’ in front of an integrated audience at Café Society in Greenwich Village, lynching in America had breached a death toll in the thousands. Because of the dangers of singing the presumed anti-lynching song, Holiday could only sing “Strange Fruit” when she was concluding her set. The waiters would stop serving in advance and the room would grow still. Darkness would settle throughout café except for a spotlight on Holiday’s face. There would be no encore, no specific mention of names, no official remarks. The song evoked a collective mourning, an acknowledgment, however brief of the horrors of racial violence in America, but it and many modes like it lack discursive attention.

Despite being more prolifically written, intensively studied and theorized than poems in practically any other traditional genre, the elegy has not been nearly as explored when the poems refer to black bodies. In the same way that the African American elegy may have been overlooked, African American writing in other poetic genres has grown increasingly elegiac as black poets have continued to address themes of death, loss and mourning—without consolation. These writings are not being theorized as elegies, but as other forms of poetry, a move which has inadvertently concealed a powerful, and perhaps genre-less, African American journey through the representation of loss.

Popularized in studies by Jahan Ramazani, the African American elegy is understood as a subgenre of the elegy written by and for African Americans. It does traditional “work of mourning” by meditating on the unbearable and often unjustifiable loss of black bodies (Freud). The elegy for the black body, as distinct from the African American elegy, in no way limits Black poetry of mourning to the genre of elegy, but it does rely on the convenience of such language as put forth by centuries-long research in the genre. This research is aware of the

problematics of assigning authorship of any genre of African American style of poetry to Western parentage. However, the elegy for the black body, defined by this text as a poem that is *occasioned by the death of a black person who has died as the result of racially violent person or systems of persons*, can be described as a mode of poetics that falls *partly* within the modes of the Greek/English and American elegy. A close read of nearly seven decades of Black poetry for the slain black body will only reveal its entanglement with its various poetic relatives and neighbors. In fact, the elegy for the black body is a species of poetry whose DNA is braided by two distinct genetic strands of oral traditions—the Ancient Greek oral tradition and the African American blues tradition—into a unique, though not altogether new, species of poetry.

## A CULTURAL STUDIES APPROACH: THE LEGACY of STRANGENESS & THE CULTURAL MEMORY of THE LYNCHED BLACK BODY

This thesis relies on a two-pronged approach: strangeness and cultural memory. In the first case, the term strangeness is taken from “Strange Fruit” and used as a “terministic screen” that “permits this analysis to operate kaleidoscopically” (Royster 29). This analysis does not simply rely on the brief illusion to “Strange Fruit” for sentimental purposes. Rather, it does so to highlight the mor(t)al and racial imperative that guides the research on this collection of poems. For black bodies, these poems are a matter of life and death; their publication reveals the affect of poetic discourse as (perhaps the only source of) recourse for the body. Thus, this analysis aims to frame the poetic discourse that has time and time again, turned its gaze to the works of white violence, understanding that such a violence may take up dialectical spaces and gazes differently. This text also relies on “Strange Fruit” to aptly and critically term the peculiar kind of violence that the elegy for the black body takes as its principal subject matter. The term suggest a milieu of ideas, the chief of which is the re-appropriation of the black body as the terrain for black semiotics of mourning and, therefore the recontextualization of the so-called *strangeness* of that body. African American diction and colloquialism has a long cultural history of subverting and converting racially oppressive words in order to inscribe new meaning, the most notable example being the word *n—r*<sup>5</sup>. The word ‘strange’ here is an example of that kind of linguistic revisionism. Furthermore, one can indeed understand ‘strange’ as the memory or psychological remains of the haunting history of lynching, as Billie Holiday did. ‘Strangeness’ can also embody the uncanny racial violence to which slain black bodies are subject. However, after the

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<sup>5</sup> The n— word was originally used by white slaveholders as an oppressive tool to subjugate blacks. Today, it is controversial code used conversationally and discursively by black speakers.

revisionist mode, ‘strange’ will be used here to describe the complexity of tools black poets have crafted to investigate and interrogate the death of slain black bodies. Thus, using all three of these variations of the word, for the purposes of this text, ‘strange’ can be defined as the confiscation of the cultural memory of newly and historically slain black bodies to be mobilized as the subject, that is the tool and the topic, of poetry, thus enabling poets to investigate and interrogate society about the uncanny death of black individuals.

For example, Black elegists between 1955 and the present form a diachronic shift in the connection between “strange fruit” and the deceased to comment on the strangeness not of black bodies, but on the strangeness of the society that would systematically obliterate them. From there, I argue that twenty-first-century Black elegists reimagine strangeness to include critiques such as estrangement and strange-ing which theorize the affect of strangeness on and in the black body. In that light, “Strange Fruit” provides a subtext for this study as it epitomizes the changeability of the black body, especially as that body is interpreted by white violence. With that, what is meant by the black body is understood by what is known as the lynched black body. This text will rely on the scholarship of the black body as it relates to lynching, which this research takes as its entry point for discussing violence against black bodies<sup>6</sup>. In particular, this text can make note of Lyn Hejinian’s concept of strangeness, which dialogues with Viktor Shklovsky and the Russian Formalism description of poetry as a strange genre because it performs estrangement, or defamiliarizes familiar objects and their representations.

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<sup>6</sup> This research could choose other forms of black embodiment to contextualize violence. Scholarship on lynching offers this research structure. The perished black body of Middle Passage for example, while highly important to understanding poetic representations of violence against the black body, may prove too expansive for this text.

I note this concept alongside strange fruit because the elegy for the black body can be understood as having what Hejinian calls “simultaneity, a current array of disparately time-bound things” (Hejinian 67). The concept of strangeness, then, for Black poets, must be contextualized by the fact that racial violence is “here” and “there,” “then” and “now,” “this” and “that” (67). It registers differently in each of the poems, but strangeness, estrangement, and strange-ing work as “contextualizing terms” whereby Black poets can speak on state sanctioned violence and loss with “simultaneity and temporal heterogeneity in the same passage” (Hejinian 67).

The other prong of this analysis relies on “cultural memory” as a critical approach to understanding Black poetry of mourning. The term “cultural memory” has become an important topic in the field of cultural studies, where it has displaced and subsumed the discourses of individual (psychological) memory and social memory (Murtken vii). In other words, the term cultural memory denotes that memory can be understood as a cultural phenomenon as well as an individual or social one. Despite differences in theoretical orientation and disciplinary background, this term provides a primary assumption for this text. This text assumes that cultural memorization, especially where memories of violence against black bodies are understood, is an activity occurring neither as a “remnant, document, nor relic of the past, nor floating in a present cut off from the past, cultural memory, for better or for worse, links the past to the present and future” (Murtken 1). According to Mieke Bal, “cultural recall is not merely something of which you happen to be a bearer but something that you actually perform, even if, in many instances, such as acts are not consciously and willfully contrived” (Bal vii). Cultural memory allows this text to place an increased significance on the lynched black body, not as a relic of the past but as

an ever-present reality that signifies a range of meanings depending on the poetic terrain or genre that mobilizes it.

Furthermore, this analysis concentrates on African American poets (and not poets from other racial backgrounds) because racial memory, as separate from history, and psychology, as connected to trauma, informs the context from which black poets have written and is imperative to understanding the origin and the continuity of the elegy for the black body. Based on eight poems, this text will identify the key ways the elegy for the black body manifests. The key features include but are not limited to: strangeness, “fingering the wound,” monumentalization, sacrilege and re-sacralization, dismemberment, embodiment, appropriation, reimagining, revisioning, terraforming, and genre-making. Together, this cultural memory of lynching, this strangeness, distinguishes the elegy for the black body as it functions as a medium beyond consolation—towards investigation, interrogation, and inscription. Departing from the genres previous species, the elegy for the black body aims not to reconcile or console its readers, but to inscribe new meaning via social action. Effectively, cultural memory enables these poets to investigate the ‘strangeness’ of the fruit before picking it off the tree and planting its remains in a proper burial place, a place that marks or transcribes a new genre. Charles Bazerman defines genres as social actions. He writes, “Genres are not just forms. Genres are forms of life, ways of being. They are frames for social action [...] locations within which meaning is constructed.” (Bazerman 19). Ultimately, the construction of meaning out of mourning is a collective semiotic process that metapoetically re-engages landscapes of ruin as both a social and spiritual ritual *operationalized* by inheritors of black cultural memory (Russell 512). That is, these rituals are enacted by specific language practices among Black folk, who culturally remember the violence

in *genres*—“sorts” or “kinds”—such as lynching, assassination, police shooting, conspiracy, and the like.<sup>7</sup>

To that, I argue that as it correlates to the functions of the traditional elegy, the elegy for the black body extends the tropes of praise and lament. To the extent that it laments, it also protests. To the extent that it praises, it also condemns. However, the greatest distinction between the elegy and the elegy for the black body rests in its position on consolation. Where the elegy works towards consolatory ends, the elegy for the black body subverts consolation, using investigation, interrogation, and inscription to revise narratives of violence within the poetry of mourning. It is my hope that these poems will further shape and broaden studies on the subject of the black body and the poetry of mourning. Let these poems be read as epitaphs on tombstones.

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<sup>7</sup> The word *genre* is borrowed from the French meaning “sort” or “kind”

## CHAPTER ONE: THE BLUES ELEGY: or LANGSTON HUGHES' "LAMENT FOR DARK PEOPLES"

Civil Rights Movement, 1955-1962

As a poetic form, the blues cannot be discussed outside of its oral tradition. As an oral tradition metonymically associated with the low spirits of the slave fields, the blues cannot be misrepresented as a tradition of mere sadness. Because of its inclination toward themes of loss, the blues can be prematurely classified with the poetry of mourning. This is not to say that the blues does not deal with sadness. On the contrary, the thematic resemblances between what Jahan Ramazani terms "the poetry of mourning and the blues is striking: both signify loss—loss of love, loss of money, loss of life, etc. However, the blues as a musical and poetic form, while it has "overtones of sadness," according to Albert Murray, "its very nature is nothing if not a form of diversion" (Murray 45). Regardless of the kind of loss, but especially where the elegy warrants consolation, the blues oral tradition diverges from traditional forms of mourning. Instead, the blues encourages "movement that is the direct opposite of resignation, retreat, or defeat" (45). The elegy for the black body is rooted in this distinction: where the ancient elegy functioned in three primary ways—to praise, lament and console—the elegy for the black body grows out of the oral tradition of diversion and coded communication.

In Ralph Eastman's 1988 analysis of country blues, he argues that the blues is filled with "musical and inflectional nuances [that] modify the literal meanings of the verses. Since slavery, black society has employed its own argot and slang to disguise the true nature of its communication. Given the culture's tendency toward veiled or hidden meanings, it is essential that especially careful consideration be given to all facets of a performer's text in order to

determine the ultimate meaning of his message. It is this tension between opposites, possible only in performance, that reveals the strength and courage of the blues performer who can look the inequities of life squarely in the face and still sing” (Eastman 162). Thus, as an oral tradition, the blues naturally incorporates some of the mournful features of the elegy, while also using the space between mourning to play, to perform, to encode meaning. Consider the definition of the blues as given by prominent African American writer and critic Ralph Ellison. Ellison, in his 1945 review essay of Richard Wright’s “Black Boy,” theorizes that “the blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the *consolation* of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically” (Ellison 3). This “near-tragic, near-comic” lyricism is the focus of the elegy for the black body of the mid-1950s, where the blues as an oral tradition intersects with the poetry of Langston Hughes and the death of Emmett Till. I argue that the blues oral tradition roots six-decades of the elegy for the black in a practice of “fingering the grain” (3). In doing so, the elegy for the black body succeeds in transcending consolation, forming for itself a tradition of mourning tied together to protest.

There is not much that can be said of Langston Hughes that has not already been stated. The canonical African American Harlem Renaissance poet, playwright, and critic was instrumental in establishing the blues as a poetic form. Often relying on folk language and folk themes to call attention to social issues that affected not only the Black community but also the global marginalized community, Hughes’ protest aesthetic is the most useful starting point for this analysis because it assumes the blues and ultimately gives way to the various species of

protest aesthetics within the elegy for the black body. As Ellison and Murray would later, Hughes recognized that "sad as Blues may be there's almost always something humorous about them—even if it's the kind of humor that laughs to keep from crying." It is this ironic laughter that Hughes employs in his 1955 poem concerning the death of Emmett Till.

In 1955, a fourteen-year-old Chicago native journeyed to Mississippi in the summer to visit relatives. What happens next has been widely debated, but scholars conclude that he performed an act of agency that was deemed worthy of death. He was later abducted in the night, beaten, lynched, and murdered. His body was pulled from the Tallahatchie river days later, a heavy cotton gin fan tied on his neck with barbed wire. At his funeral, Till's mother refused to conceal his mutilated face. She said she wanted "the world to see what had been done to [her] son" (—). Her action was unprecedented, attracting the nation's gaze to Mississippi and, more broadly, to the nation's violent relationship with black bodies. The combination of Till's murder and the blues poetic proliferation, as championed by Langston Hughes, becomes the poetic space in African American cultural memory from which the elegy for the black body is constructed. For the elegy for the black body, Emmett Till is holy ground. That is, his death marks the optimal starting point for tracking poems relevant to this discussion.

The 'strangeness' of Till's murder was not that his manner of death was uncommon, but rather that it was visible. His infamous lynched body has since evoked the pen of many poets. Beginning with Langston Hughes' "Mississippi—1955," the elegy for the black body manifests in the distinct form of the African American blues tradition, a tradition unique from the mournful essence of the elegy, but altogether bound to it by theme and occasion. What Jahan Ramazani calls "lynch poems," here signifies lynching through Emmett Till. Hughes then imbues the poem

with the basis of the blues that creates a foundation for various other modes in the genre. By doing a close-read of “Mississippi—1955,” dedicated to the loss of Emmett Till, this text will identify three relevant techniques used in the blues elegy: the blues repetition, the jazz variation or “riff,” and the irony or “laughter mixed with tears” (Hughes 2).

Despite the seemingly woeful, resignatory tone of the poem, like Ellison and Murray, Hughes establishes the blues, not as the poetry of resignation or pity, but as the poetry of black literary and cultural protest. As a blues poem, Hughes follows a certain formulaic pattern: a statement is made in the first line, (“O what sorrow!”) a variation is given in the second line (“Oh what pity!”), and an ironic alternative is declared in the third line (“Oh what pain / that tears and blood should mix like rain / and terror come again / to Mississippi”) (1:1-4). Hughes's poem, “being written and not sung to accompaniment, obviously relies on carefully plotted attempts to capture the rhythm and spirit of blues performance. Structurally, the traditional blues form is stanzaic, developing from the AAA pattern (the same thought repeated three times, as in Henry Thomas's "Texas Worried Blues") to the more common standard AAB pattern (the first thought repeated twice, the last word of which rhymes with the final word of the last line), which is a resolution.” (80). We can tell that Hughes’ poem is influenced by both forms, but his appropriation is altogether different. Hughes creates a hybrid of the AAA and AAB pattern to deploy a blues language strategy that suggests the opposite of what is being said. His AAA-B form is against “resolution” (80). First, by repeating the syntactic structure three times, “Oh what,” Hughes is working with the AAA pattern and choosing to repeat parts of the phrase and vary on the endings (1:1-3). Though each ending implies the same feeling, Hughes ends each line with a variation on the previous word -sorrow, pity, pain—a strategy which he borrows from

the jazz form. Next, what Hughes does with the AAB structure is supposed to propose a resolution, but it instead suggests conflict. Effectively, AAAB, where the first three lines signify the same meaning, the last line(s) can be read as B because they blend injembently as one. Thus, B is syntactically different from the first three lines and where its last word should rhyme with the last word in the first line, it rhymes with the last word of the second line: abc dccb

Oh what sorrow!

oh, what pity!

Oh, what pain

That tears and blood

Should mix like rain

And terror come again

To Mississippi.

(1:1-7)

More importantly than the signifying blues rhythm is the blues irony that denotes the poem's hidden message. Irony is defined as "the expression of one's meaning by using language that normally signifies the opposite, typically for humorous or emphatic effect" (OED). More simply, Hughes is using language that normally signifies sorrow in order to oversignify something that is less expected: terror. The irony here is that "terror should come again / in Mississippi," the optimal word being "again," because "where has terror been?" the speaker asks.

These repetitions and variations produce a rhythm that Hughes suddenly interrupts to launch a series of sharp interjections akin to an investigation:

Come again?

Where has terror been?  
On vacation? Up North?  
In some other section  
Of the nation,  
Lying low, unpublicized?  
Masked—with only  
Jaundiced eyes  
Showing through the mask? (2:1-9)

His lines, “but where has terror been?” imply that terror has both never left Mississippi and that it has not been a stranger to the north. It has simply gone “unpublicized” and “masked” (2:6-9). The idea here is that terror has never, for black bodies, been forlorn. In light of this line, all the previous and following lines are lines of verbal irony. The final line should be the line of resolution, yet it disputes resolution since the speaker’s reality “terror, fetid hot [...] remains” (3:6-8). In the last stanza, Hughes resumes his syncopated rhythm, this time creating a riff off the first section of the poem:

“Oh, what sorrow,  
Pity, pain,  
That tears and blood  
Should mix like rain  
In Mississippi!  
And terror, fetid hot,

Yet clammy cold

Remain”

(3:1-8)

His final lines, “And terror, fetid hot / Yet clammy cold / Remain” suggest the final trick of tragic irony in the poem, characteristic of blues poems. The full irony of the poem is that while Emmett Till’s photo sparked outcries of “sorrow ... pity ... and pain,” the real “terror” of lynching remained sanctioned in Mississippi and throughout America. The real “sorrow” is that the long history of systemic violence against black bodies, even black children, remained unchecked. Thus, the poem comments with dark humor on the ideas that there has never been any real sense of pity, pain, or shame concerning lynching. Hughes is using the irony of the blues poem, occasioned by the death of Emmett Till, to interrogate the “clammy cold” society that would not only murder a fourteen-year-old boy, but that would also acquit his kidnapers and murderers of guilt. The blues elegy here is manifested in conflicting changes, sudden nuances, sharp and mournful interjections, broken rhythms, and a final variation in a mournfully ironic session.

On the surface, lines may seem resignatory. At first glance, the poem is a basic elegy. The poem’s repetition of the exclamation “O!” and its focus on words such as “pity ... pain ... shame” may seem to correspond to what John Ruskin calls the elegy’s “pathetic fallacy”<sup>8</sup>. Though these repetitions form oral sounds “o-w-s” or “o-w-p” that mimic lament, these

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<sup>8</sup> Ramazani, “The Poetry of Mourning,” page 155. Taken from John Ruskin, this terms denotes a “poetic practice of attributing human emotion or responses to nature, inanimate objects, or animals. The practice is a form of personification that is as old as poetry, in which it has always been common to find smiling or dancing flowers, angry or cruel winds, brooding mountains, moping owls, or happy larks” Britannica.com.

combinations of figures forms a complex blues code with various variables of pain and irony. These inter-workings of tragedy and humor are aided by Hughes' swerve from irony to pain, from grief to sarcasm. This is what Ellison and Hughes articulated in their calculation of the blues, that it is "near-tragic, near-comic lyricism,"—"laughter mixed with tears".<sup>10</sup> The poem's ordering of metaphors is also quite elegiac in that it follows what Sack theorizes as "crucial elements in the work of mourning."<sup>11</sup> However, with attention to how Hughes signifies irony the lines reveal a pertinent truth about the incessant violence against black bodies, which for Hughes, predates Till's murder.

What these basic elegiac devices amount to is a kind of "fingering the wound," a wound overlaid with overt pathos of sorrow, so much so that it works as a diversion to the poem's real function: signifying terror around the reality of society's disregard for black lives. It is a reality Hughes' poetry cannot even touch; it can only outline. The resemblance between the blues genre and the elegy may cause critics to overlook a unique feature of the blues elegy, writing off the pathos of the poem as redundant. Hughes is overtly signifying the pathos of loss without signifying the body that has been lost. That is, Hughes is participating in strangeness by not naming the "familiar object": the dead black body (Shklovsky 3). Outside of the mention in the dedication line: "To the memory of Emmett Till," there is no mention of Till. There is no imagery of his body. There are only signifiers of so-called sorrow, pain, and pity—and since those words are being used ironically, the poem is signifying irony. When read closely, Hughes'

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<sup>9</sup> From Ralph Ellison's "Richard Wright's Blues"

<sup>10</sup> From Langston Hughes essay, "The Negro and the Racial Mountain"

<sup>11</sup> From Peter Sacks' *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spencer to Yeats*

blues of repetitions, his jazz variations, and his layers of ironic metaphors “finger” and figure around the invisible lynched body of Emmett Till.

In addition, the poem’s over-use of the language of pathos rather than imagery successfully signifies around the racial wound of the body. By doing so, the elegy dwells on a different kind of loss: the poem’s absence of imagery of Till’s poetic body addresses the corresponding gap in investigation and interrogation on the uncanny erasure of Till’s physical body. Hughes’ interrogations provide a chalk outline of the lynched black body that later elegists will fill, reassemble, and embody. In Lyn Hejinian’s article “Sneeze: Oversignification, Protest, Poetry,” Hejinian coins a poetic device that sheds light on this aspect of the poem, revealing its protest devices and activist qualities. For Hejinian, “oversignification” is found “in black American language games, in contemporary hip hop” and in activist poetry (Hejinian 1). Hejinian explains the relationship between the poem’s language games and activist poetry. Oversignification allows Hughes to create diversions in the poem that not only decentralize references but also make Till’s brutalized body more strange because it is mourned unfamiliarly. Till’s body is one of those instances where instead of condensing signifiers “into a single reference point, oversignification casts forth a multitude of references, modeling something akin to an ecology and drawing attention to the forces that bring about its ruin. Often thought of as single-minded and message-driven, this feature of protest poetry, in its long history, has shown itself to have aesthetic, as well as instrumental, intent” (Hejinian 1). Instead of substituting Till’s body with resolute or consoling literary objects, Hughes subtly posits irony around the absent the black body, creating a gaping wound at which he can only point with near-images and near-collocations of grief. He moves from the “near-tragic” to the dark, from the “near-comic” to

the uncanny reality of racial violence (3). Through its oversignification of mourning, “Mississippi—1955” converts the traditional elegy from a poem that dwells on the ethos of loss to a poem that dwells on the painful and ironic process of erasure. This reading of Hughes poem, along with the jazz riff on the rhythm and the blues irony on the pain can generate a variety of meaning and protest that continues well into contemporary Black poetry.

While the use of oversignification allows Hughes to make nuanced meaning of Till’s *absent* body—inscribing him into literary meaning—later poets will use Emmett Till’s body as *the* signifying black body that informs their poetry. For poets beyond Langston Hughes, the lynching of the 14-year old boy from Chicago is no longer news, but it is indeed an ever-past, present, and future cultural memory. The simultaneity of strangeness is embodied by Till’s body, which the first agent and literary space from which black poets can signify a narrative that investigates and interrogates white hegemony. In that way, it is not so much the speaker or the poet that investigates and interrogates, as it is African American cultural memory that does so. So long as that cultural memory lives, the body may live as well. Hughes’ apt dedication to the “memory” of Emmett Till attests to this. Hughes begins a poetic tradition of anti-substitution, of using the psychological space of memory, rather than the physical representations of the black body, to signify meaning. Later, as this text will show, it is from Till’s signifying memory that later literary and historical lineages of ‘strangeness’ can be excavated from African American poetry.

## THE MARTYR ELEGY: or AMIRI BARAKA'S "POEM FOR BLACK HEARTS"

Black Arts Era, 1963-1969

Extending beyond the protest aesthetic of the Blues Era, the elegy for the black body of the mid-1960s is shaped by a rise in nationalist voices via the Black Arts Movement. This liberationist movement was framed by a shift in resistance practices of Civil Rights era poets and musicians who grew more revolutionary in their critique and response to the incessant violence of the white hegemonic academic and political state. Where Hughes' blues protest aesthetic was concerned with protest as a rhetorical reality, newer poets were concerned with the uses of protest as a tool of social action: first as a monumentalization of sacred black bodies and second as a means of retribution<sup>12</sup>. The use of black memorials of protest comes from the cultural memory of lynching. Lynch scholar Michael Bibby articulates how 'strange' black bodies in Black Arts poetry convert images of bodies such as Emmett Till into agents of violent revolution, capable of being "rearticulated as potent attributes of the black body [...] rising up against white America" (65). The elegy for the black body, under the influence of Black Arts reimagines both the lynched black body and, in Marita Sturken's term, the "cultural memory" of lynching to manifest the Black revolution (3). I expand upon these concepts by pointing to another manifestation of the use of lynching signifiers in Black Arts, poems that reimagine the black assassinated or martyred body as a vehicle for revolutionary action. I argue that signifiers of the assassinated body are mobilized in conjunction with the lynched body, which has been consistently deployed as a critique of American culture's pervasive structural inequality and violence. In these poems, the speakers argue

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<sup>12</sup> Lynching scholar Michael Bibby demonstrates that in many poems black bodies are agents of violent revolution; even traumatized bodies enable liberation, as "the means of corporeal oppression have been rearticulated as potent attributes of the black body . . . rising up against white America" (65).

that assassinations occur on various levels: not only to “assassinate” the “criminal” black body but also to sabotage the cultural memory of the black martyr, effectively desecrating the black cultural memory. In response, Black Arts poets look to reclaim black bodies as sacred terrains from which racial oppression can be critiqued and black leaders can be properly celebrated.

It is difficult to ascertain a single notion of the Black Arts Movement. It is, however, possible to identify a set of theoretical, ideological, and aesthetic debates and the figures central to them (Kieran 240). In different ways, Dudley Randall and Amiri Baraka were two figures whose poetics are central both the Black Arts Movement and to the martyr elegy. Randall for example had by the late 1960s “increasingly adopted a nationalist tone in his comments about the goals of Broadside Press,” which he had founded, while simultaneously crafting poems “inspired by the Black Arts Movement” (Kieran 241). Sampling Dudley Randall’s 1968 response to the 1963 Birmingham church bombing<sup>13</sup> that resulted in the deaths of four little girls. Though Randall’s poem is a “Ballad for Birmingham,” his lyrics are no less elegiac as they mourn the loss of four innocent black girls, his with tools akin to those used in the blues aesthetic. But more interestingly, Dudley’s poem comes from a collection titled “Cities Burning,” where he uses the historical background of riots, bombings, and assassinations as cultural texts from which he can articulate a form of social action. Events such as the Birmingham church bombing are deployed here to support the claim that the blues aesthetic evolved into the black arts aesthetic and it did so for the express purposes of responding to ‘strange’ violence against black bodies. From theme and context alone, we can see how the blues aesthetic, present within various black literacy traditions, gives

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<sup>13</sup> The 1963 Bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham Alabama resulted in the deaths of four little girls: Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, Denise McNair and Addie Mae Collins.

way to the emergence of revolutionary practices within elegiac forms among Black Arts poets. Of course, Dudley Randall is not alone. Another major Black Arts poet wrote not only in direct response to the nature and severity of the events of the sixties that would drastically alter the response to the murder of black bodies, but also concerning the assassination of Malcolm X. Amiri Baraka, known as one of the architects of the Black Arts Movement, imbues the elegy for the black body with a species of Black Arts that reexamines the ways oral and literary traditions are used to centralize sound (and spoken performance) as a means to bring awareness to the legitimacy of black speech sounds, theories, and practices which can be useful in dismantling culturally and politically violent apparatuses of whiteness. Baraka's poetics attacks the literary and political world's preoccupations with standardized and privileged speech practices generally associated to non-blackness (or whiteness). In doing so, he and other black arts poets "weaponize" poetry as a way to combat the white gaze as a hegemonic force within contemporary black art. The Black Arts aesthetic, being counter to the elegy's traditional consolatory practices, functions instead as a direct response to the deaths of key leaders of social justice by hybridizing the poetry of mourning with what Baraka terms "poems that kill" (Baraka 19).

It goes without saying that this movement in poetry arose out of a period of great social injustice, making it impossible to analyze the poems apart from historical context. Malcolm X was assassinated February 21, 1965. Martin Luther King, Jr was assassinated April 4, 1968. Fred Hampton was assassinated in his bedroom next pregnant girlfriend on December 4, 1969. To say that the struggle for social justice is separate from the poetry of mourning is to understate the convergence of trauma out of which this discourse flows. The fight for social justice is directly connected to African American movements in the arts, entertainment, and philosophy which

themselves are cultural products of the turbulence relation between the races on the American scene. By the mid-to-late 1960's the Black arts "generat[ed] a new racial pride [and] protest so exigent that it often became a radically separatist ethnicism proposing to disengage itself not only from the American literary establishment but also from whatever else in the received cultural tradition might be conceived to be indelibly "eurocentric" and "white" (20). This undertaking found it's principal expression in the poetry of Amiri Baraka, whose opposition to white hegemony and the politics of respectability flowed out of the African American experience with social injustice. Thus, the period directly following the Birmingham Church bombing, the period resulting in the consecutive deaths of key leaders of the Civil Rights movement, is arguably this texts most appropriate period for understanding the martyr elegy.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a martyr as "a person who undergoes death or great suffering for a faith, belief, or cause, or (usually with to; also with of, for) through devotion to some object" (OED). The African American martyr as subject in American poetry can be intuitively integrated into the fabric of the elegy, whose form consistently incorporates the death of martyrs as a subject of mourning. In elegy criticism, Jahan Ramazani has used the term "hero elegy" or "public elegy" to describe the poetics of elegies for famed persons written not only to commemorate their memories, but also to console a grieving public. While these terms exist and may inform this text's approach to the outlining the genre's inherited forms, the elegy for the black body, heavily influenced by the Black Arts movement, converts traditional elegiac structures in exchange for a more radical approach to mourning. This conversion appropriates the norms of the elegy while deploying new norms that transcend the limits of the elegy.

For poets from Baraka's era to the present, Malcolm X's body is represented as another example of America's harvest of 'strange fruit,' bursting from the tree of racial oppression and emasculation<sup>14</sup>. Baraka's "Poem to Black Hearts" features poetic themes that are both typical and atypical of the traditional elegy. Like Rainer Maria Rilke's "Hero Elegy" from *Duino Elegy*, the martyr elegy does not depart from the elegiac tradition of praising the heroic dead, idealizing the deceased, and preserving her or his memory among the living. He typifies the elegy with a sense of what Jahan Ramazani calls the "elegiac apotheosis," or making Malcolm X the pinnacle or height of black power and spirituality. Effectively, he monumentalizes or erects a memorial of Malcolm X through praise and exaltation. Unlike the traditional elegy, however, Baraka converts praise away from consolation, finding solace not in "meditation on natural continuances or on moral, metaphysical, and religious values," but on avenging a fallen hero<sup>15</sup>. In light of this, "A Poem for Black Hearts," can be read as a jazz-influenced poem that re-sacralizes the memory of Malcolm X.

Baraka is no stranger to Hughes' blues protest aesthetic. The interplay of blues and jazz devices (repetition, variation, irony) are present in Baraka's poem, but ultimately it is the poem's reconstruction and revision of Malcolm X's memory (by way of ritualizing and praising Malcolm's heroism) that reinscribes the black body's value. Hughes starts the elegy of the black body off on a path of subversion and protest that Amiri Baraka carries through to the Black Arts era. While Hughes, through the oversignification of mourning "fingers" around the body of Till, Baraka chooses to deal with Malcolm X's dismembered legacy. Baraka reassembles the fragmented *public* memory of Malcolm X so as to erect the proper cultural memory. If Baraka's poem seems to construct Malcolm X's memory from a fragmented view it is because he is

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<sup>14</sup> See Nikki Giovanni poem "All Eyes on Me" : The Fame Elegy

<sup>15</sup> *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Page 324

representing Malcolm's memory body part by part, a task towards reassembling Malcolm's desecrated body so that it may signify martyrdom and heroism. Ultimately, Baraka's revisionist choice reinscribes the image of Malcolm X, a task that requires an elegiac conversion from consolation to justification, then from justification to retribution.

That is, in order to justify Malcolm X as a hero, Baraka must first engage dialectically with the image of Malcolm X as villain. That is, Baraka must first investigate or negotiate the dominant opinions concerning Malcolm X's legacy. He does so almost invisibly, each of his lines are a response to an unspoken instigation. Consider that each time Baraka uses the word "for," he is simultaneously continuing the blues and jazz aesthetic of musical repetition, riff/variation, and syncopation of rhythm while also extending that esthetic to meet his political and cultural needs. For example, Baraka's repetition of the word "for" creates a syncopated rhythm through which variations on the word and its phrasing can be expressed.

Like Hughes, whose poem was a kind of running commentary on a poetically absent figure of Till , Baraka's poem forms a body by engaging in an invisible dialogue concerning the virtue of Malcolm X. Consider again, that Baraka is revising the mainstream, call it classical, record sheet on Malcolm X, whose criminal background and political rhetoric made his death "legitimate" and therefore ungrievable. The mainstream public perception of Malcolm X at the time of his death was highly controversial. His links to what were seen as Muslim extremists made his death justifiable in the eyes of some critics, who argued that the leader's violent rhetoric was his ultimate demise. Others, believing that the Nation of Islam was solely responsible for the assassination, reduced Malcolm X's death to political, not racial, violence. Furthermore, Malcolm X's more threatening political record drew unfavorable representations of his life and death—hence, the

need for an apologetic for Malcolm's praise and avenging. Beginning with this word "for," Baraka's poem presents a series of reasoned arguments against the dominant discourse which prohibited the praise of so-called controversial black bodies. Baraka writes:

"For Malcolm's eyes...For Malcolm's words...

... For Malcolm's heart...For all of him dead...

For all of him" (1, 6, 12-13, 17, 22)

Each "for" begins a variation on the pattern of defenses for Malcolm's heroism as remembered in the cultural memory of the Black community.

Next, each reasoned argument reclaims a space on Malcolm's body to avenge. Body part by body part, from "his eyes" to "his hands raised to bless us" to "his stride, his beat, [...] his speech", and ultimately, "for all of him," Baraka calls for a reassembling of this martyred black body, which represents an assemblage of the communal black body. Baraka's poem suggests that Malcolm X's sacrifice and leadership can and must be dialectically avenged. Next, Baraka moves from Malcolm X to addressing the collective black body:

for your dignity, black men, for your life,

black man, for the filling of your minds

with righteousness [...]

avenge (15-17)

At first glance, Baraka's imperative directives to the "black man" summons collective voices to not only address the racial wounds caused by Malcolm X's assassination, but also to "avenge" Malcolm X by revolting against white supremacy. Yet, there is enough religious language here—"righteousness" and "bless,"—to suggest that Malcolm X should be signified along the same lines as another martyr figure: Jesus Christ. In the same way that the Christian

body is assembled as the Church, with Christ as the head, the African American or black body is one, its head being represented by its various leaders. Baraka describes Malcolm X as the “black god of our time...a prince of the earth...God like” (19-24). Thus, after reclaiming the fragments of Malcolm X’s body, the poem seems to ask a poignant question about loss and mourning. That is, why is the assassinated black demonized and not exalted in Christ-like fashion? Baraka builds a sacred monument to Malcolm X’s exalted image, calling for the “black man” to rise in Malcolm X’s name perhaps in the same way that the church is built in the name of Jesus. Baraka draws from popular emblems and images in Christianity to represent Malcolm X as a “God like ... prince” (19-24). Despite Baraka’s depart from the negro spiritual tradition, and the de-Christianization of his rhetoric, there are translations between ritual commemoration for Malcolm X and the ritual of memorialization of Christ<sup>16</sup>. There is a simultaneous appropriation of and resistance to preexisting structures in the elegy forms of praise and exaltation, especially where Christian tropes are concerned. Baraka is praising and exalting Malcolm X, but he does so with the same fervor used to condemn and critique Malcolm X’s murders: white supremacy.

stupid animals            anger  
that killed him (24-25).

Thus, Baraka’s dialectic on Malcolm initiates a ritual semiotic practice whereby Malcolm X can signify various notions of martyrdom—from praise to sacralization—alongside strong critiques of white supremacy. While Baraka’s revisionist text begins by revisiting the death of Malcolm X as a site for retrieving the memory the hero outside of white America’s racial imagination, it is the use of the possessive “we” and “us” that ultimately addresses the collective

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<sup>16</sup> DuBois’ “sorrow songs” clung to a Christian tradition that the Black Arts poets departed from.

black “hearts” whose wounds do not require consolation. Rather, “black hearts” need permission to mourn and, even more, to act in a revolutionary capacity on behalf of their fallen member. This rather collective gathering around the body of a desecrated hero resembles the “assassination” or “crucifixion” Christ. Baraka poem is not only monumentalizing Malcolm X, it is also enacting a kind of ritual around his body, literal or otherwise, where a process of re-sacralization must take place. Like Christ, that which has undergone a process of sacrilege must go through a process of resurrection. It must be reclaimed and praised. The need to reclaim Malcolm’s legacy, to piece together his body again, member by member, is a part of the religious tradition aligned with the Christ and the eucharist, or communion. As Jesus Christ instructs his disciples, saying “This is my body, given for you. Do this in remembrance of me,” Baraka’s reassembling of Malcolm’s contested parts (bodily or otherwise) recreates and instructs readers on how to erect and exalt a holistic view of a beloved hero. The man some historians would call “violent” or “radical” Baraka calls the “prince of the earth” (23). The leader that was rejected by many of his contemporaries as too radical, Baraka (re)members as “God like”. In the same way that Christ’s body was given that He may be remembered,<sup>17</sup> Baraka suggests that Malcolm X’s assassinated body was sacrificed for “black hearts” (1). Baraka re-sacralizes Malcolm’s mutilated body, reminding readers of his sacrifice and instructing readers on how that sacrifice should be remembered.

Baraka’s poem, like many hero or martyr poems, despite their drawback from past traditions, does not escape the Christian motif of praise and exaltation of a Christ-like figure. While the ritual of praise of Christ is enacted to remember Him, Baraka’s praise activates a ritual

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<sup>17</sup> See Luke 22:19

praise towards revisionist and resistance ends. For Baraka, it is not enough that Malcolm be remembered. It is how Malcolm is remembered that makes his elegy unique. Because of Baraka's influence, the martyr elegy is marked by a discursive pattern, began by Hughes' ironic interrogation but carried forth by Baraka's unapologetic dialectic.

Baraka is not alone. He, along with other poets such as Haki Madhubuti and Gwendolyn Brooks appropriate the hero elegy's tendency towards praise, but reserve the right to critique the society, and in Madhubuti's case, the right to protest through avenging the black body. In his poem "One-Sided Shootout" dedicated to Fred Hampton and in her poem "Malcolm X," both Madhubuti and Gwendolyn Brooks affirm that a revolutionary poetic tradition exists within the elegy which encapsulates the very spirit of the Black cultural heroes who are celebrated and mourned in its poetry. The names of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and Fred Hampton as they occur in Black poetry, become signifiers not only for the notion of racial identity, but also for the act of defending and revising narratives about black heroes. Even in the face of dejection and horror of the slain black body, the martyr poems of Baraka, Madhubuti, and Brooks posit several conversations on the various ways the black hero can be mourned and the violence against them protested. While Brook's poem uses free-verse to highlight the hero who "opened us," the "man who was a man," Madhubuti's poem loads the black aesthetic with militant action. While all of these are forms of the martyr elegy, Baraka's poem is a broad capsule for the tone and function of the martyr elegy: of a darker blues used as rhetoric and armed with a sense of 'black power'. His radical deconstruction leads to inscription, a written record that is not towards publicly consoling the black body, but towards avenging it.

The African American experience in the United States, one of resistance against white hegemony, has long been concerned with both the violence of its racial oppression and the fatality of its discursive leaders. Thus, it is no surprise that African American poetry is filled with individuals whose deaths fall into the mode of the heroic elegy, and as Ramazani notes in *Poetry of Mourning*, “into a mode of resistance” (Ramazani 175). African American poets from Paul Laurence Dunbar to Langston Hughes have been occupied with the subject of heroism. While the protest of such a poetics manifests in various genres and subgenres—odes, sonnets, free verse, villanelles—it is important to note that these forms do not escape the elegy. For individuals from Frederick Douglass to Nat Turner, to Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, the martyr elegy is an extension of the elegy’s poetic mode, whose function is primarily consolation and mourning. However, the martyr elegy, as it has been crafted after volatile historic periods of resistance to white hegemony, is marked by the celebration of black identity, a preoccupation with more than leadership and heroism, and a turn towards revolutionary action. As this text highlights elegies written for black bodies who have died ‘strange’ deaths, the pool African American subjects concentrates drastically within a specific period where African American poets radically celebrated cultural identity, departed from mainstream ideologies, and protested white hegemony. Thus, it is fitting that the vehicle for mourning the loss of black leaders, martyring their memories, would be associated with Black Arts movement, the black poetic movement for radical change and protest. Given the marriage between protest and the elegy for the black body, it is important to note that the martyr elegy is just one of the children of this union. While Baraka proposes “poems that kill,” various other protest traditions exist which challenge assumptions concerning both racial and gendered forms of protest.

## CHAPTER THREE: THE JUSTICE ELEGY

1972 -1980

Given the protest aesthetic of Langston Hughes' blues elegy and the revolutionary rhetoric of Amiri Baraka's Black Arts era elegy, the term *justice elegy* may appear redundant to most readers. Where Hughes' protest tradition gave rise to the Black Arts Movement's revolutionary aesthetic, the justice elegy is an alternative protest tradition to consider. What readers have seen before now is a dialectic of protest elegies for the black body as employed by a predominantly male authorship. Where the blues elegy relied on the blues poetics of Langston Hughes and Ralph Ellison, where the martyr elegy was embedded in the black arts poetics of Amiri Baraka, the justice elegy roots itself in black womanist thought. Thus, further nuancing already inter-discursive debate around justice by introducing marginalized thematics such as motherhood, accountability, and narrative mourning.<sup>18</sup> These considerations, while not altogether different from how the lynch images have been signified throughout the genre, reperform a protest aesthetic that makes particular use of black feminist thought. How so? To borrow a term from Alice Walker who famously articulated a key black feminist stance in her work "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," womanist thought "a more culturally appropriate label for black feminism and feminists of color" because it recalls "the black folk expression of mothers and is committed to the survival of the entire group" (19). Womanist thought is concerned with social activism across racial and gender lines. In the justice elegy, poems that embody the black mother as agent are supported by a black womanist strategy. The use of cultural language, tones, and voices reimagines the mother of the deceased as a literary embodiment to be used against white

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<sup>18</sup> A Theory of Justice is Rawls's attempt to formulate a philosophy of justice and a theoretical program for establishing political structures designed to preserve social justice and individual liberty.

and/or patriarchal domination. Black womanist thought can be particularly contextualized by the consistent figurations of key women, specifically key mothers, whose distinct voices within the Black elegiac tradition inscribes a narrative of loss just as it signifies social action and accountability.

Gwendolyn Brooks, for example, in her 1968 poem, “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi, Meanwhile A Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon,” addresses the lynching of Emmett Till from a new perspective by inserting a dialogue between white southern male patriarchy and the inescapability of the culpability of the white woman via the violent binary of white and black motherhood. Brooks juxtaposes the losses of the black and white mother. Brooks paints the loss of a child on the one hand and the loss of so-called honor on the other hand, in order to interrogate the differences in experiences between the two feminist groups. Ultimately, Brooks’ poem highlights the complicity of white women where their injuries amounted to fatal responses from the dominant institutions of white patriarchy. The “Bronzeville Mother,” however is deployed as a symbol of Mamie Till-Mobley who signifies black mothers who lose their children to white violence and, more specifically, to white patriarchal violence which demands black blood in alleged defence of the “Mississippi Mother.” Thus, the need to seek justice via discussions around accountability begins here with mothers who, in the cultural memory of violence, figure justice differently than others.

While Brooks is among the most notable African American poets who utilizes motherhood as a metaphorical figure from which other radical protests will emerge, she is by no means the first. Brooks’ poem, written in 1968, draws upon a lineage of poetry that signifies

Till's lynching through code words such as Mississippi<sup>19</sup>, "Mother," and even "burn". It may or may not be surprising to know that a woman dominated lineage of elegies for Emmett Till is far less popular than the male voices in the Black elegy's tradition. For example, Hughes' "Mississippi-1955" was published in the same year as Mary Gilliam's "Little Boy from Chicago," Mary Parks's "For Emmett Till," and even Martha Millet's "Emmett Louis Till (1941 - 1955)".<sup>20</sup> Among the later elegies, Eve Merriam's "Money, Mississippi" (1956) and Wanda Coleman's "Emmett Till" (1986) are just two of the dozens of poems written by black women poets concerning Emmett Till. Yet, these poems do not appear in anthologies, nor can they be easily accessed or found for analysis, forcing this text to rely on more canonized poets such as Hughes. If this text relies on the contributions of Hughes and Baraka alone, though those contributions are weighty, then this text would run the risk of (m)othering black feminist voices and thought from the African American elegiac tradition. Heretofore, not only have black women poets in the elegy's genre been disregarded, black mothers as embodiments of racial violence have also been in some ways othered in the semiotics of mourning for the black body. To omit these voices is to misrepresent the African American elegiac tradition as a tradition bound to a singular male as interpreter and therefore, as the master narrative of the genre. To omit black womanist voices is also to enact the very same violence of erasure against which black bodies, especially black female bodies, have been in regular combat. It is to silence the maternal tradition that exists within the elegy for the black body. Finally, such an erasure not only others black motherhood from the semiotics of mourning for black bodies, but it also

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<sup>19</sup> Langston Hughes' "Mississippi 1955" and "Money Mississippi" are both examples of the long-standing trend of signification where Emmett Till, lynching, and Mississippi are interchangeable words for the poems racial and violent context.

<sup>20</sup> Website with link to poems about Emmett Till

alienates motherhood from the arenas of struggle against social injustice and thus, the justice-making processes that have historically defended black bodies.

It is here that poet and activist Audre Lorde becomes important. As others have contributed to justice-making process (Hughes and Baraka), Lorde's use of motherhood as a poetic device demonstrates the capacity for the elegy for the black body to investigate and interrogate across race and gender. While Hughes and Baraka investigated the terms of mourning for the body as images and memorials to be figured and dismembered, Brooks and Lorde interrogate the terms of accountability for the loss of the corporeal black body. Thus, the black matriarch is of particular relevance to this conversation given the notion of how black womanist thought continues to re-contextualize the poetry of mourning via the felt loss of Emmett Till as experienced by his mother and later embodied by black elegists. It is known that Emmett Till is a significant signifier within the elegy for the black body. His mutilated face, however, could not have possibly instigated the political and poetic move from consolation and towards action, had it not been for the revolutionary act of his mother, Mamie Till-Mobley who dared to reveal his face to the world. In an analysis of Till's death, Molly Littlewood McKibbin argues that "Till's age and, to a great degree, his mother's vocal outrage and public action made his death news-worthy." (McKibbin 678). Thus, Mamie Elizabeth Till-Mobley's bold action is remembered as the protest statement, "I think everybody needed to know what had happened to Emmett Till," (PBS 1). This revelation sparked outrage and ultimately emblazoned the Civil Rights Movement<sup>21</sup>. Moreover, Brooks' companion poem, "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of

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<sup>21</sup> The Washington Post: "Emmett Till's Mother Opened His Casket and Sparked the Civil Rights Movement" [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2018/07/12/emmett-tills-mother-opened-his-casket-and-sparked-the-civil-rights-movement/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.1631d0856de8](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2018/07/12/emmett-tills-mother-opened-his-casket-and-sparked-the-civil-rights-movement/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.1631d0856de8)

Emmett Till,” explores the grief of Emmett’s mother, reminding readers of “the black woman’s pain and the permanence of Emmett’s absence” (McKibbin 678). This section will show how Till-Mobley’s position of protest and loss is appropriated by elegists who make significant use of motherhood as a signifier. Such a unique position of protest offers a space from which poets can more authoritatively investigate and interrogate violence.

If there is any poet who can interrogate violence across racial and gender lines it is Audre Lorde. The American born Caribbean writer, feminist, womanist, librarian, and civil rights activist is best known for her technical mastery and emotional expression, as well as her poems that express anger and outrage at civil and social injustices she observed throughout her life.<sup>[1]</sup> Her poems and prose largely deal with issues related to civil rights, feminism, lesbianism, and the exploration of black female identity. Lorde’s selected poem is, “A Woman/Dirge for Wasted Children,” written for Clifford Glover, a 10-year-old who was shot after running from a plainclothes police officer with a gun who had just jumped out of a white Buick Skylark in Jamaica, Queens, on a spring morning in 1973 (-- 1).

Clifford Glover is the subject of multiple of Lorde’s poems. In “A Woman” Lorde takes the poetic embodiment of motherhood to another level, pulling from a tradition of protest that ritualizes the duties of the “matriarch of protest” in the person of Mamie Till-Mobley, who as a plea for justice reveals her son’s brutalized face to the viewing public. Lorde relies on the voice and tone of motherhood to activate a ritual of mourning for Clifford, whose mourners had no reliable judicial recourse. Thus, Lorde’s dirge weighs society’s and a “woman’s” accountability to “wasted children”; the one legitimizes murder and the other guards life. In that gap, Lorde draws a distinction between genders. Only as a “woman” is the speaker anointed “guardian over life,”

contrary to a “man who appoints himself over fetuses”(2:3). She is a woman who is anointed by “centuries of wasted children [...] of warring, whoring, and slaughter” to challenge the notions of white male justice. In the third stanza, when one child is taken, Lorde’s speaker challenges the legality and legitimacy of state sanctioned murder, of rationalizing the death of black bodies. She instead opts for a ritual of mourning and remembrance that “wipes up” the spilled blood of the slain. In a society where grieving a lost child to state sanctioned violence is prohibited, Lorde’s poem wipes up the blood of slain black bodies, a ritual demonstration of accountability and loss that collides with the Mamie Till Mobley’s tradition, where black mothers become accountable for cleansing social injustices against the slain black bodies in ways that society fails to.

Both Lorde and Brooks enact motherhood as a ritual in the poetic tradition which examines the dichotomy of race and gender as they color the strange violence against black bodies. Like Brooks, Audre Lorde attends to issues of race and gender as they appear in the blurred spaces of accountability and complicity. This reveals that the spectrum of protest within the elegy for the black body has the ability to critique itself as well as white institutions of power. Such an approach specifically recontextualizes how black women poets have participated in the genre, having contributed poetically, drawing traditions from a historically and spiritually rooted participation in defence of the collective black body. If the justice elegy is the demonstration of black women’s long standing protest in the struggle against social injustice, then Audre Lorde’s poem “A Woman/Dirge for Wasted Children” is performative representation of the black feminist protest tradition which re-enacts the accountability practice demonstrated through “wiping up blood”. Unlike Baraka’s ritual of sacralization, Lorde’s ritual of cleansing is conflicted: the speaker cannot entirely praise or exalt anyone. The poem is counter-praise just as it is counter-consolation,

buttressing a need to hold all members of society, those complicit in the violent acts as well as those who like the speaker who for her silence, hold themselves responsible.

Thus, Lorde's protest tradition, beholden to Mamie Till-Mobley finds its distinction from the Black Arts poetry of Baraka in that it uses embodiment, not dismemberment to interrogate white violence across gender and racial lines. This "difference" is attributed to black womanist thought, where black women stand outside of the non-intersectional feminism and the patriarchy of racism that Brooks' poem so clearly represents. It is to this fact that Lorde's famous words can be best postulated:

"Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference – those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older – know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (Lorde 112).

The change that Lorde speaks of, the tools needed to dismantle social injustices and violence against black bodies emerges out of the experience of the black mother as *different*. This difference that distinguishes the black mother experience amounts to a brand of strangeness as well. A valuation of the mother embodiment requires "essential recognition of difference— of strangeness" (Hejiniian 157). Black mother embodiment highlights difference as a tool of defamiliarization for what Lorde calls "dismantling" frames of oppression. Lorde writes "And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support" (Lorde 112). The African American poetry of mourning is not only tied to the memory of

Emmett Till; indeed it is. However, through Mamie Till-Mobley, the observance of mothers in mourning becomes bound first to our experience of mourning the slain, and second to our experience of our experience. This double-ness constitutes a strangeness, a double consciousness of mourning that draws a distinction between mourners of loss and the loss of mourners, the latter is shaped by a difference in positional proximity to the slain. I borrow DuBois'<sup>22</sup> model of double-consciousness to swerve on “this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (DuBois 3). Black mothers do not simply “look” and “measure” their “souls” through multiple consciousnesses (racial and sexual), they “look” and “measure” their grief, their mourning looked on “in amused contempt and pity”<sup>23</sup> (DuBois 3). Thus, the justice elegy retrieves the black maternal critical gaze from gender and racial interpolation. Using Audre Lorde's tool of difference, this poetry “looks” at the cultural-poetic practice of mourning, defamiliarizing the object of mourning to demand social and spiritual justice.

While the protest aesthetic of Hughes and the revolutionary rhetoric of Baraka are all present in poems from Brooks to Lorde, these later poets re-contextualize the male-dominated the discussion around the mourning of black bodies. Where Till has been the center of the elegy for the black body, black womanist thought creates new meaning by figuring back and forth from Till

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<sup>22</sup> DuBois borrowed the term ‘double consciousness’ from psychologist Alfred Binet’s 1890 book *On Double consciousness: Experimental Psychological Studies*.

<sup>23</sup> One example of this “pity and contempt” can be seen in the response to a court testimony given by the grandmother of slain 7-year-old Aiyana Jones, who was shot and killed in her grandmother’s arms due to a Detroit police night raid. According to court recordings, which show jurors and officers smirking, and an article titled “How Aiyana Jones Grandmother Didn’t Help Prosecution’s Case” the testimony of black mothers is perceived as a contemptuous emotional performance at best and at worst, it not only fails to extract any empathy or credibility in the eyes of the white institutions of power who are complicit in the murder but they also receive scorn and blame. Mertilla Jones’ treatment is typical of the marginalization and disbelief that black mothers face. Nonetheless, black motherhood is a subjectivity that the justice elegy takes (even confiscates) as central to its poetic discourse of demanding justice.

to his mother, creating pluralistic rather than a singular agent in the semiotic mourning of black bodies. Black women elegists assume Till-Mobley's interpretative position as mother and protester, and from her position, they are able to produce new meaning through self-interrogation. Lorde's speaker questions herself concerning the "wasted children," highlighting black womanist thought's capacity for self-examination. From Emmett Till to Clifford Glover, the elegy for the black body greatly benefits from womanist thought, adding to its mode (1) core themes of loss and accountability, (2) its epistemological significance to motherhood, and (3) its connections to domestic and transnational practices of protest. In this chapter, then, because black mothers are re-conceptualized to embody not the lynched body, but the mourner, black poets who embody the tone and voice of mothers force the genre to focus on notions of mourning and protesting from the literary position of the black matriarch. They open the genre to social actions present in the black community and release the tradition of black mother embodiment to poets of all genders. The thematics of black m(o)thering, the black matriarch, and mourning have perhaps appeared throughout literature, but can their exposure supports other works that move beyond consolation within the elegiac practices of contemporary black poets. Not only do women poets Brooks and Lorde draw ontological power and protest from Till's mother. From Ricardo Weeks 1955 "Song for Emmett Till's Mother" to Michael Harper's 1970 poem "A Mother Speaks" to Jericho Brown's 2019 masterpiece "Riddle" the embodiment of black mothers suggests that there is not only an overwhelming amount of poetic protest by black women poets, but also that Black poets of all sexes figure mourning and protest through mother embodiment.

Heretofore, Hughes and Baraka have dealt with the lynched and assassinated black body by focusing on its dismemberment. From this point forward, Brooks and Lorde, by figuring Till's

mother, deal with both the reassembled black body and female embodiment. This reassembled body in the justice elegies by Audre Lorde and Gwendolyn Brooks specifically address the killing of black boys and strike a timely relevance decades after their publications. The poems mark a reinscription of the horrific event, offering another way to process and protest the traumatic loss of a child. Although there are other poems that address assault at the hands of “de facto” or “de jure” white violence, the power of these poems is their uncontested authority to open the casket, so the speak, or to “reveal the face” of the black body. Further “habitations” of the slain black female body appear in the genre for black women such as Sandra Bland<sup>24</sup> and Renisha McBride. Embodiment, as opposed to dismemberment, allows for both the ritual cleansing of social injustices as well as the social practice of protest against injustices. While Langston Hughes’ blues poetics certainly shapes beginnings of the elegy for the black body, going forward, this paper cannot overlook the tremendous contribution that black women have offered the African American poetry of mourning, specifically towards a protest that is counter both consolation and retribution, narrowing instead on justice. Projecting this concept over the next several decades, black mother embodiment or black female habitation will continue to recreate agency to reveal the face of black body, effectively new terrains of discourse from which poets can erect investigations towards justice, accountability, and acknowledgment.

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<sup>24</sup> Lauren K. Alleyne’s “Heaven?” is a poem dedicated to Sandra Bland, the 28-year-old black woman who authorities say they found hanging in a Texas jail cell in 2016. It reads: “*Where does a black girl go when her body is emptied / Of her? And her wild voice, / where does it sing its story / when the knots of history/ make a grave of her throat? [...] How many angels weep / when a black girl is torn /into wings?*” The poem is an example of a type of black female embodiment, choosing the slain black female body as its subject, this poem and others like it address the injustice of structural violence. Other poems include slam poetry such as the poem read by Kai Davis, Nayo Jones and Jasmine Combs connects the abuse black woman have faced for centuries to Bland’s death. Performing at Temple University for the 2016 College Unions Poetry Slam Invitational, the poets said: “I’ve wished death on myself many times but it was never my idea.”

## THE COMMUNAL ELEGY: or SONIA SANCHEZ'S "POEM FOR MOVE PHILADELPHIA"

Post-Vietnam War Era, 1985-1990

In the previous chapters, we have seen how black elegists have used the cultural image of the lynched body to investigate white America's disregard for black pain, to interrogate and initiate a ritual of re-sacralization of the assassinated black body of the Civil Rights era, and to initiate and sanction a black womanist ritual of accountability whereby justice for black lives can be demanded. What those chapters have not addressed, however, is the invisible social framework upon which these institutions of power find and base their legitimacy. That is, the role of structural violence in legitimizing penalties for black bodies has a historical root in white supremacy's need to guard spatialization from black visibility—or the need to protect the equilibrium of white spaces from threatening black bodies. Here, the communal elegy will interrogate structural violence, using the cultural memory of lynching to make a distinction between contemporary acts of so-called "legitimate" violence and the memorized "illegitimate" violence of the past.

Marita Sutken's term "cultural memory" offers this analysis a chance to look at cultural representations inherent in Black performances and narratives of mourning. Negotiated at the nexus of national history and collective lived experience, cultural memory suggests considerations in literature, art, television, film, and commodities, but it is perhaps remembered most powerfully "through public memorials and rituals of memorialization" (Chidester 754). Effectively, what earlier black elegists Baraka and Lorde demonstrated were poetic memorials and rituals of memorialization. From Malcolm X to Clifford Glover, from the assassinated black body to the wasted child, this genre is given a public memorial either exalting or demanding

accountability for the death. These elegies have demonstrated how poets of the 60s and 70s used dismemberment, rememberment, and embodiment to not only erect monuments to the slain black body, but also to initiate rituals of memorialization and mourning. It goes without saying that these poets initiated communal ritual acts beyond consolation and towards protests colored by retribution and justice. The 1980s black elegy, however, focuses on the communal aspects of black death and violence, challenging assumptions of memorialization and choosing to focus instead on the dark side of monuments. The lynched black body as a monument, or better spectacle, of white performance of rage and othering is the topic of this section. How black poets respond to legitimized white violence against black landmarks, spaces, and visibility is as important to this discussion as how poets have responded to white violence against black bodies. The communal elegy demonstrates this shift in the elegy for the black body, which has prior to this point been concerned primarily with the cultural memory of violence against a continuum of individual black bodies, not the violence against collective bodies and their spaces, per se. Using this lens, this section posits that the elegy for the black body again investigates and interrogates white violence, this time from a communal position that critiques white institutions of structural violence across temporal and spatial fixtures. The communal elegy is exemplified in the poetry of Sonia Sanchez who comments on a contemporary episode of violence through the mobilization of spectacle lynching signifiers. David Kieran argues that Sanchez's poem "deploys lynching imagery to locate contemporary American racial violence as well as structural and institutional oppression within the long history of white supremacy that has been produced and legitimated through brutality" (35).

The 1980s were a fraught period of political and social unrest in the United States. With the disintegration of various Black social-political groups and the reinforcement of conservatism under the Reagan era, black bodies experienced structural violence in the form of high unemployment, the over-policing and under-funding of public goods, the drug crisis and the criminalization of drug-related issues—all of which marginalized black society, especially black urban society. At the same time, Black communities were increasingly forming and practicing resistance philosophies. This, coupled with the fascination of the white gaze on pop culture media, sports, and entertainment meant that white spatialization felt threatened by the growing number of visible black bodies. Notions of visibility, how black bodies are perceived as threats, and invisibility, how structural violence works inherently and invisibly within social institutions to prevent black bodies from meeting their most basic need—come into play. In this context, the murder of black bodies is abetted by culturally violent precepts that color black bodies and their architectural/communal spaces as wrong or criminal or animal, etc. I term this concept ‘white spatialization,’ which can be understood as the racial coding of certain spaces as dominant spaces of whiteness and white superiority, to be protected from the threat blacks and perceived blackness (crime, drugs, violence, etc). This racialization of space, particularly in an “urban” context, engages the urban space and its marginalized black residents as a national emergency. Imagined as dangerous spaces of violence and delinquency, black communities are surveilled and policed on a Panopticon level.<sup>25</sup> Depending on their visual and spatial hue, black bodies are projected as threats in society, making violence a normalized response. The particular horror that

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<sup>25</sup> Mainstream society, dominated by white people, creates spaces of visibility and opacity where people of color, particularly poor people of color, are made either visible or invisible according to many factors. Condensed neighborhoods is one such space where there is a central building, what Michel Foucault, following Jeremy Bentham, would call the Panopticon, surveilling people coming in and out of the buildings.

this chapter makes its focus, the deaths of Philadelphia *MOVE* family members proves just that. The revolutionary organization known as *MOVE* was a black liberation organization founded by John Africa in Philadelphia in 1972, and continues to exist today. Members of *MOVE*, self-described as a “deeply religious organization,” adopt the surname “Africa” to signal the familial nature of the group, and they reject all aspects of “the System”: man-made laws, the government, industry (including the food industry), and big business. After a series of encounters with the police, the organization’s communal home was bombed tactically bombed and left to burn with its members, some of them children, in the home.

“On May 13, 1985, Mayor W. Wilson Goode authorized a military-style assault on the *MOVE* house. The siege lasted approximately eighteen hours, during which 10,000 rounds of ammunition were fired on *MOVE*’s home in less than ninety minutes, after which a bomb containing an improvised combination of Tovex and the powerful military explosive C-4 was dropped on a house that was clearly occupied by both children and adults. Police Commissioner George Sambor and Fire Commissioner William Richmond then used the fire caused by the bomb as a tactical weapon, deciding in consultation with each other to “let the bunker burn,” even though they were aware that people were still in the house. The official record reports, “11 occupants of the house, including five children, were dead. Nearly two square blocks of a residential neighborhood lay wasted by fire. Sixty-one families, some 250 men, women and children, were homeless” (Beckman 9).

Poet and activist Sonia Sanchez is a native poet of Philadelphia whose poetics interweaves with a long lineage of African American poetics, especially Black Arts poetry. Sanchez’s poem “Elegy

(for MOVE and Philadelphia)” was written as a response to the shocking disregard for black life in the 1985 bombing. Overall, the communal elegy “recalls the lynched body to address ongoing [structural] violence without diluting the specificity of past violations or contemporary instances of violence and oppression” (85). These signifiers rely on the memory of lynching in a way that not only highlights the enduring strange breed of violences that African Americans face at the hands of whites, but also in a way that shifts the conceptual mapping around the word. Here, strangeness moves from a critical term that characterizes slain black bodies to a term that critically characterizes institutions of structural violence. What Sanchez suggests is that strangeness, from the lynch era to the 80’s is better embodied by the moral debasement of white society not the projected uncanniness of the black slain body.

When we turn to the first stanza, the poem deconstructs the logic of the city’s authority figures who sanctioned the bombing of an entire community. From there, Sanchez recalls a strong lynching imagery that sets up the rest of the poem. Philadelphia is represented in the same way that Mississippi has been emblemized from poems as early in the genre as Hughes’ “Mississippi—1955,” : as a space of ruin and punishment for black bodies. Her poem recontextualizes West Philadelphia to reveal it’s uncanny resemblance to Mississippi, ultimately drawing a conclusion about the nature of lynch era mob mentalities and the present day police force, fire force, and news media. Thus, She destroys the pretense of a non-urban lynching by establishing the connection between Mississippi and Philadelphia as similar sites of violence against black bodies, especially where the 1985 Philadelphia media makes dead black bodies a national and global spectacle. The image of white men posed next to dead black bodies, especially burned black bodies, is strangely reminiscent of the lynch scene. This places the

lynching discourse at the base of Sanchez's poem, coloring the instances of strangeness therein. She terms Philadelphia the "disguised southern city" of "cowboys and auctioneers," all being drawn to the spectacle lynching. Sanchez people's the poem with signifiers for the white mob, the vigilantism, the westerners wildness, and the slave auctioneers—all of which make up the white fascination lynched black bodies.

According to David Kieran, Black Arts poetry, of which Sanchez is a proponent, "have mobilized these images and this legacy in work that critiques violence during the 1960s and into the 1980s. Dudley Randall, Larry Neal, Etheridge Knight, Michael Harper, and Sonia Sanchez deploy images of the lynching victim's mutilated body to comment upon other realities, such as the 1967 riots in Newark and Detroit, the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the 1985 bombing of MOVE in Philadelphia, and the effects of institutionalized anti-black violence" (240). While it is true that Black Arts poets deploy signifiers of the lynched body in poems to describe contemporary spectacles of institutionalized, legalized, and legitimated violence, Sanchez's poem remarks on the violence not only against black bodies, but black communities that threaten white spatialization.

The next stanza demonstrates Sanchez's critique of structural violence as it legitimizes black death. It does so by responding rhythmically to poem's subject matter, where the first stanza responded spatially and temporally. The tone of the poem is rhythmized by oral southern mimicries of excitement and eagerness to participate in the sociocultural dynamics of the lynchings. The speaker says, "C'mon girl hurry on down to Osage st / they're roasting in the fire," a first line that harkens back to the long hunting and feasting association with black bodies as prey (2:5-6). Sanchez then uses the rhythm of southern lynch culture to not only

re-contextualize the temporal scene of the 1973 Osage street bombing with the historical scenes of lynchings, but also to *refigure* its socializing participants. In the mob crowd, Sanchez includes 1985 perpetrators such as “tvmen and “newsmen” in “corporations”—figures that represent systems of institutions who commodify the spectacle of violence against black bodies. This reveals the presence of the structurally violent apparatus that disguises the lynching scene, attempting to legitimize violence.

These tropes are also expressed in the next stanza, where the speaker recalls a series of lynching signifiers such as “roasting fire” and “blood” to stress the mutilated communal black body. This, along with the fascination of the white media’s gaze on the mutilated black body, broadly represents the lynch mob as more contemporary but no less complicit institutions of power such as the judicial branch and the media. According to Amy Wood, the media’s attention to the bombing works in tandem with “the long history of lynch, arrest, and death penalty reporting in media. It serves as a reminder that the death penalty has frequently been imposed without a trial and outside of the jurisdiction (though often with the implicit cooperation) of law enforcement and judicial officials (Kieran 239, Wood 13). Amy Wood further asserts that that nineteenth century public executions “were legal versions of the spectacle lynchings that took place in this same period,” (Wood 13). To that, Sanchez’s poem challenges the legalization of what she contextualizes as a mass contemporary lynching. The significance of the speaker’s mourning is that he/she is expressing the loss of the MOVE family, their home, community, and even the loss of the city of Philadelphia that, by participating in the lynching, is transformed from a multicultural community to a site of white violence. The poem’s crucial use of lynching lies not simply in African Americans being mutilated but also in that mutilation's visibility

through reproduction in various media. That is, the attack on the MOVE home was not enough, the community had to be burned to publicly mutilate the black body. According to Matthew Hale, public violations “produced and maintained white supremacy as well as culturally constructed racial categories and [that...] retroactively validated white notions of African Americans as deviant and dangerous” (Hale 205, 228). Spectacle lynchings likewise defined social roles for African Americans: “the assumption persisted that an occasional lynching ... served ... to remind a new generation of blacks of their place in Southern society” (Litwack 308-309). To point out how Sanchez is in dialogue with Hale’s point about lynchings, consider how Philadelphia is represented as a “Southern society” reinforces the violent spatialization of white supremacy for future generations (1:1-3). It is important to note that the elegy is not simply for MOVE, but “for MOVE *and* Philadelphia,” a city that is transformed through self-mutilation. Because lynching often served to publicly deny the subjectivity<sup>26</sup> of all African Americans, what the speaker is mourning is not only a loss of sacred black lives, but also the loss of sacred black spaces: homes, communities, and cities (Hale 229). If black cultural memory has taught us anything, it is that this strange violence is has a familiarity to instances of extreme violence in the south. Similar to the MOVE home and community burning, this essay cites the Rosewood Massacre of 1923 in Levy County, Florida where a white lynch mob over the period of several days, attacked and killed their black neighbors, some 350 people. In January 1923, not only did the mob kill the residents, they also burned most of the buildings in the settlement, which was subsequently abandoned by residents fleeing the attacks that ensued. Together with the cultural

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<sup>26</sup> At the time of the bombing, the first black mayor of Philadelphia W. Wilson Goode was responsible for ordering and authorizing the firebombing of the Move residence, going so far as planning the bombing weeks ahead of the tactical assault. Self-mutilation here implies that black authorities, as members of a structurally violent apparatus, participate in the public mutilation of the communal black body.

memory of burning, the signification of the lynched black body, and references to lynching's function as a public spectacle—we can confirm the communal elegy's preoccupation with structural violence as central to the elegy for the black body's critique of contemporary violence against African Americans.

In *Hearts and Minds: Bodies, Poetry, and Resistance in the Vietnam Era*, Michael Bibby argues that "throughout the Black Liberationist poetry ... the body is foregrounded as the terrain for the signification of a racially assertive and empowered subjectivity. Many poems celebrate African American culture ... by focusing on physical features idealized as characteristics of black corporeality" (57). While Black Arts poets often refer to lynching in its historical context, Sanchez's poem explores how frequently shared signifiers of extralegal capital punishment were mobilized in poems to critique contemporary forms of violence, structural inequality, and institutionalized oppression. Up to now, Sanchez, in tandem with the earlier elegists, portrays the contemporary African American body as having been mutilated, dismembered, burned, shot, or as having had its eyes gouged out—"look, over there, one eye escaping from its skin" (4:3-4). Later, however, readers will see how Sanchez's lynch imagery is in line with later elegist, principally Claudia Rankine. Consider the third stanza and shortest stanza of Sanchez's poem. It is a one-line sentence that seemingly disrupts the poem's flow to ask, "how does one scream in thunder?" (3:1) The rhetorical question here concerns itself with the audibility of black terror in the face of deafening violence, as seen by the unchallenged thunderous bombing of the MOVE residency. The question underwrites the poem's premise: for a racially violent culture, to what extent is the violence against black bodies ever *unwarranted*? For the MOVE house members, their protest lifestyle was deemed abject or "savage" to dominant white society, which

legitimized extreme police retaliation. However, as put forth from Claudia Rankine decades after the MOVE bombing, “the wrongheaded question that is asked is, What kind of savages are we? Rather than, What kind of country do we live in?” (Rankine). Sanchez’ poem is before its time, dialectically speaking to Rankine’s 2015 question. She puts forth this answer by turning readers’ attention to the strangeness of contemporary lynch society. ‘What kind of country do we live in?’ The kind, Sanchez notes, that is deaf to the “scream” of the burning black body. These lynching tropes are presented as evidence of the prevalence of the strange cycle of violence as a dominant mode in the elegy for the black body. As themes, these notions color the invisible and the systemic nature of violence towards black bodies and their communities. As frameworks, these ideas are used by black elegists to critique the ways that contemporary cultural violence is underwritten by a legacy of lynching.

The event known as Philadelphia MOVE is a point of distinction in the elegy for the black body generally, as it contributes to the elegy’s mode of investigation and interrogation, and particularly where elegists move against consolation and towards the practice of inscribing meaning around the illegitimacy and madness of the strange state-sanctioned violence. This strangeness is supported and characterized by structural violence that privileges white spatialization and violence against black bodies as a spectacle. Sanchez’s poems situate the struggles of contemporary African Americans within the history of structural racism which we will later see has various institutions at its disposal to mutilate and murder black bodies, especially where they are *too* visible.

The communal elegy makes room in this discussion for dialogues concerning themes in the elegy such as riots, gang violence, prison and state correctional violence—ultimately

culminating into the conversations around the legitimized death penalties without due process. In the chapters to come, this dialogue is increasingly important due to the role the media plays in the criminalization and legitimization of violence against black bodies, those famous and lesser known.

## THE FAME ELEGY: or NIKKI GIOVANNI 's Elegy for "Beautiful Warriors"

'90s Hip-Hop Era, 1990-1999

The fame elegy can be defined as an elegy occasioned by the death of a famous black body, whose death is the direct or indirect result of structural violence, especially where the media is concerned. In the history of the elegy for the black body, lynching signifiers metonymically associate the mob's fascination with the mutilated black body with a different unruly group, the media<sup>27</sup>. Throughout the media, as the previous chapter shows, publicized fatal violence is central to the legitimization of the violent social and political imaginary. As the last chapter hinted, strangeness is supported by structural violence, an invisible social-political system that privileges white spatialization and violence against black bodies as a legitimate response to black visibility. The struggles of contemporary African Americans within the history of structural racism, then, is in escaping the various institutions capable of mutilating and murdering black bodies. However, as the media conglomerate began to expand in the early 90s, it gave the white gaze more access to black bodies, prompting yet another strange response to black visible bodies. Black bodies in media, especially in Rap and Hip-Hop culture, then, being themselves at times admittedly violent, were subject to over-criminalization, imprisonment, and othering.

With that, the music, philosophy, and rhetoric of Tupac Shakur was perceived by the public as of glorification of illegal acts, as is the conflict with most Rap/Hip-Hop artists. In turn, when violence is predicated on these artists, a narrative of mourning is complicated by resistance to their seemingly violent rhetoric. His death and murder, then, though not tellingly tied to white

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<sup>27</sup> See "The Justice Elegy"

supremacy, is related to the narrative of mourning because his absence, though not caused by direct state sanctioned violence, is marked by neglect. Despite his fame, despite the visibility of his death (murdered on one of the most public streets in the country), authorities seems unresponsive to Tupac Shakur's fatality. This is the paradox in the fame elegy: the visibility and invisibility of the blackness that legitimizes violence against the black body. It is a paradox that marks, to a degree, all the elegies for the black body. The term the *fame* elegy can be applied to each chapter's person of interest, Emmett Till, Malcolm X, Clifford Harris, MOVE Philadelphia. All of these lives were made public in some way before or after their death and despite the visibility of their deaths they were invisible to the American judicial process.

Tupac Shakur's death not only highlights what the previous chapter have notes, the publicization of the mutilated black body, but also focuses on the mutilation of the public or famous black body. To that, the 26-year-old Rapper and Poet, Tupac Shakur is represented as a black body in fame, whose death is culturally remembered in the same tradition of violence as that of Emmett Till, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., the four little girls, and many more.

To further complicate the mourning of such individuals, let us consider again the relationship between white spatiality, black visibility, and punishment. In the Jim Crow era, vigilante lynch mobs punished black bodies for two fundamental reasons: the visibility of their race, meaning their affluence, pronouncement, or success that was seen as threatening, along with the spatialization of their black bodies which was seen, depending on their visibility, as a trespass of the laws of white spatialization and visibility. In future chapters, the intersection of these two laws produces a different kind of "lynching" and a different kind of "mob," requiring a rebuttal in the elegy for the black body that destroys those laws and re-figures the black body in

relation to strangeness or violence. Nikki Giovanni, a major poet of the from the Black Arts era and beyond, truly helps to define African American poetry of the '90s. In her poem, "All Eyez on U" Giovanni ingrafts Tupac Shakur into the '90s elegy and to every tradition and species of the elegy for the black body before mentioned:

(a). Where the Blues elegy ironically oversignifies the notions of mourning, Giovanni oversignifies the pathos of mourning to critique the media's responsibility to Tupac

(b). Where black arts writer Baraka used the reassembled the assassinated character of Malcolm X to erect a ritual of praise, Giovanni does the same for Tupac

(c). Where Brooks and Lorde embody motherhood to interrogate society and demand justice for Till's and Glove's murder, Giovanni embodies Afeni Shakur, Shakur's mother, to interrogate authorities and complicit members of society

(d). Where Sanchez's communal elegy re-performs the lynch narrative to raise awareness on the individual and communal threats to Black life, Giovanni aligns Shakur's death to the lynch narrative, requiring that his death be mourned not only as the result of contemporary lynching but as a result of state legitimized structural violence. Thus, Giovanni inscribes Shakur's murder into the historical record of strangeness, performing a ritual of memorialization that historiographs his death in the lineage of various other persons of cultural interest to the genre.

The sociopolitical backdrop of the '90s was filled with racial political and social strife. The 1991 Clarence Thomas controversy began to reveal the stark need for social and political reform concerning black women's liberation. The 1992 Rodney King verdict triggered a series of riots in Los Angeles and throughout the nation that drew more attention to legacy of racially brutal police practices. Poverty and unemployment in the black community drastically increased

as a fallout effect of Reaganomics. The media was over-reporting crimes in the black community while at the same time, very little was done to address the causes to the rises in gang wars, over policing, and police brutality. Finally, the Clinton administration had just passed several laws concerning minimum sentencing and repeat offenders, which would later drastically increase the number of imprisoned Blacks<sup>28</sup>. The times were changing. Despite these changing times, the poetry of mourning for black bodies remained committed to its literary tradition. Also, despite the elegy being one of the most ancient forms of poetry, its form remained contemporary enough for 90's poet Nikki Giovanni who uses its conversation with a popular poetic and musical form: rap. Giovanni's elegy is for one of Rap's leading artists, Tupac Shakur. Tupac died on September 13, 1996, of gunshot wounds inflicted six days prior. At the time of his death, Tupac Shakur was a 26-year-old accomplished actor, poet, rapper and activist who was considered the greatest rapper of all time. The young rapper came to embody the 1990s gangsta-rap aesthetic and in death became an icon symbolizing noble struggle. He has sold 75 million albums to date, making him one of the top-selling artists of all time. A sensitive, precociously talented and troubled soul, Tupac was gunned down in Las Vegas on September 7, 1996, and died six days later. His murder has never been solved.

The term *fame elegy* is used in Shakur's case because Shakur's death can be eulogized within the framework of an elegy that attends to the relationship between fame and racial violence equally, particularly since in his case the white gaze on the famed black body is perceived to be a cause of death. The fame elegy's strangeness is demonstrated by how

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<sup>28</sup> The NAACP reports that between 1980 and 2015, the number of people incarcerated in America increased from roughly 500,000 to over 2.2 million. Today, the United States makes up about 5% of the world's population and has 21% of the world's prisoners.

society, particularly the media, craves the mutilation of the visible black body. In Till's time, lynching was a *de facto* practice used by whites to deal with black bodies who were believed to have transgressed their margins. This idea of fame or *fama*, Latin for "talk, rumor, report, reputation," is in some ways a part of each of the slain subjects heretofore mentioned in this analysis. That is, "talk, rumor, [and ] report" of the individual made their death somewhat more visibly acceptable, but not socially or judicially accountable (OED). Thus, there was a level of fame attached to Till's murder after his mother made his face visible. In popular culture today, there are symbolic and seemingly benign ways that society deals with black bodies who are believed to have transgressed. Like Till, Shakur was targeted for being transgressing margins, and more-so for being outspoken. He began his music career as a rebel with a cause to articulate the travails and injustices endured by many African-Americans (Wikipedia). His skill in doing so not only made him a spokesperson for his own generation but also a target to those who perceived him as a threat to white spatialization and safety. Throughout his rap career, Shakur made several complaints about his violent encounters with police and law enforcement, inciting criticism from white media and politicians (of all races) who led crusades against his "gangster" music<sup>29</sup>. This is the context of his death as remembered by poet Nikki Giovanni when she writes "All Eyez on U". Her poem historicizes Shakur's murder not as a result of "east coast west coast" gang feuds, not even as an isolated

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<sup>29</sup> See the last line of the poem. It mentions Ms. C. Delores Tucker: "Are you happy now Mz. Tucker?" As an African American council woman/ senator and activist, Tucker battled Tupac on the 'respectability' front. Her controversial issues with Shakur further confirmed his gangster rap persona in the media. This inter-community debate between respectability and racial progress often marginalized young Black voices in mainstream media/politics. By making Shakur "the problem" and not racism, "Mz. Tucker" made Shakur become complicit in making Shakur a candidate for spectacle violence.

act of personal vendetta, but as series of racially imbued aggressions that originate in the long memory of white violence.

First, Giovanni does not separate Shakur's death from the Till lynching, the Birmingham Church Bombing, the Malcolm X assassination, the Clifford Glover shooting, or the MOVE bombing. Furthermore, as a fame elegy Shakur's narrative of mourning can blend easily with the aforementioned individuals and their respective modes: blues, martyr, justice, and even communal. In the cultural memory of the poet, Tupac is remembered as all of these. For this reason, Giovanni's poem is more useful as a summation for the elegy for the black body, as its content signifies Tupac in a lineage of other signifiers within the genre.

First, like *the blues elegy*, Giovanni's fame elegy relies on a particular rhythm, repetition, and irony that likens it to the blues. Where Hughes uses oral folk language, Giovanni uses popular cultural references and Hip-Hop idioms such as "your kitchen has roaches your toilet is overflowing your basement has so much water the rats are in the living room your house is in disorder" (17-20). Giovanni also uses loose repetition, relying on single word repetition to re-create and riff on a repeated syntactic structure. For instance, the word "if those who lived":

*if* those who lived by the sword died by the sword there would be no  
white men on earth

*if* those who lived on hatred died on hatred there would be no KKK

*if* those who lived by lies died by lies there would be nobody on wall street (4-7)

Then she takes the second word, "those" and draws a new syntactical repetition and riff:

there were *those* who called it dirty gangsta rap inciting there were  
*those* who never wanted to be angry at the conditions but angry at the messenger  
who reported (15-17).

Giovanni also atunes a sort of blues rhythm to the poem, repeating the phrase “What a beautiful boy to lose ...what a beautiful boy” almost as a refrain. The greatest deployment of the blues elegy here is the blues irony which signifies interrogation throughout the poem, asserting an unspoken idea that “white men,” “KKK,” and “wall street” are equally violent, if not more violent than Tupac, and therefore also worthy of death. Thus, Giovanni is using irony to signify real terror: “white men,” “KKK,” and “wall street” and to over-signify the double standard of racial violence (6-8).

Like the *martyr elegy*, the *fame elegy* here departs from suggestive irony and from a focus on mere sadness. Rather, it narrows on retribution. Choosing to revise the public record of the martyr, the *fame elegy* gives cultural justifications for why the slain individual needs to be honored. In Shakur's case, and certainly in Nikki Giovanni's perspective, the young rapper and poet “told the truth” (14). Like Baraka's Malcolm X elegy, Giovanni is defending Shakur's right to be mourned, his right to “his life”. She writes “don't tell me he got what he deserved,” countering popular opinions that the young artist “lived by the sword and died by the sword” (9). With that, Giovanni engages in a pre-existing dialogue that uses over-criminalization to legitimize black death. Giovanni is aware of the fragmented white gaze that has interpolated Tupac and, like Baraka, she is concerned with reassembling the ‘dismembered’ memory of the black body.

Like the *justice elegy*, this poem makes use of black motherhood to revisit the event at hand:

you know, Socrates had a mother she too watched her son drink  
hemlock she too asked why but Socrates stood firm and would  
not lie to save himself 2Pac has a mother the lovely Afeni had  
to bury her son it is not right (26-41)

Giovanni's poem also bears resemblance to Audre Lorde's justice elegy, which embodies motherhood to mourn the loss of a black boy, Clifford Harris.

Sonia Sanchez said when she learned of his passing she walked all day  
walking the beautiful warrior home to our ancestors I just cried as all  
mothers cry for the beautiful boy (44-46)

Finally, Giovanni's poem summarizes the *ebb* genre up until this point. As Giovanni writes:

... I saw  
them murder Emmett Till I saw them murder Malcolm X I saw  
them murder Martin Luther King I witnessed them shooting  
Rap Brown I saw them beat LeRoi Jones I saw them fill their jails  
I see them burning churches ...  
this generation mourns 2Pac as my generation mourned Till as we all mourn  
Malcolm this wonderful young warrior" (25-29, 42-43).

Tupac is metonymically linked with Emmett Till and Malcolm X, Martin Luther King J., Amiri Baraka, the prison industrial complex, and even the Birmingham church bombings—so it is no wonder that this poem can be read as a summary of elegy for the black body. Tupac is not simply

a slain black man. In this poetic tradition, he is *another*. He is one man in a continuous line of fallen heroes whose deaths are the result of a *strange* 'racial imaginary' (Rankine 1). The expected tropes of the elegy are all present: "mournful," "consolatory" etc. Giovanni moves past lament and consolation. She sees Shakur's murder as a kind of "political action," a string of historical political moves that also murdered Martin Luther King, beat LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), and burned black churches. This time, the fruit hanging is "the brightest freshest/ fruit from the tallest tree [...] // what a beautiful boy" (30-31). Here, Giovanni's "fresh fruit" is linked to Meeropol's "Strange Fruit". The language also suggests that Giovanni believed Shakur's fame had something to do with why he was "picked". He was, as she notes, *visible*. He was the visibly the "brightest freshest / fruit" (30). The tree that Giovanni speaks of is not the lynching tree from Meeropol's poem. In fact, Giovanni seems to have reimagined the lynching trope altogether, taking the terrain of violence to resurrect Shakur's body outside of ruin and "rot" (3:11). Indeed, Shakur exists along with other "beautiful warriors" as a lynched body, is on the racial tree of oppression, and is engrafted into the semiotics of ruin. However, Shakur as the "brightest freshest / fruit," is inscribed into a different semiotic process: he becomes a vehicle for revising narratives of violence. As Henderson's text suggested in the last chapter, "the significance of lynching [is] coterminous with the move to cultural freedom or spiritual resurrection" (Henderson 154). Thus Giovanni commits Shakur's famed black body both to the tree of cultural memory via lynching as well as to the new tree of "spiritual resurrection" (Henderson 154). That Giovanni accomplishes this "resurrection" metonymically with signifiers of lynching is no small feat. She writes,

"but he did not go away as Malcolm did not go away as Emmett

Till did not go away / your shooting him will not take him from us [...]  
his spirit will fill our hearts his courage will strengthen us for the  
challenge” (32-36)

By spiritually reimagining Shakur in this way, Giovanni manages to resurrect the signification of other black bodies from dismemberment as well. She remains clear on what kind of violence “picked” Shakur, but she is more clear on not only reclaiming the black bodies aligned with Shakur but also on claiming the terrain associated with their ruin. Here, Giovanni makes a statement concerning the function of the elegy for the black body. Her metonymic arrangement suggests that the genre is capable of regenerating terrains of signifiers and inscribing those terrains with a meaning more consistent with the African American narrative of triumph and life. The elegy for the black body as a genre, according to Giovanni, is not limited to seeing its slain as perpetual fruits on the signifying lynch tree—no. By likening Shakur's death to Emmett Till and Malcolm X, by likening Shakur's his death to Socrates, a principal figure of the ancient Greek world (and our earliest terrain for the elegy as a poetic genre), Giovanni reclaims that tree of death and makes it a tree of eternal life. By immortalizing Shakur, “he will not go away,” Giovanni immortalizes all “beautiful warriors”—Till, Malcolm X, Clifford Glover, and many more black bodies who died under the umbrella of strangeness (32). The result is a resignified lynch tree and, with it, the bodies that are represented as its fruit. Giovanni’s work offers the genre a double-voiced discourse on the concept of strangeness, demonstrating how the poetry of mourning can subvert the lynching narrative even as it acknowledges it.

## THE CONCEPTUAL ELEGY: Claudia Rankine's Elogy for Trayvon Martin

Obama Era, 2008-2012

As the last chapters demonstrate, the lynching narrative exists both in the social and literary fabric of American life. However, while the lynched black body as spectacle is acknowledged by a black literary tradition, white accountability to the corporeal scarring of the black body is not acknowledged; or rather, it is *disbelieved* by the white imaginary. To remind the reader of the deafening sound of white silence to black pain, let us return to the words of Sonia Sanchez who wrote, "how do you scream in thunder?" (3:1). Or let us perhaps consider the words of Lorde who wrote, "I am broken into clefts of screaming" or Giovanni who wrote, "I just cried as all / mothers cry for the beautiful boy" (3:8-9, 45). Together all of these expressions conceptualize an important concept: the *estrangement* of the black body. The term "estrangement" is an old notion given by the Russian formalists, notably Victor Shklovsky which refers to the Lyn Hejinian theory of *ostranenie*, Russian for "making strange" (Holdheim 320). The term estrangement in this analysis is not to be confused with Shklovsky or Hejinian's *defamiliarization*<sup>30</sup>. Though distancing works in defamiliarization to make strange innovations, here it looks at the distance between black terror and white empathy. It is not enough to point out a long legacy of strangely horrific deaths. This analysis must also highlight the strangeness of mourning the black body when the grief lacks white credibility. The wound of racial violence, then, is both unseen and unheard as it is suspended by white *disbelief*. I borrow concepts from the theatrical world to highlight the performative aspects of estrangement and disbelief, or the

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<sup>30</sup> Estrangement "concerns the way in which writers write from a tradition that "petrifies" style. In literature, "expressions and constructions become predictable, pale, stereotyped, and thus lose all visibility and concreteness" (Holdheim 320).

distancing of the black body from white belief, and therefore, from white credibility, and even furthermore, from empathy<sup>31</sup>. This topoi emerged on America's center stage of racial imagination in the case of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin who was killed at the hands of George Zimmerman. As a woman-led jury of six mothers acquitted Zimmerman, effectively charging 17-year-old Martin with his own death, it became apparent that the white imaginary performed *disbelief* on Martin's body. This disbelief manifests as a "cultural production," to borrow a term from the economic world, that runs circularly back to estrangement. This estrangement, disqualifying the black body from white social and behavioral accountability, is a form of strangeness that stems from a lynch era social practice of white gazing and cognitive dissonance. To that, this section posits that the nation, not just the communities or persons directly implicated in racially violent crimes, performs *estrangement* in order to distance itself from the reality of a racially astringent society in a so-called post-racial America.

The 2012 fatal shooting of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, at the hands of neighborhood watch captain George Zimmerman engrossed the nation. Though coverage of Martin's death was surrounded by endless debates concerning his hooded sweatshirt, the photographs used to frame Martin's character, and the legitimacy of the stand-your-ground statutes, at the core the debate was the nation's unwillingness to frame Martin's murder through the lens of another spectacle murder: Emmett Till's. Claudia Rankine's lyric classic, *Citizen*,

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<sup>31</sup>Samuel Taylor Coleridge's term "the willing suspension of disbelief" is used to explain the phenomenon whereby onlookers and readers agree to accept non-reality as reality for the duration of the art experience or performance. I borrow this phrase to highlight the production around racial violence and all its elements. Frequency with the elements of violence as they relate to black bodies attempts to recreate reality, *verisimilitude*, and credibility that is fulfilled by the receiving racial imaginary's acceptance. If the white racial imaginary rejects narratives of its violence against the black body, it also lacks empathy for the bodies it sees "staged" in media, and it follows that it will have a reverse reaction to pain of those bodies. That is, the white imaginary will suspend its belief in those bodies.

conceptualizes estrangement to prove just this. Addressing microaggressions as an everyday performance of invisible violence—a form of estrangement—Rankine demonstrates how racial violence is performed by alienating the black body through a process of disbelief that leads to obliteration. As Rankine notes in a *New York Times* piece after the Charleston massacre, “transforming the slain black body into a public spectacle” enables “America to observe such atrocities from a distance, without comprehension or mourning” (Leszkiewicz 19)<sup>32</sup>. In conjunction with Trayvon Martin, “by transforming the slain black body into a public spectacle, America is able to observe such atrocities from a distance, without comprehension or mourning” (Leszkiewicz 19). Although in 2012 Martin became the new public face of racial violence, which threatened the then post-racial America narrative, the American public narrative continued to postulate “the illusion that, aside from these terrible, isolated incidents, [America is] not tinged with racism” (Rankine 19). Post-racial America’s unwillingness to acknowledge the isomorphic nature of a Trayvon Martin and Emmett Till narrative was revealed through the verdict that found Zimmerman’s fatal racial imaginary guiltless. Where others asked the essential question, “how could this happen?,” *Citizen* sought to provide answers (PBS Rankine).

*Citizen* has been heralded as a triumphant collection of poems, prose poetry, investigative reports, narrative vignettes, communal documents, and even dissertation, but the marriage of these concepts around the subject of mourning frames it as a *conceptual* elegy. Theorized by the likes of Kenneth Goldsmith—whose “The Body of Michael Brown” was highly controversial—conceptual poetry is uncreative writing that operates as an “obsessive archiving

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<sup>32</sup> On June 17, 2015, nine Black congregants of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina were shot and killed by 21-year-old Dylann Roof who entered their afternoon Bible study service. Rankine speaks on this national tragedy, named the Charleston Massacre, in a *New York Times* piece titled “The Condition of Black Life is Mourning”

& cataloging, [using] everyday speech, illegibility, unreadability, and the debased language of media & advertising” to un-ornamentally posit texts (Goldsmith 1). *Citizen* appropriates the “inherent and inherited politics” of “borrowed” texts from racialized media, news, art, and literature (Goldsmith). The text’s self-reflexive quality rests in the collective-black-self it embodies to “enact the ways in which this daily almost invisible racism [...] allows people to go on to do more unacceptable things” (PBS Interview). But as a conceptual elegy, “poems that are able to redouble their sense of afterness into uncreative, but no less powerful, acts of mourning,” *Citizen* creates a space that can accommodate black mourning (Leong 118). Using texts, scripts, video sequences, art, photography and the likes, *Citizen* conceptualizes the elegy for the black body’s mournful practice of investigation, interrogation, and inscription against consolation. In order to posit a new concept around the Black experience with mourning in the 21st century, it asserts that the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and several others slain black bodies are not only *not* isolated murders in a disjointed era of racial politics, but that they are indeed the effects of *estrangement*, or distancing and disbelieving black bodies in the white imaginary, a performance that voids black bodies, their pain, discomfort, and human position into oblivion. To that point, Rankine’s collection is filled with vignettes of microaggressions and idiosyncrasies of white violence from popular media to daily life. Ultimately, Rankine uses the lyric, a genre-offspring of the elegy, to alter the American verse on strange fruit. Her conceptual elegy redefines the lyric “as a kind of internal song,” that highlights “the position of blackness to the American song” (PBS).

One section in particular, concerning Trayvon Martin, makes use of the elegy for the black body’s lynch signifier, and the twenty-first century signifying “hoodie” to draw a parallel

between mourning micro and macro acts of violence through estrangement. Rankine first challenges the assumption of racial progress in the contemporary, color-blind era, using cover design features David Hammons' *In the Hood* from 1993, a depiction of a dark-colored, rough-cut hood set against a white background.



Figure 1. *In the Hood*, 1993. David Hammons.

Thought 'In the Hood' is a response to the police beating of Rodney King in 1991, Rankine repurposes it to underline the consistent violence of racial injustice: Martin's hoodie-as-thug-wear, not American sportswear, was for his killers, his lawyers, and jurors a sufficient justification for his death. For Jim Crow era lynchings, minor actions or even accusations were justifications for the obliterating the black body. These are the "fruits" of estrangement. By creating a distance between white and black citizenry, white spaces and black visibility, estrangement allows everyday individuals (jurors, newscasters, lawyers, colleagues, therapists) to participate in systemic racism at a micro level. As a result of this casual use of violence, racism and its aggressions are not particularly visible or believable to the *disbelieving* white

gaze. Without regard for the humanity and pain of black citizens, white citizens are able to then shirk their accountability to the black body.

This is evident in lynch era photographs similar to the one Rankine posits in her text. Rankine utilizes one of the most popular lynch images of all time, the image even said to have inspired Meeropol's "Bitter Fruit": John Lucas' photograph of the 1930 lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, in Marion, Indiana.



Figure 2. *Public Lynching*, August 30, 1930, from the Hulton Archives. Courtesy Getty Images (Image alteration with permission: John Lucas)

By contextualizing images of lynch scenes and hoodies without the black bodies, Rankine manages to "marry" the micro and macro expressions of racial violence to a single narrative of estrangement. Where previous poets have talked about the dismemberment, where they have attempted to reassemble the black body and embody it, these images point to the obliteration, the absence of the black body in the presence of white estrangement. The uncreative texts ask questions such as where is "the lynched bodies in Lucas' photograph, or the face in Hammons' hoodie? Where have they gone? Why can they not be seen?" (Adams 66). Rankine

“fingers” the answer just as Hughes “fingered the wound” around Emmett Till’s absent body. This trope of absence is seen again in a section on Trayvon Martin, where Rankine reproduces a script of a speaker who is talking to a “brother” who we can presume is Martin. The “brother’s” speech is not quoted, at least, not in quotation marks and he is in the process of hanging up before she can say goodbye:

... I

say good-bye before anyone can hang up. Don’t hang up.

My brother hangs up though he is there. (90)

Making use of the double-entendre, “hang,” Rankine inscribes Trayvon Martin’s body to signify the erasure of the lynched black body from the American narrative. This layering of text and image “proposes a strong link between the white racial imaginary of the 1930s and the 2010s, of how ‘We’re still there—there differently than those before us, but there, otherwise known as here’ (Loffreda and Rankine 2015, 13)” (Bibby 65). From Lucas’ lynch photo to Hammon’s “hoodie,” the wound of racial violence is an ever-present hole in the collective cultural memory of the black body. Estrangement puts forth a two-fold idea on consolation. The idea is that while persistent traumas of racial violence prove inconsolable for Blacks, this same racial violence, through a process of estrangement, actually consoles Whites. As the *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* indicates, the traditional elegy follows the “movement from expressed sorrow toward consolation” (Preminger and Brogan 322). Whereas the elegy for the black body works against consolation, white America’s preoccupation with impunity forces everyday people to estrange. That is, the nation’s need to be consoled out of racial accountability suspends black bodies in *disbelief*, issuing violence in macro and micro

degrees of aggression. From this perspective, *Citizen* is a conceptual elegy that critiques the limitations of the traditional elegy. Given the need to re-contextualize violence for a desensitized white America, Rankine marries the concept of spectacle lynching with the concept of suspension of disbelief to stage the isomorphic nature of the nation's micro and macro violence against black bodies. By scaffolding decades of textual evidence of violence, Rankine converges the history of violence against the black body to one temporal stage: the ever-present. Consider this section of Rankine's poem:

... Those  
years of and before me and my brothers, the years of  
passage, plantation, migration, of Jim Crow segregation,  
of poverty, inner cities, profiling, of one in three, two jobs,  
boy, hey boy. (Rankine, 89)

Rankine refers to the "years before" where the obliteration of the black body now "accumulate" into contemporary situations of subtle racial violence.

... accumulate  
into the hours inside our lives where we are all caught hanging, the rope  
inside us, the tree inside us, its roots our limbs. (2014, 89, 90)

However subtle, and seemingly benign, present day microaggressions originate in a history of violence. Rankine creates a temporal bridge between black life from Middle "passage" to "Jim Crow segregation" contemporary moments of "poverty" and "inner city"—all of these violent happenings occur as the same kind of violence on the same body, making distinctions as to macro ("Jim Crow segregation") and micro ("hey boy") level of aggression (89). To Rankine's

question—*where did the face in Hammon’s hoodie go?*—the text answers: “inside [...] inside our lives where we are all caught hanging” (89). Where earlier elegies for the black body were interested in revealing the body as dismembered or disembodied for the purposes of protest or lament, Rankine’s poems pursue the invisibility of the traumatic violence that marks the black body. Ultimately, the strange fruit, the trauma of the “tree” is brought near to the collective black body, which alone must acknowledge its own scarring.

If there is anything that marks Black life as American, from “passage” to “hoodie, it is strangeness. Strange is not simply the peculiar violences of racially violent states as Hughes proposed. Nor is it the institutional forces of violence that are legitimized by a structural violent system as Sonia Sanchez’s poems proposed—nor is strangeness limited to a reimagination of the black body as eternal in the black imaginary as Giovanni repurposed. Rather, here, it is this national suspension of belief, the peculiar kind of wound that persists on the “inside”: a continual cycle of aggression— occurring macro-aggressively by the nation at large even as it injures micro-aggressively in casual everyday small society.

Finally, Rankine’s conceptual elegy frames Martin with other slain black bodies whose deaths occurred consecutively between 2012 and 2014 in the wake of Martin’s death.

In Memory of Jordan Russell Davis

In Memory of Eric Garner

In Memory of John Crawford

In Memory of Michael Brown. (Rankine, 134)

Each line refers to a slain black body, specifically to two men and two teenagers, who were murdered between November 2012 and August 2014 ‘for’ existing in America’s “sharp”

white positioning (--). For each, simple tasks such as “playing loud music (Davis), carrying an air rifle (Crawford), selling (Garner) and stealing (Brown) cigarettes,” were disbelieved to the point of fatal obliteration. (Adams 67-68). As it is, their memories are rooted in an entangled narrative of strangeness and estrangement that compels the elegy for the black body to exist.

## THE META-ELEGY:

Ross Gay's Elegy for Eric Garner & Danez Smith's Anti-Elegy for "The Boy"

2014-Present

As Rankine demonstrates, the conceptual elegy creates a space that can accommodate the intertextual discourses around strange violence, particularly as that violence begins in the white imaginary. The meta elegy however, self-reflexively engages another imaginary, the black racial imaginary. By doing so, it critiques the discourse around mourning black bodies of strange violence. The meta-elegy is characterized by a doubleness that evaluates the poetry of mourning even as it engages in it. It does so in order to critique the elegy as purely a mode of protest and furthermore, to extend the elegy's features to make examinations of the real that it may transcend the tradition of mourning via a black racial imaginary.

The previous chapters have shown that the deaths of real-life Americans are the inevitable consequence of a life-denying 'racial imaginary' (55). It makes sense, then, that a black 'racial imaginary' could be deployed as a *life-giving* literary device. So far, the black bodies in this text have been elegized by a tradition that inherently denies consolation in favor of features such as protest, memorialization, re-sacralization, justice, re-appropriation, and so forth. Here, as a genre that roots itself in the blues oral tradition, the elegy for the black body is just as concerned with performing mourning through new rituals of protest as it with critically framing a discourse around the insufficiencies of mourning. A black racial imagination is that performance, which in an imaginative way, performs a call to action and more specifically, a call for more than mourning.

In the elegies of Ross Gay (for Eric Garner) and Danez Smith (for Michael Brown), the elegy is demanded to do more than mourn. It is asked to make “dead” things live again. In that way, Gay and Smith use the imaginary to flip the genre on itself in order to critique racial violence, so that even the elegy is made obsolete. In “A Small Needful Fact” for example, is Ross Gay’s response to the July 2014 asphyxiation of Eric Garner, who was reportedly retained and subsequently choked to death by police for selling a cigarette in Staten Island, New York. Gay postulates his meta-elegiac commentary on Eric Garner’s murder between the disbelief of Garner asphyxiation and the irony of his previous vocation as a gardener who “ma[de] it easier/for us to breathe” (14-15). When we look closer, we find double signifiers for the lynching tree: breathing, plant, earth, etc—all of which promote a new narrative counter to the traditional strange fruit model. The theme of disbelieving black bodies is epitomized in Gardner’s case, where he died after being held in a chokehold by police and saying “I can’t breathe” 11 times. Outside of cultural memory, Gay’s poem is polite, anecdotal, and sympathetic. Amidst the backdrop of black criminality, legitimized state murder, and a history of violence however, Ross Gay’s poem provides keen insight into how the elegy for the black body must initiate a response for strangeness by looking to other “facts”: facts of life. Given the fact that Eric Garner was a gardener whose profession was to maintain the life of plants, and by relation, the life of all people, the cultural memory of asphyxiation—of choking, of “the ropes inside us”—makes Garner’s death that much more violently present. Gay’s poem uses a black racial imaginary to testify to what he calls, “the transformative possibilities of the imagination—that we might go away, but we also might become flowers, actually” (Gay). That Eric Garner could “actually” exist beyond the poem as earth or ether, speaks meta-elegiac-ally to Gay’s “rambunctious gesture

of the belief in the transformative possibility" of the *black body*. It also speaks to the "realness" of the imaginary. Despite accusations of Garner's criminality, despite the desire to focus on his strange murder, Gay posits a revelation of the deceased that represents the *terrestrial* black body as a terrain or environment for transformation. The poem's tragic irony lies within the changeability of the black body: that the black body can be dead, asphyxiated and obliterated, in as much as it can be alive, breath-giving and immortal. This points to the creative possibilities of the black body as its own genre that recuperates its own losses. Thus, Gay description<sup>33</sup> of the changeability of Garner's body to alludes to the body's terraforming capabilities just as it alludes to the genre's ability to change. As his own "terrain," Garner is his own genre of mourning. He is able to both elegize, or *bury*, and immortalize, *give life*, to himself. This challenges assumptions of the real, defamiliarizes the affect of the slain black body, and signifies new "facts" into African American poetic tradition of mourning.

Ironically, these descriptive "facts" suggest not only that those who accused Eric Garner of criminal activity (as justification of his death) be informed, but also that those who mourn him must be in possession of certain facts so that they may know how to mourn. Moreover, mourning as we have seen it is enveloped by certain politics of respectability. Estrangement takes form in various ways, one of them being depersonalizing the black bod. One way is overlaying slain individuals with signifying apparel (hoodies, dreadlocks, rap music, or in Garner's case, selling cigarettes) which suggests the individual's so-called deviance. Another way, is enveloping the slain black body with overly romantic signifiers such as praise, which de-personalizes the black

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<sup>33</sup> Ross Gay's poem is "descriptive" in that it makes an examination of the real. This term "descriptive" is taken from Lyn Hejinian, who writes that "an evolving poetics of description is simultaneously and synonymously a poetics of scrutiny. It is description that raises scrutiny to consciousness. And in arguing for this I am proposing a poetry of consciousness, which is by its very nature a medium of strangeness" (Hejinian 159).

body. Gay, however, uses a black racial imaginary, imbued with tragic irony, to bypass these notions.

Gay does something with the elegy for the black body in that he disengages the death of Eric Garner for a moment from a purely deceased context. Instead, he forces the reader to reimagine the man who used “his very large hands” to “put gently into the earth . . . some plants . . . [that] make it easier for us to breathe” (3-15). By doing this, he sets the scene for a question that will be asked by poet Danez Smith, “are we not worthy / of a city of ash?” (2:4-5). While the ironic causality of Garner’s murder is more mournful because it forces readers to address the doubleness of black mourning (the why and how we mourn when we know the intimate facts of the human life that was slain), this shift in topoi from a preoccupation with dead imagery, to *life* challenges the function of the elegy for the black body. A black racial imaginary has a fixed gaze on not only how black loss can be expressed, but also on how black life can be posthumously *alive*. Consider Vladimir Jankélévitch who says that:

“Death destroys the whole of a living being, but it cannot destroy the fact that they lived; death turns to ashes and dust the psychosomatic hum an architecture, but quoddité of lived life still exists in these ruins; everything that belongs to the nature of being is perishable, that is it exposes this being in different ways to decay, dissolution, decomposition; only this invisible, intangible, simple and metaphysical je-ne-sais-quoi that we call quoddité, escapes annihilation” (Jankélévitch 352).

The aspects of the black body which escape annihilation, whether it decomposes on the branches of the lynch tree or transforms into invisible breath as Garner does, can be traced and

imprinted posthumously onto living bodies. “These traces, when embedded in the memory and consciousness of the living, transform their mental space into posthumous space, where the dead not so much persist as static, reified images, but actually “live.”” (Marciniak 214). This refunctionalization of the elegy, as a form that transforms the posthumous “space” is a consistent theme in the meta-elegy that makes room for a new kind of response to strange violence.

Gay’s poem inserts this meta elegiac function into the elegy for the black body’s function just as Danez Smith does in “Don’t Call Us Dead”. That is, if elegies can be written to inscribe new “facts” into the public and cultural memory, facts that double as personal anecdotes as well as traumatic memory, then new realms of response to strange death can be envisioned.

In *Don’t Call Us Dead*, Danez Smith addresses the long tradition of mourning strange violence and subsequently, his desire to depart from habitual elegizing entirely. His refusal to participate in the elegy is anti-elegiac at its core, but it is also meta-elegiac in that Smith utilizes the elegy to access the “needful”-ness of the elegy. In his poem, “Not Another Elegy for Mike Brown,” Danez Smith responds to the August 2014 death of eighteen year old Michael Brown, who was allegedly shot and killed for stealing cigarettes. Taking place a little over one month after Eric Garner’s death, Brown’s murder (among many others) called for a need to rethink the responses to strange violence. Between 2014 and 2016, several news stories and recorded murders revealed black bodies being unjustly slain while their murders went unconvicted. This, for poets Ross and Smith, drastically alters the way in which black mourning is narrated and contextualized. Given this context, it is possible that Smith writes, “not another elegy” for Michael Brown to reassess a genre that has been writing the “poem” for the “same body” since Emmett Till (1:1-2). In all of these possibilities, Smith and Ross introduce a new concept

concerning *strange-ing* the black body. That is, they infer that the black body, as a result of strange violence, is transformational. It can transcend its corporeal positioning from burial to terrain and, with that, from dead to alive. Thus, the black body's doubleness features as its own genre, critiquing the genre of the elegy even as it builds upon it.

In the first stanza of the poem, "Not Another Elegy for Mike Brown," Smith addresses the "dead boy," making little to no distinction between black boys from Till to Brown.

I am sick of writing this poem  
but bring the boy. his new name  
his same old body. ordinary, black  
dead thing. bring him & we will mourn  
until we forget what we are mourning (1:1-5)

Not only is the speaker "sick" of the habitualization of poetic mourning, but the poet here, Smith himself, is self-reflectively scrutinizing the politics of ritual elegizing. This, coupled with the doubleness of "the boy. his new name," suggests a pejorative familiarity with the lineage of slain black boys from Emmett Till to Clifford Glover to Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, and Michael Brown—all of whom have lost their lives to state sanctioned racial violence. This line also suggests the simultaneity of the "boy" who as Hejinian noted in an earlier chapter is "here" and "there" and "this" and "that" (Hejinian 67). The "boy" to which Smith refers is both Emmett Till *and* Mike Brown, a "simultaneity and temporal heterogeneity in the same passage (67). The poem's language, "ordinary. Black, dead thing" is ironic and meta-elegiac in that its double meaning suggest a coinciding resilience and acquiescence to the "familiar" descriptive terms that characterize the slain black body. Like Gay's poem, the black body can be "ordinary" or it can

be magical. It can be “black / dead thing,” just as it can be immortal (1:3-4). Here, the meta-elegy asks readers to reconsider the sufficiency of the poetry of mourning, not as a vehicle of mourning, but as a tool by which we can circumvent it through a black ‘racial imaginary’. As opposed to Gay, who deployed a black ‘racial imaginary’ to resist signifying death, Smith uses a black ‘racial imaginary’ to oppose signifying habitualized, and therefore impotent, mourning. Instead, the speaker looks to confrontation to console his grief:

I demand a war to bring the dead boy back

no matter what his name is this time.

I at least demand a song. a song will do just fine.

\\

look at what the lord has made.

above Missouri, sweet smoke.

This compensation for murdered black boys and girls is comparable to the war waged for the return of Helen of Troy. Black bodies, Smith argues are worth just as much, if not more, than “one white girl” (2:3). with the missing black bodies, and articulates the double standard in our response. Politics of respectability demand that black screams are not heard, or at least that they are mouthed respectfully or politely. Here, the speaker makes a compromise between the two schools of influence within the elegy for the “black boy”. That is, Black Arts demand for retribution and the respectability politics attached to mourning—a “song” will do. The song, however, upon close inspection, is more connected to war than it is to a funeral song. Here is a poet writing about the insufficiency of the poetry of mourning as he writes poetry of mourning in order critique the demands of the mourner. In some ways, unlike the Black elegists before him,

Smith has made a shift to consolation, not as a call for sympathy but as a call to action, not as resignation, but as a consolation prize “to bring the dead boy back” (2:9). Earlier in this stanza, the speaker uses the mythology of the ancient world to reimagine his demands. Smith addresses the missing black body just as Rankine did—“where is the face in Hammon’s hoodie?” (66). This is done to critique the former demands of the Black elegy, which mourned as Smith said, “until we forget what we are mourning” (1:5). No matter what these demands were, protest or justice, the elegy for the black body never retrieved the body for which it mourned. Even when we consider the most radical form of the elegy for the black body, as seen in Black Arts poets who used the martyr elegy to reclaim black bodies as sacred terrains from which racial oppression can be critiqued and black leaders can be properly celebrated, there is no return of the body. The absence of face in Hammon’s hoodie reminds us of the absence of bodily recovery and social accountability. These poems have not dealt in consolation and therefore, could not have obtained a consolation prize. With the rapid pace of public murders between 2012 and 2014, the elegy for the black body had to make an adjustment. That adjustment emerges from Smith’s writing. Elsewhere<sup>34</sup>, in a poem titled “Dear White America” the speaker says:

“Each night, I count my brothers.  
& in the morning, when some do not survive  
to be counted, I count the holes they leave” (34)

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<sup>34</sup> In his collection “Black Movie,” Danez Smith has a variety of poems that meta-elegiacally speak to the politics of mourning. In one poem, “Politics of Elegy” he powerfully dialogues to contest with the habitualizations of mourning the “ordinary” dead black body. He speaks to the idea of anti-elegy, calling for an end to mourning and advocating for Baldwinian “fire”: “not an elegy for.../ this one / nor this one / nor this one / nor this one / not this one/ nor the next one/ nor the one after that / not this one / nor this one either / no more elegies / bring the fire”

The incessant missingness that is addressed in both *Citizen* and *Don't Call Us Dead* pushes the elegy towards consolation of a different kind: “war” (2:9). As Smith writes, and war “song,” the speaker argues, is well within his rights—“are we not worthy of a city of ash?” (2:4-5). Whereas other poets refused to venture towards consolation, possibly for fear of appearing passive, Smith’s poems are imbued with a speculation that challenge the master narrative’s double standard on injustice. In this way, the book is not only oppositional towards racial violence but also to the racialization of violence, giving the collective black body room to respond with violence on behalf of the “black boy,” not as a necessary racial response, but as a “needful” human response. This is a two-pronged argument allows Smith to negotiate trauma and how it can be resolved. When satisfied by social action or “war,” the need for consolation rebukes, not acquiesces to, strange violence.

Both poems, written for individuals who were ironically murdered for possession of cigarettes, conflict the elegy genre with a black ‘racial imagination’ that transcends life or death. Furthermore, the poems at once refuse consolation and also pursue it through a black ‘racial imaginary’. As a result of a focus on life, a focus on returning “the black boy,” the meta-elegy generates negotiations on the genre of mourning via revision. It refuses to prescribe by elegy’s literary limitations (2:9). Here, the elegy for the black body may be said to console, but its consolation is won *outside* of the elegy, where the black body becomes its own genre of social action<sup>35</sup>.

This is what is meant by *strange-ing* the body. It is the phenomenon whereby strange violence is shared from one member of the black body to another. Black poetry moves from

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<sup>35</sup> Genre here is defined by Charles Bazerman, “Genres are not just forms. Genres are forms of life, ways of being. They are frames for social action [...] locations within which meaning is constructed.” (19).

individual embodiments of strange violence to a collective embodiment of strange violence and with that, an exchange of power whereby the same body can be both alive and dead, both scarred by racial violence and capable of scarring systemic racism. As a result of “racialized trauma,” a term borrowed from George Yancey “which, etymologically, means a form of wounding, hurting, or defeating,” the black body is socialized into strangeness (Yancey 142). The “sociality” of racial violence creates a “the reality of being embodied with others, along with a background of a shared intelligibility” (Yancey 142). Thus, the meta-elegy constructs a bridge between metaphysical and corporeal black body that isomorphically embodies the Black experience with white violence. It is no wonder then, that this text has focused on Black poets, whose “shared intelligibility” produces the elegy for the black body. Thus, the number of black embodiments is infinite, as is the number of its poetic discourses. That is, as inheritors of a strange legacy of violence, the black body generates infinite embodiments through the “same body” as Rankine notes, that is buried “inside us” (89). Here, we find extensions of mourning that not only go *beyond* consolation, but *through* it in order to actualize rebirth. Smith’s black ‘racial imaginary’ “bring(s) the boy back” (2:9). It uses the imaginary to write slain black bodies into existence. This is the kind of “war” Smith speaks of, one where a black ‘racial imagination’ actualizes consolation through “war ... song” or what can be understood as the discursive middle between total war and funeral song. Nonetheless, it is through the imagery of burning that Smith renames the “boy” —from Till to Mike Brown— “us”. That is, in “Don’t Call *Us* Dead,” the isomorphic black body undergoes a sociality of strangeness and, subsequently, a rebirth through *burning*—whether by lynching or by a “city of ash”—that ultimately renames “us” (2:5). Such burning imagination, moving beyond its condition—“death”—and constructing a “life” of its

own forms, representations and signs, upon the loss, must be aware of the fundamental self-reflexivity of its defiance. It is not only about crossing ontological and epistemological borders, but also a metaphysical and ethical one—the imagined limit of elegiac appropriateness which approaches *social* action as it signals *a call to action*. Hence, the “sweet smoke [above Missouri]” is a double signifier. It is a call to bring empty mourning to an end as well as a social act of rebirth (3:2). The meta-elegy reveals the materiality of the elegy for the black body’s discourse community, demonstrating an interaction between the genre’s “lived textuality” and its “lived experiences” (Devitt, et al 372). By critiquing mourning through a poem of mourning, both Ross and Smith extend the black body and its related topoi to realms of the black ‘racial imaginary’ where it may be inscribed, renamed, enlivened, and even called to enact new functions that move beyond the sociality of mourning or strange-ing to the sociality of rebirth and action.

## CHAPTER 8: The Future of the Elegy for the Black Body

This text would like to extend some apologies because it has been overwhelmingly misleading. The question has not been whether or not the aforementioned poems belong in part or in whole to the elegy. Neither has this analysis been question of the extent to which the *strangeness* of black death has appeared across six generations of African American poetry. Neither still has it been whether or not the African American elegy—from the blues, martyr, protest, fame, journalistic, satirical, and anti-elegy—is a valid sub-genre or mode of poetry. Rather the question is whether or not a body of poetry engendered by a tragic history of oppression, racism, and systemic murder can manage to *not* be elegiac. In some ways, the black experience in the United States has no period where death, and strange death at that, has not been the material of its collective narrative. If removed from the historical process, the answer is yes: there are instances where death and poetry converge where the poetry may not necessarily be elegiac. However, as long as African American poetry is understood from its cultural memory, it will address the wrongful individual and collective deaths of its people, which makes it at the very least a genre of poetry occasioned by the consistent deaths of a racial group. As it was narrated to us by Claudia Rankine, “the condition of black life is one of mourning” (Rankine). Adding,

“We live in a country where Americans assimilate corpses in their daily comings and goings. Dead blacks are a part of normal life here. Dying in ship hulls, tossed into the Atlantic, hanging from trees, beaten, shot in churches, gunned down by the police or warehoused in prisons: Historically, there is no quotidian without the enslaved, chained or dead black body to gaze upon or to hear about or to position a self against” (Rankine).

As long as African American poetry is analyzed from its mournful historical context, it will be difficult, if not impossible to find a poem whose spine is not affixed by tendons and arteries that are not rooted in the memory of the horrific, albeit resisted, the mournful, and the endemic racial dilemma of African Americans in the Americas. Duly noted by Ramazani, “all modern writing may be covertly elegiac” (Ramazani 215). To this I add, that all *Black* writing may be covertly self-elegiac, that by mourning the collective black body, Black writers mourns the self as well. The constant conversation between black poets and the traumas of racism, implicit or explicit, constitutes a broad basis for the elegy for the black body. So the question again is not is there an elegy for the black body. The question is *can there not be?*

For black bodies, these poems are a matter of life and death; their publication both contributes and derives itself from a poetic discourse on the literary body of work concerning blackness as well as the psycho-social condition of blacks fighting for social justice in the United States. While “Strange Fruit” is iconic for drawing attention to the mutilation of the black body, the elegy for the black body shifts that attention from the strangeness of the mutilated body, and instead onto its branches, roots, and even soil. The elegists for the black body write towards a discourse that would interrogate and investigate the ecosystem, the system of trees that bears the fruit of black death and not life. The elegy for the black body, then, reveals the affect of poetic discourse on the the literary body as well as on the collective black body. By asserting itself against white supremacy, the poetic genre possesses a materiality that can be seen in music, dance, pop cultural memes, protest signs, and more. This means that the future of the elegy for the black body is off the page, materializing wherever language and loss intersect. Because of the materiality of language, elegiac studies should look to more “texts” such as the ones mentioned

above. Other themes include elegies to God, such such as Joyner Lucas' "Devils Work," which addresses the injustice of taking noble Black life where ignoble life persists. For this reason, I argue that the poetry of mourning asserts itself as a judicial body that deals with transgressions and injustice of Black murder or white violence. Furthermore, this judicial function makes elegy for the black body a form that may be useful to various groups of marginalized mourners.

Further studies into elegy for the black body the can offset topics that include the elegy for *queer* bodies or elegies for individuals of LGBTQ-A community who have died as a result of sexual or gender violence. Furthermore, a global study can materialize around how and to what extent poets of all backgrounds have engaged in writing elegies for black and brown bodies in a transatlantic context. Even further, considering the overwhelming number of political responses via social media and protests, the ideas about what constitutes a poem can be argued to classify digital elegies, elegies written on protest signs, etc. Another inquiry into the elegy is the elegy for the unborn. Recent studies have shown that black women in America are more likely to die or to risk the death of their unborn child due to racism in the health sector. The elegies to these bodies may also be taken into consideration. Moreover, strangeness (racial violence) towards black bodies of all kinds is becoming an increasingly visible debate and with that, the hypersensitivity to the racial wounds that afflict the black body is expanding into various genres. In fact, I problematize the idea that black poetry, due to its content, can fit simply into one canon of poetic form without bleeding, as its bodies have, into other poetic forms—namely the elegy. What this text finds is that black poetry, especially where it mourns black bodis, reinvents the poetic form it claims. Because it is committed to an extra-literary tradition, its poems are at once elegies and anti-elegies. They are equally black arts odes or blues poems or sorrow songs as much as they

are rhetoric, propaganda, or journalism. The works are not merely beyond the elegy's function of consolation. Because the elegy for the black body make sacred what was sacrilege, they're poetry of mourning pushes the boundaries of poetry beyond the generic functions of any given genre. The future of the genre, then, rests in this mechanism of rebirth, whereby Black elegists operate across disciplines to challenge any narrative that does not support black life.

## CONCLUSION: What's It Doing to the Body?

If there exists, within a complex ecosystem of Black cultural memory, a poetic discourse of loss, trauma, and resistance specific to African Americans in the United States, it is the elegy for the black body. The poets here go beyond the traditional elegy's goal of consolation by refusing that standard as the poetic function of the African American elegy and instead, deploying the elegy's temporal and cultural space of death as a site for inscribing a new body of narratives. This section raises the question, *what is the racial affect of the elegy for the black body on the black body*

Is it in any way shaping how the black body is perceived in literature and beyond? Given this claims of this paper, I would assert a two-fold theory: (a) that the elegy for the black body, the consistent need to elegize victims of strange violence, leads to an inheritance of strangeness. This strangeness can be rewritten into and out of the fabric of the Black experience. However, its impact on the collective living black body rests in its discursive power of writing from a racial imagination that persists. That is, because of strange violence, the black body has inherited the strange ability to live. Black poetry has developed discursive modes that continue to write themselves into the social and political terrain that attempts to obliterate them. Be that terrain the Middle Passage, the Jim Crow segregation era, or Trump era white supremacy, the black body continues to critique. One simply cannot "call us dead" (Smith) and (b) the genre is creating a new body, a judicial body that resists and supplants the absent judicial advocacy of American governance. As a genre unparalleled to any other, the elegy for the black body is shaped by several distinguishing features, the first being its rootedness in discursive racial movements that separate it from "Strange Fruit". Together, Holiday and Meeropol used the song to address the erasure of

black bodies by forms of violence such as lynching, perhaps calling for some redress of the racial wound in Black America's side. It would seem that the call went unanswered until 2018 when the first federal legislative acts of against lynching took place. On December 19, 2018, lynching became a federal hate crime in the United States. Eighty years passed between 1939 and 2019 where the national address for racially violent crimes against black bodies seemed unanswered. During that time, while lawmakers and judiciaries were disputing case-by-case studies of racial killings, a racial movement took place where artists were the unknown architects of literary case studies, investigations, and interrogations concerning state sanctioned, racially-induced deaths. Between 1955 and the present, Black poets are the judiciaries, demonstrated by a significant rise in poems dedicated to charging racial violence with murder and establishing memorials for individuals who died unjustly at the hands of racial violence. More than that, the elegy for the black body has terraforming capabilities that enables it to use its changeability (as slain or immortal, as wound or weapon, symbol or critique) for social, political, judicial, metaphysical, or literary use.

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