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Between the Living and the Dead

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BETWEEN THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

by

LAURA HENRIKSEN

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of
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Laura Henriksen

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Between The Living And The Dead

by

Laura Henriksen

Advisor: Jean Halley

Throughout my studies at the Graduate Center, I have attempted to deepen my understanding of how some people, such as myself and my family, came to be white, and what that means, and how it can be undone. This question of whiteness has pushed me further back ontologically, or deeper down, to include how some people came to be human, and then even further, how some matter came to be living. In my thesis project I attempt to participate in dismantling one of the most fundamental binaries in binary thinking — the strict and uncomplicated division between the living and the dead. I attempt to imagine what it means to speak with the dead, to live in relation with not only the non-human and more-than-human, but also the non-living, and how this might open other ways of thinking about responsibility (particularly in Donna Haraway's sense of response-ability) across boundaries of time and nation and category of being. How might troubling the divide between the living and the dead show us other ways of valuing life? What alternate temporalities might it open up, against a linear, progressive model of time that marches ever forward out of a completed past? How might remembering differently create different possibilities for the future? How might thinking about the complications that are hidden in the strict division between the living and the dead allow us

to question fundamental constraints around all that is considered possible and impossible, knowable and unknowable, present and absent? Exploring the porousness, the borderland, between life and death has perhaps a distinct urgency from the particular location of 2018, as I hope in my writing to respond to the lessons in the politics of mourning and remembering offered up by scholars and activists focusing on living and dying in the anthropocene, decolonization efforts, and the Movement for Black Lives. How best can we care for and respond to our ghosts? How might we push against the limits containing the dead and other non-living in a way that resists and rejects the devaluing of the vast expanse of precarious life on the planet today? How can we slow and stop the production of more devalued dead? Although truly a matter of life and death, these questions can feel at times impractical in their abstraction, and so I want to foreground lived experience in my writing, to approach these questions through both philosophical reflection as well as discussion of a broad range of examples from literature, art, movies, and music that explore the boundary between the living and the dead, the forgotten and remembered, the possible and impossible, the now and the never.

In my thesis I write about The Winchester Mystery House in California, Leslie Marmon Silko's 1977 *Ceremony*, Octavia Butler's 1979 *Kindred*, Ari Aster's 2018 film *Hereditary*, Jordan Peele's 2017 film *Get Out*, David Lynch's 1992 film *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*, two works by the Queens-based novelist Eugene Lim, Frank Ocean's 2016 song "White Ferrari," Alice Notley's 1987 poem "At Night The States," Tina Takemoto's 2011 short film *Looking for Jiro*, Vince Staples' 2017 song "745," and close with a ghost story from my own neighborhood in Brooklyn. From a philosophical and theoretical perspective, I engage with Avery Gordon, Gloria Anzaldúa, Karen Barad, Denise Ferreira Da Silva, Lisa Marie Cacho, Audre Lorde, Colin Dayan, bell hooks, Kim TallBear, and others. As I thought about whiteness and who qualifies as

a living human, I attempted to never separate these questions from the history of violence and oppression and injustice in the United States. I tried to remember and examine that history as something urgent and never over, as I remembered the dead and remember with the dead, who are neither gone nor silent, planning for and working towards justice that is still possible and yet to come.

I was guided both conceptually and formally by Gloria Anzaldúa's borderland theory, writing a series of relatively short, interconnected essays. I was similarly inspired by both the form and content of Anna Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On The Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, wherein she explains her decision to write "a riot of short chapters" as a way to "build an open-ended assemblage, not a logical machine; [to] gesture to the so-much-more out there" (vii). I am a poet as well as a scholar, and it remained important to me that this work includes honest self-disclosure and transparency. As I attempted to explore a space of imaginative possibility, I also endeavored to create such a space with my prose.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: Being With Ghosts, Becoming Mediums	1
Uncontainable Ghosts: The Winchester Mystery House	16
Recognizing Your Dead: On Ancestors, Storytelling, and Coalition-Building Between Life & Death	22
Another Version Of Memory and Storytelling: <i>Hereditary</i>	36
Among The Living Dead: Desiring Bodies in <i>Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me</i> and <i>Get Out</i>	41
Mourning, Place, and Possibility in the work of Eugene Lim	64
Living Memorial: Love and Mourning in Frank Ocean, Alice Notley, and Tina Takemoto	68
Another Car, Another Memorial: Vince Staples’ “745”	86
Old Buildings, New Buildings	90
Works Cited	95

Introduction: Being With Ghosts, Becoming Mediums

When people die, I never want to talk about it. I freeze up at funerals. I even get mad at the people who do want to talk about it, I want to say, *how can you be so selfish, talking about him with your breath-filled mouth like that, he's dead*. I think it's because, talking about the dead feels like such a direct gesture demarcating their absence in contrast to the embodied, earthly presence of the person doing the speaking. The dead person can't talk, can't come to the party, can't drive a car or take the train, they can't even remember themselves, they have no more power over their stories. That's the worst part to me, you die, and you're just left to other people, they get to define you now. The great Los Angeles writer Eve Babitz explains, and it's not a joke and it's not flippant, "Death, to me, has always been the last word in people having fun without you" (123). Babitz explains that's why we end up with a heaven to believe in, a place where we are having the most fun, telling more stories and sharing more laughs than the people at our future funerals. The only way to tolerate missing a party is by planning for a better one, to which no one who previously excluded you is invited. Losing a loved one is terrible, but for me the idea of losing all control, all agency, even where that control and agency was only imagined, has been what keeps me up at night, thinking about the dead, their silenced voices, their erased secrets and hopes and plans. With or without the comfort of heaven, the only thing the dead can do in this world is haunt, and that's one reason I wanted to take hauntings more seriously.

I know how it might sound, so sometimes I start by saying I know how it sounds. In the park one day I'm asked by a relative what I'm working on, and I say doing better by the dead, being more serious about my responsibility to the nonliving and the nonhuman. They humored me and nodded, but I could tell they did not believe me. At times I felt myself sounding like the

mysterious motel attendant character, Sheresa, in Samantha Hunt's 2016 novel *Mr. Splitfoot*, who explains when asked by the narrator about her studies:

“You’re speaking metaphorically, right?”

“Oh, sure. Of course. Metaphorically. Transubstantially. Cryogenically. Whatever you need. Whatever gets you through the night.”

I have no idea what she’s talking about. “How’d you end up here?”

“I’ll tell you.” She runs her tongue hard against her front teeth. “I’ll tell you. It’s like this. In college, everyone chose a nice, a microscopic subset of the human race they wanted to fight for, lay down on the tracks for... but it started to seem like so much rooting for the home team, and the home team only. I didn’t want to choose one small group. I wanted to understand real diversity, so I turned my scholarly attentions to the greatest population.”

“The poor?”

“Not even close. Dead people.”

“Right.”

“A totally underrepresented population. The people underground. No one’s looking out for dead people’s rights. Right?” She slams her fist on the counter. “No one’s making sure dead people are invited to speak at conferences on semiotics or the effect of polar vortexes on the Gulf of Mexico. I became a ghost activist. I’d start arguments with my classmates and professors as to why they always privilege being over non-being. Why they behave as if the only words people hear are spoken ones. Makes my blood boil. What about the unsaid? Right? What about the dead?” (224)

Right? Can you imagine a conference like Sheresa imagines, where the dead might come to share their expertise on polar vortexes and signs and symbols? It seems well-worth imagining, as with the possibility that some words, some messages, though unspoken, are already waiting to be received, or have been received already, but await translation, await response. And as Sheresa argues for the needs and desires and value of non-being, or non-beings, what would it mean to understand being latent in non-being, the non-beings constituting the beings? Her argument is not against the importance of any “one small group,” of any living being, but rather for the expansive possibility created by sincere inquiry into the ways and needs of the dead.

A NOTE ON POSSIBILITY / SOME OF OUR GUIDES

So sometimes I hear myself sounding like the eccentric innkeeper in a ghost story. (And honestly, I can live with that.) And often when I explain that, in my desire to participate in the creation of a better future and a more just world, I don't want to think only about the future and those to come, but about the past and those who have come before but are not gone, have not left — remembering Walter Benjamin's warning in “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” “Social Democracy thought fit to assign to the working class the role of the redeemer of future generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This training made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren” (quoted in Elizabeth Freeman's *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, 19) — or when I argue that to have a more just world, we need to care better not only for the world as we perceive it around us, but also for the imperceptible, the dead, the nonhuman and nonliving beings, their mysterious presence that surrounds and constitutes us, we need to care so much better for that too, I get some quizzical

looks. It doesn't necessarily help that I'm not speaking metaphorically, that when I say *haunt* or *ghost* I mean what I say. If we are going to have a more just world we are going to need a much more active imagination when we think about what is possible, who we are, when and where we are, and who and what is here with us. As Avery Gordon writes in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, a book that, along with *Borderlands / La Frontera*, has done so much to guide my thinking, "We need to know where we live in order to imagine living elsewhere. We need to imagine living elsewhere before we can live there" (5), or as Anzaldúa writes, "Nothing happens in the 'real' world unless it first happens in our heads" (109). Imaginary isn't necessarily a bad thing, a limiting thing. There is so much potential in what we might imagine.

Sources of power that cannot be controlled — the sensual, the spiritual, the supernatural — are often devalued and trivialized as impractical, impossible, and irrational through the gendered and racialized frameworks that value only liberal humanist knowledge creation. Audre Lorde's explanation of the erotic can be one guide for us here as we strive to know in other ways. In "The Uses of the Erotic," Lorde describes the erotic as that deepest source of knowledge that comes through embodiment, connection, joy, and satisfaction, and acts as a bridge between the spiritual and the political. Lorde explains that it is through erotic knowledge that we might imagine the world truly different and find the power and strength and "energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama" (59). Erotic or sensuous knowledge could lead to true transformation, new characters in a new story. Gloria Anzaldúa is another powerful guide as we assume our responsibility as mediums. In *Borderlands / La Frontera*, her classic 1987 book combining autobiography, poetry, history, and theory to challenge the ontological primacy of all binaries, all borders, and

proposing to replace such strict divisions with the realm of “Borderlands,” a space in-between, a space of possibility, she writes:

Like many Indians and Mexicans, I did not see my psychic experiences as real. I denied their occurrences and let my inner senses atrophy. I allowed white rationality to tell me that the existence of the ‘other world’ was mere pagan superstition. I accepted their reality, the ‘official’ reality of the rational, reasoning mode which is connected with external reality, the upper world, and is considered the most developed consciousness — the consciousness of duality.

The other mode of consciousness facilitates images from the soul and the unconscious through dreams and the imagination. Its work is labeled ‘fiction,’ make-believe, wish-fulfillment. White anthropologists claim that Indians have ‘primitive’ and therefore deficient minds, that we cannot think in the higher mode of consciousness — rationality. They are fascinated by what they call the ‘magical’ mind, the ‘savage’ mind, the *participation mystique* of the mind that says the world of the imagination — the world of the soul — and of the spirit is just as real as physical reality. In trying to become ‘objective,’ Western culture made ‘objects’ of things and people when it distanced itself from them, thereby losing ‘touch’ with them. This dichotomy is the root of all violence.

(58)

This Borderland, another world, another mode of consciousness, Anzaldúa describes is certainly a place where the living might be able to get “in touch with” ghosts. Through staying close to the Borderland, I am also reminded again and again that it is not only the dead and buried who are erased, treated as if already long gone, but also all the living who are transformed into objects, as Anzaldúa describes, those who are not “fully human” according to a white supremacist capitalist

colonial heteropatriarchal logic. (This is an idea we will continue to explore later on with the films *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* and *Get Out*.) Making a world hospitable for the dead means making a world hospitable for all the living too. What transformation might be possible if we believe Anzaldúa that this dichotomy — between the human and nonhuman, the living and nonliving — is the root of all violence, and so we reject it, choose to find a way in the space between? What more living would be made possible, what other world?

It comes as no surprise when world-changing power is mocked by those in power that do not want the world to change. As Anzaldúa embraces her *facultad* to perceive more, as Lorde embraces the erotic to know and feel more, they guide us to challenge what is possible, and what is meaningful and believable, so that we might do more for both the living and the dead for whom we must hold ourselves accountable. It is our urgent responsibility to follow them there, to, as Avery Gordon says “follow the ghost” (22).

GHOST TIME

Living in a time of dying, which I don't mean to suggest hasn't always been the case, but certainly is the case now, as we watch species and habitable land disappear more and more quickly, we all have a responsibility to learn to mourn together, not only with other human animals, but with other species and with the land, and not only to mourn, but to try our hand at mediumship, to feel the proximity always of those taken from us through unjust systems of valuing some life and devaluing the rest, to feel their strength ever close at hand. We must repeat the names of the dead not only to recall them, but to announce them, their presence, their power.

To get comfortable with the dead, we'll need to think about the dead differently, and so life and death differently, and so time differently. We'll need to get familiar with the dead, while

still valuing the mysterious and strange possibility of them. The feeling of mystery matters, as it guides us to another world, and so does the feeling of familiarity, because it guides us into a relation with the dead that can be informed not only by distance or difference, but by care and responsibility, or response-ability in Donna Haraway's terms. Speaking with the dead, or telling a story about a ghost to a member of the living, is a way of entering into a conversation not just about presence and absence, but *with* presence and absence, not just about time and location, but *with* time and location, with both the particular (*this* lake, *this* house) and the infinite, the uncontained.

This relation cannot occur in a progressive, linear time, where the past is lost, the future waiting to be unfolded, and crucial present our only home. It can occur, in what I think of as ghost time. More than a romantic thought or a spooky premise, this ghost time, this making time for ghosts and telling stories about them, has profound consequences for understanding our location in a world we have damaged through our long misunderstanding of both our location and our role in it, and the violent, colonial behaviors that misunderstanding has justified. If we open ourselves up to what ghosts could teach us about the world, about living and being in the world, it would change our way of remembering, our way of imagining, and our way of storytelling. As Gordon writes, "Following the ghosts is about making a contact that changes you and refashions the social relations in which you are located. It is about putting life back in where only a vague memory or a bare trace was visible to those who bothered to look. It is sometimes about writing ghost stories, stories that not only repair representational mistakes, but also strive to understand the conditions under which a memory was produced in the first place, toward a counter-memory, for the future" (22). For the future, if all this could change, then our understanding of what it means to be ourselves, to be human would change, and with that our

capacity to live in a world without harming the world and all the other human, non-human, and more-than-human life and death in and of it. If we followed the ghosts, if we went to the Borderland, we might then more clearly see our interconnection with all living and nonliving, and then we might, as Derrida proposes in *Specters of Marx*, “finally learn to live” (xvii). We will spend more time with this interconnection later when we explore the historical fiction novels, *Ceremony* and *Kindred*.

A NOTE ON GHOSTS

Can anyone see one? Can anyone be one? Is just anywhere haunted? One way to think of ghosts is as ruptures in the seamless flowing of time and power, suggestions of something beyond or below the obviously present, the unquestioned explanations or justifications for the world being as it is. I see them as reminders of something lost, but more than that as reminders that the divide between the lost and the maintained is not so simple, that one predicates the other in a complex web, and that what is lost is never so far, although we may not always notice if we do not make an effort to feel, imagine, and remember. In the introduction to their deeply helpful book, *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt explain why they turned to ghosts to discuss life and death on a planet in peril, writing “Our ghosts are the traces of more-than-human histories through which ecologies are made and unmade... We call this return to multiple pasts, human and not human, ‘ghosts.’ “Every landscape is haunted by past ways of life” (1). For them, the ghostly manifests in lichen, in wild flowers — both the presently growing kind and the imagined/remembered kind — in mud volcanoes and stones, in extinct species as well as the invasive species that lead to their extinction. Ghosts of this sort are traces or reminders of what has been, what could have been,

and what might yet be, or become otherwise. These ghosts, while never denying the history of destruction, nevertheless challenge the idea of what is “lost,” raising questions about what “recovery” might look like. Ghosts such as these can appear in plain sight, or make no appearance at all, and either way they blur the difference between the two, the visible and invisible. Like any good ghost, they make those they visit question the efficient-functioning of their senses to ask *what’s out there, what am I perceiving, what am I not perceiving*. Or, as Karen Barad explains in her essay in the collection, “No Small Matter: Mushroom Clouds, Ecologies of Nothingness, and Strange Topologies of Spacetime-mattering,” “Loss is not absence but a marked presence, or rather a marking that troubles the divide between absence and presence” (106). What does it mean to trouble that divide? To be here, but not only here, more-than-here, to be now, but not only now, more-than-now?

Toni Morrison offers another way to think of ghosts in her novel *Beloved*, perhaps the greatest ghost story every written. Ghosts in the book appear as voices, as sounds, as light, and as flesh-and-blood people. They want revenge, they want to help, they want so many things. In *Beloved*, ghosts also appear as “rememory,” a complex concept which Sethe describes to Denver in a conversation about Sweet Home:

Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it’s you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to someone else. Where I was before I came here, that place is real. Even if the whole farm — every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what’s more, if you go there — you who never was there — if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. (44)

We can think of ghosts as rememory, the way a past event or place or person lingers and is passed between members of the living, building our world together. Ghosts like this shape not only our imagination, our consciousness, but also the physical, material world, even our bodies. Traces of past violence and destruction can be read on the land, traces of past injustice on our health, our socioeconomic status, traces of past trauma on our DNA. Everything is haunted by something or someone. Ghosts constitute the world alongside us, the living, ghosts are all around us, and also within us, and also ahead of us. Ghosts are what we will all become. Ghosts are waiting for us.

TO ANOTHER WORLD / SOME MORE OF OUR GUIDES

As I think about the dead and the living and our bond, remembering what we learn in the *Borderland*, it is crucial to remember that not all living and breathing human bodies are equally valued against or considered distinct from the dead in the first place, that life itself is used as a measure of whiteness, or whiteness as a measure of aliveness. To think against the unbridgeable divide between the living and the dead is to think against all-consuming, all-powerful whiteness and its systems of control contingent upon strict binary boundaries — one nation against another, the interior individual against the external world, the valuable living against the expendable semi-living semi-human, the living against the dead.

Thinking of ghosts and ghost stories in this way will help us tell more truthful, useful stories about who we are and how we got here, stories that don't erase colonial and white supremacist violence and destruction. One place to begin is in the retelling of a story much beloved by whiteness in the United States — the story of the vanishing race. Telling instead a story of ongoingness, of what Gerald Vizenor calls *survivance*, is one thing that could change

everything. As the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate scholar Kim TallBear writes in her essay “Beyond the Life/Not-Life Binary: A Feminist-Indigenous Reading of Cryopreservation, Interspecies Thinking, and the New Materialisms”:

Indigenous people, our movements and our voices are the others it seems the new materialists — indeed most of Western thought — cannot fully comprehend as living. They may hear us like ghosts go bump in the night. Once forced to see us, they may be terrified of the claims we make on their house. The invisibility of our ontologies, the very few references to them in their writing, and reference to indigenous thought by other theoretical traditions as ‘beliefs’ or artifacts of a waning time to be studied but not interacted with as truths above a living world — all of this is to deny our vibrancy. It is a denial of ongoing intimate relations between indigenous peoples as well as between us and nonhumans in these lands. We are the living that the new materialists, like so many Western thinkers before them and beside them, refuse to see... Seeing us as fully alive is key to seeing the aliveness of the decimated lands, waters, and other nonhuman communities on these continents. (198)

TallBear shows us plainly and powerfully that power structures treat some living as ghosts already, and that they do this to deny the living their power, because that power it is enough to end this world and bring about another.

Another guide in our journey to relate to the dead and end of the world is the ethicist Denise Ferreira da Silva, who turns to the oppositionality of blackness to counter the consuming time and universal reason of the colonial, patriarchal order. In her essay “Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World,” da Silva writes, “Ending the grip of Time restores the World anew, from the position Blackness registers — that

is, the halted temporality that preempts recognition and opens the World as Plenum, becomes a Canvas Infinita, where the Subject figures without Time, stuck in the endless play of expression, with the rest of us” (90). Here, if “here” would still apply, in the endless play of expression:

... what exists becomes only and always a rendering of possibilities, which remain exposed in the horizon of Becoming... A Black Feminist Poethics become here in a World imaged as endless Poethics: that is, existence toward the beyond of Space-time, where The Thing resists dissolving any attempt to reduce what exists — anyone and everything — to the register of the object, the other, and the commodity. (91)

In this world, a world that demands the end of this current one, not in the impending apocalyptic sense of climate change, but in the sense of a rebirth, perhaps, or return, or a recognition of the truth of the world we already inhabit, we are bound to each other not by the coincidence of a shared indexical “now,” nor by a shared relationship of identity to a particular category of being or life, because in this world, the categories that afforded some humanity and to all others nonhuman, less-than-human, commodity no longer figure, and time no longer marches ever onward, unmovable and unmoved. In this world, instead we are bound to each other because we constitute each other, and because we share a responsibility of care, to care, for each other. We share a responsibility to care for the precarious living and the dead, to care for the future, not in terms of an unfolding progressive linear narrative, but nevertheless a future for which we are responsible. A future which is a becoming-together, which is not an absence, but a marked presence, like an apparition, a shimmering, a beloved ghost. An imagined future, one that does not ask us to do unjust harm to bring it into being, a remembered future from a story reclaimed, a future where time is not a limit, and our selves are not a living tomb. We walk amongst ghosts, we speak to ghosts, we are with them already in the future. As Karen Barad asks in “On

Touching — The Inhuman That Therefore I Am,” “... what would it mean to acknowledge that responsibility extends to the insensible as well as the sensible, and that we are always already opened up to the other from the ‘inside’ as well as the ‘outside’?” (217) and then proposes “*it may well be the inhuman, the insensible, the irrational, the unfathomable, and the incalculable that will help us face the depths of what responsibility entails*” (218, emphasis in original).

This turn to the inhuman, insensible, irrational, unfathomable, and incalculable already within us, already who we are, is not a matter of abstraction or fantasy, it is a project for justice. As Lisa Yoneyama writes in *Cold War Ruins: Transpacific Critique of American Justice and Japanese War Crimes*, a book about what justice is possible:

The task of carrying the pursuit of justice forward and mourning for the dead, then, requires not so much authentic restitution of the original, or uncritical identification with and empathy for the ultimate victims, as the contagious acknowledgment of and indignation toward the violence perpetrated by colonialism on the wholeness of life, language, body, and name... The community, moreover, consists not only of the living, here and now, but also of the dead out there — those unnameable and innumerable multitudes of beings and nonbeings. (168)

When we are responsible for the dead, we feel their presence and remain indignant at their devaluing, their unjust loss, and so we demand more for them, and with them for us, for without them we are nothing. To turn to the dead is not to turn away from material change for the living, it is not to turn from the world as limited by daily human perception, it is not to pause in demanding freedom for the fullness of life. It is, however, to say that change to the functioning of existing systems is not enough, as it has never been enough. The world as it is must end, not only be updated or reformed in a way that makes more insidious the functioning of colonial,

heteropatriarchal, white supremacist control. To push against the limits of what we can perceive with our logic and our senses as we have come to understand, to push against the limits of what we can speak with our language as we have come to use it, can be very frustrating. It feels like reaching the limit of all possibility, beyond which there is nothing more. That is the moment when we can end this world and move outside it, together with the dead forgotten, the dead misremembered, the dead recovered, for justice and with care.

FROM HERE

This project is comprised of three long essays and five shorter ones, each exploring the bonds — beautiful, tragic, wretched, liberatory — between the living and the dead. I begin with the Winchester Mystery House, a prototypical haunted house, to try and imagine different, less normative and more transformative ways to think about ghosts and haunting. I then consider how storytelling brings the living into active relation with the dead, with the ancestors who came before, focusing on Octavia Butler’s 1979 novel *Kindred* and Leslie Marmon Silko’s 1977 novel *Ceremony*. For another, very different story about the living and their ancestors, I then visit Ari Aster’s 2018 horror film, *Hereditary*, thinking about inevitability and escape. From there I think about desire, both in its destructive forms, and its possibly liberatory forms, focusing on two more horror films, David Lynch’s 1992 *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* and Jordan Peele’s 2017 horror debut *Get Out*. I then reflect on place and mourning and possibility in two pieces by the writer Eugene Lim — his collaborative poetic memorial “Second Person” and his 2017 novel *Dear Cyborgs*. I continue to explore mourning, imagining a queer mourning where bonds are not simply broken by death or other separations, focusing on Frank Ocean’s 2016 song “White Ferrari,” Alice Notley’s 1987 poem “At Night The States,” and Tina Takemoto’s 2011 short film

Looking for Jiro. I then consider how loss and possibility is represented in Vince Staples' 2017 song "745." I close with a ghost story from the neighborhood where I live, Flatbush, Brooklyn. While I listed them in the order in which I think about them (which is not the order in which they were written), these essays can be read in any order. There are so many other songs and stories and places that I would have loved to visit here. But then as this work of relating to the dead did not begin in this writing, neither does it end here, or at all. An online version of these essays, containing images and links, can be found at laurahenriksen.com.

Uncontainable Ghosts: The Winchester Mystery House

In this world, on one street, you can find Winchester Optometry, Winchester Smoke Shop, Winchester Pavilion, Winchester Auto Shop, and more than one Winchester Building. The day I'm on this street, a day in July in California, it's sunny and hot and clear. I'm not here for these other Winchesters, I'm here for the Winchester Mystery House, sometimes described as "the house that spirits built." Once isolated, surrounded only by empty fields, I now walk to it from a mall parking deck, passing a bank, something called Splunk, and three dome-shaped movie theaters that are now vacant and used for additional mall parking. They remind me of another era's idea of the future, of space. Waiting for the light to change so I can cross Winchester Boulevard, here in the capital of Silicon Valley, I wonder if anyone in my current range of vision is a billionaire, and beside me the Winchester Mystery House looms in the spot where it's always been but now feels dramatically out of place, anachronistic and strange, an ambiguous monument to something. But what? Perhaps to wealth and guilt and violence and power and the dead and the lingering appeal of novelty tourist traps in the "American West."

So the famous story goes, Sarah Winchester, a bereaved widow, grieving mother, and heir to the Winchester Repeating Arms company fortune, as well as its majority shareholder, was informed by a medium in New Haven sometime after her husband's death in 1881 that she and her fortune and family were cursed, haunted, and that her only hope was to move West and build a home for all those killed by Winchester arms. She began construction in 1884, with no master plan for the mansion beyond its purpose of appeasing the spirits, and according to legend, work on the estate continued ceaselessly until her death in 1922. Once seven stories, but after one of California's not infrequent but always terrifying natural disasters, the mansion is now only four

stories, and open to the public for \$39 guided tours, during which visitors can see up close the doors that lead to nowhere, the windows that look into other rooms, and the many tiny stairs of Sarah Winchester. The trees out front are beautiful and so California, Palms and Junipers and Redwoods. As with certain tombs I've visited, no photography is allowed inside, although whether out of respect for the dead or concern over copyright is unclear.

It is worth, I think, mentioning that the house has a very fraught relationship to guns. Built with the wealth produced by weapons sales in and around wartime, perhaps intended as a sort of personal reparation to the dead, but then a personal reparation in the form of a sprawling mansion for a very wealthy woman to live in, the privately owned tourist destination's stance on gun violence is ambiguous. I can say that while a tour of the mansion is \$39, a visit to the small Winchester Historic Firearms Museum, accessible through the Winchester Mystery House Gift Shop, where mugs and T-shirts bearing illustrations of the mansion as well as toy guns are available for sale, is free. On display there are rifles, bullets, old promotional materials, and most unsettling to me, "an Indian portrait created in 1941 at a shooting exhibition given by Adolph Topperwein at the Wabash Gun Club, Wabash, Indiana."

There's a movie about all this. It came out in 2018, starring Helen Mirren as Sarah Winchester, and like the house-turned-tourist-attraction in which it was partially filmed, it similarly avoids any clear stance on gun violence. In the movie, Sarah designs and builds each new room in the house for a specific spirit, and then seals them inside using thirteen nails, thus putting lost souls to rest. The board of the Winchester Repeating Arms company hires a doctor to assess Sarah's mental fitness, having come to suspect it to be defective given her obsession with the dead — specifically those who lost their lives to the company's products, more specifically after the massive loss of life that was the American Civil War — and her belief that those dead

are near to her, that they communicate with her, that they can and do hold her accountable for that which she owes them, a woman made rich by their pain. To the board these beliefs mark her as unsound and unfit, and they assure the doctor that he will be generously compensated if he obeys his devotion to reason and officially diagnoses her as insane. The crazy woman who believes in ghosts, the rational man there to save her from those beliefs — or more to the point to disprove them and humiliate or institutionalize her, come to deny her power and take it away — these figures are familiar in horror as they are familiar everywhere else.

In this movie, perhaps unsurprisingly given the genre, Sarah is right and the ghosts are real. It isn't necessary to get too deep into the plot — which ranges from the predictable to the baffling, and includes a possessed child, a magical bullet, a wife's tragic suicide, black veils, nails falling out of walls, and the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906 — more than to note that the main antagonist of the film, the ghost for whom finishing his “unfinished business” involves terrorizing the Winchester family, is a the spirit of a young white man who fought for the Confederate army, lost his brothers in the war, and then afterwards perpetrates the familiar tragedy of a mass shooting followed by suicide. For him the room is not enough to put him to rest, he demands more violence and more death. As the doctor battles this dead confederate soldier, he is helped by other spirits from the house, including several women, enslaved people — one man still with a chain around his neck even in death — and an Indigenous man with beads on his chest and a bow and arrow.

This is a crucial part of a typical ghost story such as this — the injustice, the “unfinished business” that brings the dead in contact with the living is always a solitary injury, a tale of personal misfortune or tragedy, and not instead a response to systemic oppression and injustice and murdering. These ghosts may appear in the film, but for them the room Sarah built is

sufficient, they are containable, they are contained. At the end of the movie, the story of the wealthy white woman, the rational white male doctor, and the angry white male ghost complete — the only issues the movie concerns itself with rectified — the remaining spirits return to their rooms, their minor roles complete. No transformation is required, and so none occurs.

The Winchester Mystery House is just one example of this version of a ghost story, which so often center around a building such as this, a castle or a manor, something grand now in decline, something once glittering now abandoned, an old hotel when its glory years are now only legend. These are the homes imagined hospitable for hauntings, where ghosts might easily rattle and moan in the night, women in white, women in black, bloody dukes, victorian children. But after these centuries of violence, of genocide, of enslavement, of gendered violence and economic violence, of erasure and incarceration and premature death and slow death, the land of the dead is surely overfull, and ghosts are everywhere, each inch of this earth is haunted.

Against these ghosts we have come to expect from certain stories and certain places marked as haunted — ghosts who return to their rooms at peace in the end, atomized and alone, non-threatening to the world beyond their individual “unfinished business” — I am interested in those ghosts who demand an end to this world, and the construction of another. I am interested in those ghosts who can never be contained, those spirits that do not long to rest but to transform the world and the lives of all those living upon it, and a debt to the dead that can never be done with, never be paid and so forgotten, an endless communion between the living and the dead, where what was lost is not restored unchanged, but understood as never truly gone, never far and never over. I would like to see how ghosts like that, a relationship with the dead like that, might give a different answer to the question of how to live. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida writes:

If it — learning to live — remains to be done, it can happen only between life and death. Neither in life nor in death *alone*. What happens between two, and between all the “two’s” one likes, such as between life and death, can only *maintain itself* with some ghost, can only *talk with or about* some ghost. So it would be necessary to learn spirits. Even and especially if this, which is neither substance nor essence, nor existence, *is never present as such*. The time of “learning to live,” a time without tutelary present, would amount to this... to learn to live *with* ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, in companionship, in the commerce without commerce of ghosts. To live otherwise, and better. No, not better, but more justly. But *with them*. No *being-with* the other, no *socius* without this *with* that makes *being-with* in general more enigmatic than ever for us. And this being-with specters would also be, not only but also, a *politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations. (xvii)

All this, he goes on to explain, for justice. To reckon with the ghosts like this, to be with and live with them, is necessarily to demand the complete transformation of the systems that maintain the careful functioning of the injustice that so devalued their living and now denies and forgets them in death. To live with these ghosts is to turn upside down the structures of white heteropatriarchal colonial domination that have, while chanting “all lives matter,” circumscribed the land of the living in such a way as to include only a few at the expense of everyone else, forgetting black lives, native lives, incarcerated lives, queer lives, immigrant lives, the list, forever, goes on. To live with these ghosts of the wronged dead, the wrongly dead, is to stand with the living vulnerable to premature death, treated as if dead already. If we are to pursue justice, it is our obligation to reckon with these ghosts, to become mediums — to remember, to listen to and repeat the names and stories of the dead, to hold more in our minds and hearts than

ourselves, to give more than we take, to hold ourselves and the world endlessly accountable for the violence and degradation that led to their deaths, and to resist that which tells us such a relationship to the dead, such a coalition with the dead is impractical, impossible. To stay with the dead who won't be contained, who don't want to rest, is to learn to live, and to live more justly.

Recognizing Your Dead: On Ancestors, Storytelling, and Coalition-Building
Between Life & Death

Everybody has somebody dead. Somebody dead they miss every day, or don't miss, but remember, think about, or curse. In fact, everybody has so many dead people, many of them they don't or can't remember at all, have never even heard the name of, the first thing about, all connection severed. As a fake medium reminds the crowd gathered for a seance in *Mr. Splitfoot*, giving them an excuse to believe when there's nothing to believe in, "Consider your dead. This could be an ancestor. Great- great- grandparent. You might not recognize your dead" (182). Lost and then lost again, if the forgotten dead call out, who will hear? Who will learn what the forgotten dead know?

Sometimes I feel I can't even go on the internet without seeing ancestry.com ads, 23andme ads, these services that promise to look into your body, look into your family, your history, and tell you who you are, where you came from, how you came to be, and how that might affect or inform your chances in the world. But what if in turning to your dead, the mystery to be solved was not only to understand yourself better, to gather clues for a clearer vision of your personal story and possible fate, but to understand your dead and the world that you share better, not to locate them at their proper distance temporally, far off branches on a family tree, but to sense them, feel them both right behind you and right in front of you too. What if, when we try to recognize our dead, it's not to fill a hole in our self image, maybe heal, maybe not, and then move on, but instead, it's so that we might better recognize the agency, activity, and desires of our dead, so that we might then do better by them, and we might form a coalition with them across being and nonbeing, between the living and the dead, for the future

and for justice, so that we might, as Derrida proposes at the start of *Specters of Marx*, through recognizing our dead, finally learn to live.

But how to relate to the dead in the first place? To explore one possible answer, I will focus on storytelling, first in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and then in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, thinking about how both writers make storytelling a door the living can open through which the dead can emerge, new coalitions can form, and new and old understanding can grow. I want to ask, when we tell tales of the dead, when we remember the dead through stories of their lives, stories of their deaths, tragic or horrifying or mundane, and stories of their afterlife activities as ghosts, what work are we doing? What is it that happens when we tell tales of the dead? When we remember the dead through stories of their lives, stories of their deaths, tragic or horrifying or mundane, and stories of their afterlife activities as ghosts? This is not a way to awaken the dead, who I would argue never sleep, but rather to awaken both the storyteller and the reader or listener to the presence of the dead and our relation, our responsibility, to them, a way to invoke and uplift their power. What happens to time and the space in the room (lecture hall, woods, etc) where a ghost story is told? Does it quake and flicker, as if by candlelight? What happens between absence and presence, the imperceptible and the perceived, the real and the unreal? What possibility is unearthed or unveiled, what feeling of kinship called up? What do the stories do? What are the stories made from? If we go with them, where will they take us?

In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Avery Gordon writes, "Following the ghosts is about making a contact that changes you and refashions the social relations in which you are located. It is about putting life back in where only a vague memory or a bare trace was visible to those who bothered to look. It is sometimes about writing ghost stories, stories that not only repair representational mistakes, but also strive to understand the

conditions under which a memory was produced in the first place, toward a countermemory, for the future” (22). The moment of contact, when precipitated by a ghost, is a haunting. The moment of contact, when precipitated by a member of the living, could be a seance, sure, but I wouldn’t necessarily recommend it, or it could be in storytelling, that play with presence and absence, that expressive way of remembering together, that enlivening of memory or countermemory through narrative, through feeling shared back and forth. Even more than evocative reminders, what if we think of stories as the presence of the dead made perceptible? As Leslie Marmon Silko explains in “An Expression of Profound Gratitude to the Maya Zapatistas, January 1, 1994,” “When I was a child in the Laguna Pueblo reservation in New Mexico, the old folks used to tell us to listen and to remember the stories that tell us who we are as people. The old folks said the stories themselves had the power to protect us and even to heal us because the stories are alive; the stories are our ancestors. In the very telling of the stories, the spirits of our beloved ancestors and family become present with us” (152).

Where, through a history domination and erasure, many people, I think especially white people, now only see only loss and death and absence, a fantasy version of remote ancestors long gone, quaint but irrelevant, with stories no more spirited than inanimate objects, Silko and the old folks who taught counter that irrelevance. Instead of absence, there is power and possibility, a great and growing lively fullness. Storytelling in this understanding brings with it a liveliness and living capacious enough to trace through both words and ancestors, weaving them together and us together with them, powerful enough to change and to heal and protect. Through the stories told this way, stories that are one and the same thing as ancestors, it’s possible to come to know who you are, how to live, over and against the dominant narratives that tell a very different

story about who Native people are, and who white people are, and who Americans are, and how we all should live, what is possible at all.

In both Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, two versions of historical fiction novels written in the late 1970's, who is haunted and who does the haunting is a shifting, active thing. Life and death, long ago and now, are far from static in these texts. As storytellers, Butler and Silko guide us into relation with the dead, with the land, with the ghosts of unbelievable violence and destruction through enslavement, genocide, and in the case of *Ceremony* the most monstrous bombs ever devised. Butler and Silko guide us their readers, from whatever our starting point, into accountability to the dead through remembering them, and honoring them, and seeing their continued influence surrounding us in the world we share, we co-create. The act of storytelling, through the weaving and opening and temporal disruption created by Silko and Butler does not produce a tidy teleological narrative meant to train the reader in normative lifeways, and it is not an effort to make something legible and in so doing consumable or containable, it does not divulge secrets in a style of confession meant to absolve or conclude the ongoing consequences of colonialism and enslavement. Instead, storytelling as they do it is a calling to life, a call to live better, a binding that links us to something more than our own individual, atomized experience of living. It's an active transformation through recognizing interconnectedness, as Gloria Anzaldúa writes in *Borderlands*, "The ability of story (prose and poetry) to transform the storyteller and the listener into something or someone else is shamanistic. The writer, as shape-changer, is *nahual*, a shaman." The storyteller, as medium, guides the reader or listener into that role as well. Just as ghosts are everywhere, everywhere is haunted, though some sites certainly more so, ghost stories and their tellers are everywhere too, not only in the literary stories I will discuss first, the kinds of stories one might encounter in a

university. Stories about ghosts, about the dead and the living interacting in various contexts, to various ends, are not uncommon in broader popular culture as well, and to conclude I will visit two such examples from recent Hollywood films. But first, *Kindred*.

KINDRED

Octavia Butler had some questions about how to live, how to survive, how to save a life, how to remember, how to be held accountable and hold others accountable too. To think through these questions, as well as questions about loss, distance, debt, and what is never gone and never far, she wrote a story about a time-traveling storyteller, our hero, Dana, a black woman living in Southern California in 1976, the bicentennial of the United States, who finds herself suddenly and mysteriously on her 26th birthday transported to antebellum Maryland to save a boy from drowning.

Kindred, written in the first person, and published in 1979, follows Dana as she travels back and forth across space and more than a century — “More than three thousand miles. More than any number of miles” (46) as she explains to her husband Kevin, like her a writer, but not like her, white. Each time Dana is hurled to the past she must save this boy, Rufus, who becomes a man, who will rape an enslaved woman, Alice, who will have a child, Hagar, who will become Dana’s great-grandmother. In many descriptions of the book I’ve come across, Hagar is described as Dana’s “direct ancestor,” but of course, so is Alice, and so is Rufus. Through saving Rufus, from drowning, from a fire, from his own incredible selfishness and foolishness, Dana saves everyone who comes after him, including herself, and anyone who might come after her, too. Her responsibility, as she comes to understand, is both to everyone enslaved on her

ancestor's plantation, sometimes her past and sometimes her present, and to those yet to come, to their possibility, to a future forever entangled with, shifting around, the past.

Who haunts whom in this book? Who does the haunting and who the remembering? Who is alive and who is dead, and when, and what difference does it make? On her second trip, her first extended conversation with her long dead ancestor, when he is still a child starting accidental fires, they try to unravel the mystery of what they have found themselves in. Rufus asks: "But how did you get there?" And Dana responds "Like that," snapping her fingers. Rufus, perhaps unsurprisingly, is not satisfied by her explanation, "That's no answer," he says, but Dana says it's the only answer she's got. For a moment then, he becomes afraid he might be speaking with a ghost, this boy who will have been dead over a hundred years, but Dana assures him there are no such thing, although in this conversation there are many ways in which they are both ghosts speaking together, haunting each other. (23)

One thing I love about this book is that that question, how did she get there, goes largely unanswered. It's not the point, it's not that important. Belief isn't even so important, what's real is all around, believe it or not, demanding action. The "no answer" of "the only answer I've got" doesn't allow for neat endings, a tidy telos. What matters are the relations, the connections, and what Dana does about it, and what Alice does, and what Hagar does, or will do. They survive, as long and as much as they can, they save lives, as many as they can, even if only their own, and they make more living possible. Dana says there are no ghosts while speaking to someone long dead because there are no ghosts in the sense of chain-rattling, spectral apparitions of the sort Rufus is most likely imagining. In *Kindred*, what ghosts there are are as alive as the living, as dangerous, as powerful.

Of course, time moves strangely in this novel. Not only that Dana travels through it, bringing with her anyone who might be touching or holding her at the moment she departs, but also that while she is away, time in 1976 nearly stops. She's in 1816 for three months, and when she returns eight minutes have passed. It doesn't add up, it doesn't align, it isn't a straight line anymore. Time is exposed as not being somehow outside the world, containing it, but part of it, entangled, moving, uneven. Denise Ferreira Da Silva writes in "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World," "Exposing Time as it is inscribed in the onto-epistemological tools that sustain the Subject recalls its worldly-ness without the primacy of temporality... Between the past and future, the old and new, asking the question of the World, toward the End of the Subject's apprehension of it, interrupts the desperate reaction — of the questions — before a Time seemingly caught in a deadly knot." (89). Dana, like Octavia Butler in writing *Kindred*, is certainly between past and future, old and new, asking questions of the World, violating basic truths of history and science, wondering what else might be true, what might all be true, even in fiction, even in stories. Like ghosts rupture time, storytellers rupture time, and in showing that such a rupture is possible, they beg the question of what else might be possible.

After she first returns to the present for the first time, Dana's notion of "home" is already altered. She explains to Kevin, "I don't have a name for the thing that happened to me, but I don't feel safe anymore" (17). She doesn't know the word or words for her experience, but it has nevertheless changed her, her understanding of the world and its limits. When she returns the final time, it is in some ways, or in one literal way, an incomplete return. Her arm is stuck between the worlds, caught in a wall. She loses the arm, she is changed. We've known this would happen from the beginning, it's the first line of the book. Once she's out of the hospital,

she and Kevin travel to Maryland, to see what remains of the home of her ancestors. They find that nothing does, “But Rufus’s house was gone. As nearly as we could tell, its site was now covered by a broad field of corn. The house was dust, like Rufus” (262). The records are brief and limited — the house burned down, Dana’s friends and family were either described as “sold” or not described at all. Because there is still Dana, we know Hagar makes it, somehow to Baltimore, somehow through Emancipation. With their backs to a Historical Society in a converted antebellum mansion, Kevin and Dana talk about what happened to them, to her, to Rufus and the people he enslaved:

“It’s over,” [Kevin] said. “There’s nothing you can do to change any of it now.”

“I know.” I drew a deep breath. “I wonder whether the children were allowed to stay together — maybe stay with Sarah.”

“You’ve looked,” he said. “And you’ve found no records. You’ll probably never know.”

I touched the scar Tom Weylin’s boot had left on my face, touched my empty sleeve. “I know,” I repeated. “Why did I even want to come here. You’d think I would have had enough of the past.”

“You probably needed to come for the same reason I did.” He shrugged. “To try to understand. To touch solid evidence that those people existed. To reassure yourself that you’re sane.” (264)

But of course, everything they touch, including each other, is solid evidence that those people existed. And of course there is no “enough of the past,” there is no getting full and moving on. But there is living with it, there is understanding, and the attempt to. The justice possible here is

not one of endings, but a justice of binding endlessness, accepting an accountability that lasts forever.

I like to imagine that Octavia Butler wrote *Kindred* as the book that Dana wrote, after surviving what she did, not to “close the book on it,” but to understand what happened, to show herself that she’s not crazy, to keep her relating with Alice and Hagar alive and unforgotten, in answer to the question of how to live, what is possible, what can be changed.

CEREMONY

Leslie Marmon Silko’s debut 1977 novel, *Ceremony*, tells the story of a young Laguna Pueblo man, Tayo, returning home from his service in WWII. His experience of violence, both enacting and surviving it, his time as a Japanese prisoner of war, and the death of his cousin, Rocky, with whom and for whom he enlisted, has left him deeply sick. Tayo returns from the war more dead than alive, closer to the dead than the living. He can neither speak nor be seen, so another from within him speaks for him to answer the doctor’s question about why he can’t stop crying, explaining of himself in the third person, “He cries because they are dead and everything is dying” (16). Tayo is both haunted and himself a ghost, one of many for whom a lack of adequate care, both for the recent traumas of war and the multigenerational trauma of settler colonialism, lessens the life he survived the war to lead, both shortening his years and shrinking his energy, spirit, the fullness of his living.

In his memories, when he has access to them against the white medicine that attempts to silence all rather than answer to anything, the faces of the dead shift around — his beloved uncle Josiah’s, who died while Tayo and Rocky were at war, face and voice appear among the faces of Japanese soldiers Tayo fought and killed and was eventually captured by. He feels responsible

for all this death, and for the drought that blights the land, because he had prayed for a break in the merciless rain that beat down on himself and Rocky, infecting Rocky's injuries, while they were prisoners of war. When he is deposited back home, into his aunt's care, his aunt for whom suffering has become a type of reward in itself, a source of pride at the center of all the shame she otherwise endures, trapped with her impossible desire to achieve standards set by whiteness designed specifically to be unachievable, to control and destroy, combined with a desire to be unchanging, a certainty that nothing changes, in a world forever shifting and growing and tumbling around the universe, Tayo can barely get out of bed. For a while, his suspicions that he is the one who died seem confirmed by his perception of his family. Silko writes, "It didn't take Tayo long to see the accident of time and space: Rocky was the one who was alive, buying Grandma her heater with the round dial on the front; Rocky was there in the college game scores on the sports page of the *Albuquerque Journal*. It was him, Tayo, who had died, but somehow there had been a mistake with the corpses, and somehow he was still unburied" (28). Tayo and Rocky are both ghosts but in different senses, haunting the family home.

Tayo's healing, his return to the living, finally begins when his grandmother sends for a local elder, Ku'oosh, to begin a ceremony for Tayo, despite his aunt's displeasure and the Army doctor's demand, "No Indian medicine" (34). Ku'oosh clarifies that the ceremony is not for Tayo alone, far from it, it is for the entirety of this fragile world. Silko writes, "The word he chose 'fragile' was filled with the intricacies of a continuing process, and with a strength inherent in spider webs woven across paths through sand hills where early in the morning the sun becomes entangled in each filament of web. It took a long time to explain the fragility and intricacy because no word exists alone... [and] the story behind each word must be told so there could be no mistake in the meaning of what had been said; and this demanded great patience and love"

(35). The ceremony Ku'ooosh is proposing does not require Tayo to enter into this web, because he is (as we are) already entangled within it, already constituted by it, but rather it requires Tayo to embrace his location in the web, to accept his responsibility to tell its story, keep it going, protect its fragility, its gorgeous intricate entanglement.

This entanglement is most visible at Trinity Site, where the first atomic bomb was dropped, an experiment precipitating death that before it was incomprehensible, the location to which Tayo unintentionally flees, pursued by white military doctors who seek to capture and incarcerate him in a military hospital, thinking him insane and dangerous. Once he recognizes where he has found himself, he knows he has reached the climax of the ceremony. Silko writes:

There was no end to it; it knew no boundaries; and he had arrived at the point of convergence where the fate of all living things, and even the earth, had been laid. From the jungles of his dreaming he recognized why the Japanese voices has merged with the Laguna voices, with Josiah's voice and Rocky's voice; the lines of cultures and worlds were drawn in flat dark lines on fine light sand, converging in the middle of witchery's final ceremonial sand painting. From that time on, human beings were one clan again, united by the fate the destroyers had planned for all of them, for all living things; united by a circle of death that devoured people in cities twelve thousand miles away, victims who had never known these mesas, who had never seen the delicate colors of the rocks which boiled up their slaughter...

He cried the relief he felt at finally seeing the pattern, the way all the stories fit together — the old stories, the war stories, their stories — to become the story that was still being told. He was not crazy; he had never been crazy. He had only seen and heard

the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distance and time.

(246)

Not an origin, neither end nor beginning, for Tayo, Trinity Site is a convergence, where the separations manufactured to maintain colonial and national violence fail. Tayo is brought to tears by this revelation, not from the relief of finding some type of peace or satisfactory answers, but from the feeling, the recognition of the vastness of this interconnection, that expansive coalition between all the living and nonliving and the dead. In “Beyond the Life/Not-Life Binary: A Feminist Indigenous Reading of Cryopreservation, Interspecies Thinkings, and the New Materialisms,” Kim TallBear describes “an indigenous metaphysic [as] an understanding of the intimate knowing relatedness of all things... the co-constitutive entanglements between the material and the immaterial.” At this point in the ceremony that is left for Tayo to do is to make it through this night, to survive, and although it is marked by terror, he does. Or perhaps here, instead of survival the question is of survivance, something more than life and death. Gerald Vizenor writes in *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance*, “Survivance — is an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories... Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy and victimry” (vii). Here, instead of absence and senseless loss, we find power and strength and love and possibility.

GHOSTS CONTINUE AT THE MOVIES

It is, of course, not only in late 1970s historical fiction that departed ancestors, the dead, are turned to by the living as they attempt to survive themselves, to learn how to live. There’s the white suburban nightmare version of ancestors returned of *Hereditary*. Or consider the crucial ceremony in *Black Panther*, where to become the Black Panther and King of Wakanda, T’Challa

takes the “Heart-Shaped Herb” and accesses what is referred to as “the ancestral plane” in the movie and “D’Jalia”, or Wakanda’s collective memory, in the comic books. There in what appears to be a perpetual, starry gloaming, T’Challa receives guidance and wisdom from his deceased father, T’Chaka, on both how to be good and be king at the same time, and how to live with loss.

We could look to another Disney movie, *Coco*, which also tells the story of a family and their dead in Santa Cecilia, Mexico on the Dia de los Muertos where Miguel, our twelve-year-old protagonist, though still a living boy, accidentally passes over to the Land of the Dead. While there he finds his ancestors, relates with them, connecting his story to their longer story, and learns why it’s important to recognize and remember your dead. In the universe of *Coco*, it is through the memories of the living, the passing down of stories, that the dead maintain such active social lives in the spirit world, and when the last memory of a dead person disappears from the land of the living, either through death or forgetting, then that spirit also disappears from the land of the dead. In *Coco*, a haunting isn’t something the dead do to the living as revenge, or for some unfinished business, it isn’t even something the dead do to the living at all, it’s something the living must actively participate in, they must remember, it’s their responsibility to keep the dead alive, and the dead in turn watch over them, and love them, and guide them as far as they will listen. The theme song of the movie, “Remember Me,” makes this argument, that distance, even between the dead and the living, means nothing. It goes, “Know that I’m with you/ The only way that I can be/ Until you’re in my arms again/ Remember me.”

Being together the only way that we can be, across presence and absence, across life and death, takes storytelling, and it takes memory work, towards other ways of knowing and of being. As Avery Gordon writes, “And so we are left to insist on our need to reckon with

hauntings as a prerequisite for sensuous knowledge and to ponder the paradox of providing a hospitable memory for ghosts *out of a concern for justice*" (60). The coalition made possible between the living and the dead, even when imperfect, fleeting and strange, has great transformative potential. While the past cannot be transformed, injustices cannot be undone, and the dead remain dead, they need not remain buried, lost again, disempowered and dehumanized again. While being responsible for and to the dead cannot right wrongs or provide second chances, it can bring back a power and sensuous knowledge that would otherwise be erased. Recognizing our dead has everything to do with recognizing how things came to be as they are, how they might have been otherwise, how they might yet become. Our responsibility to the dead has everything to do with our responsibility to the living, each other, to seeing what else is possible, to making the world we share otherwise.

Another Version Of Memory and Storytelling: *Hereditary*

From time to time, a scary movie is described as the scariest movie ever made, unwatchably scary. At the time of my writing, one of the most recent movies to earn that honor, in this case highly deserved, is Ari Aster's 2018 *Hereditary*. It tells the story of a wealthy white family, living in a vast and empty Utah in a beautiful home surrounded by ever-erie birch trees, with its bark a crowd of blank eyes, immediately after the death of the grandmother. Although she is dead before the movie begins, indeed the first image that fills the screen is her printed obituary, it's her ghostly, horrible activity, begun in her own lifetime and continued from hell, that propels the movie forward.

After mounting stress and more, worse loss begin to consume the family, Annie, the mother, played by Toni Collette, loses all emotional restraint and screams at her teenage son, Peter, played by Alex Wolff, over a particularly miserable dinner, "Now I can't accept and I can't forgive, because nobody admits what they've done." The questions of who is to be blamed, who needs to confess, and who can be absolved, haunt the story, in part because for this family, with its particular ancestral curse, all souls unknowingly sold already, it makes no ultimate difference. It doesn't matter what they do, because it's already too late. The one who is to be blamed came before them — the grandmother, who we gradually come to realize made a pact with the king of hell, exchanging her children and grandchildren for the promise of fabulous riches for herself and her fellow believers. Unlike in the novels *Kindred* or *Ceremony*, in *Hereditary*, ancestry is destiny, and destiny is a trap. There is nothing they can do. For the family in this story, all that makes any difference is their ancestor's bargain, and now that they are bound on their cursed path, all their efforts are meaningless, in fact unintentionally propelling

them ever closer to what they attempt to avoid, farther away from the escape they seek. The movie is an argument against the possibility of escape. The movie says, learn your evil history, but don't expect salvation because your damnation is so much bigger than you. Betrayed by those who came before, now all hope for another future is lost.

Two seances are at the center of *Hereditary*. In each, someone looks under the table being used as a stage for the ritual, looking for the string that will reassure them that none of this is real, the world is indeed as they thought it was. In each instance, the one who looks for a "logical explanation" finds nothing, only air pulsating, more mystery. The first seance is a trick played on a grieving mother, Annie, leading her to believe the dead are harmless, full of nothing but love, sending only messages of painlessness and peace. She's being sold a fantasy by those who are preparing her sacrifice. Leaving the seance, Annie is reassured by her mysterious friend Joan, much to her horror "You didn't kill her, Annie. She isn't gone." The first statement again returns us to the question of blame. The second we already knew. For this family the dead aren't gone, the dead never even left the house. As Annie is leaving, Joan explains that if she ever wants to try the seance again, she need only light a candle, say a few words in an unknown language, and make sure her entire family is in the house while she performs the ceremony. The ceremony, the second seance, is a portal to hell.

Annie is a storyteller herself, she's a miniaturist, she makes perfectly scaled down scenes of classrooms and hospital rooms and galleries and other interiors, as well as intricate model houses, like doll houses but even more uncanny. She's successful at her craft, throughout the movie a gallery in New York keeps calling her, asking for updates on her progress for an impending show, adding to her feeling of being trapped, of drowning. The miniatures also add to the feeling of instability in the viewer, a type of motion-sickness. Several times in the film,

notably in the opening shot, as the story rolls ahead, the camera slowly zooms closer and closer on a miniature, until a living human-sized character walks through the door, and we see it's not a miniature after all, or it was, but now it's the real thing. Every border blurs, but not towards liberation, not towards connection, more towards a terrible madness, and all space converges on a single, horrible point, the only thing certain is fate sent back (or forward or up) from the dead.

At the beginning of the second seance, a miniature we had previously only seen in glimpses, is slowly circled by the camera. It seems much bigger now. It's a house, but you can see the earth beneath, and you can see buried just below another house, and below that house another house. As if to say in reminder, to hide something, or hide from something, is no escape, and anyway, nothing stays hidden for long. To say that even what is buried is still very much present, it's there in the foundation of your world, making it what it is. Gathered around a table with her family, a candle, and a water glass turned upside down to act as a planchette, Annie declares, "I'm a medium," but she has no idea what she's doing, how she's being used, to what she's giving life. In the end, when she realizes her mistake, she tries to use the tools of Spiritualism as she understands them to save her family. She finds a notebook that she believes to be "the link" between the living and the dead, and destroys it, the consequences of which are horrible, a cruel joke from evil spirits, and not at all what she intended. What she didn't understand was that the notebook wasn't "the link;" she was the link, her home was the link, every single thing was the link in a chain dragging the family to hell.

In *Hereditary*, following one tradition in horror films and ghost stories, the dead are far more powerful than the living. They still need something from the living, but it isn't to be remembered by them or held in their hearts. Like the more malevolent spirits we find in the *Poltergeist* franchise or the *Insidious* franchise, these ghosts are after the liveliness or lifeforce of

the not-yet-dead. Like the houses buried under houses we see before the second seance, these hateful dead, this painful past, cannot be ignored away. As Heather Love writes in *Feeling Backwards: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, "... it is the damaging aspects of the past that tend to stay with us, and the desire to forget may itself be a symptom of haunting. The dead can bury the dead all day long and still not be done" (1). The darkness that haunts and hounds this family, the dead grandmother who would do any harm to anyone in her project of wealth accumulation, perhaps represents the long history of evil things done by white people for money and power. Perhaps this is the guilt and blame none of the surviving family members could acknowledge, could address, could escape. Had they confronted their true problem, the true evil, instead of becoming increasingly isolated and afraid, would their fate have been different? I don't know. Perhaps it really was too late. But then maybe it wasn't. Or maybe just trying, showing that trying was even possible, would have made some difference, would have shown there was another way, an outside to the *fait accompli*, and so another ending instead of the bloodbath we get, might also be or have been possible.

This question of what difference it might have made hits me with a particular urgency as the viewer, because the feeling of having a future foreclosed after forces more powerful than myself sold it away for their own benefit feels so familiar. From this point, this feeling of there being no possible future, the question of whether doing something impossible — or even pointing to something impossible, imagining doing it — might be enough to begin to unweave the threads that hold the world in a trap feels far from idle fancy; it feels necessary. Say all the world and everything living on it has been sold to the king of hell. Say there is no escape, no salvation, it's already over. What would the limit of possibility and impossibility mean then? With nothing left to lose, what would continue to matter? To change the end of a story like that,

one would have to change the whole story. And if that were possible, the world would still end, but what would come next would be something else entirely, a whole new world, and not just greater wealth for a few in hell.

Among The Living Dead: Desiring Bodies in *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* and *Get Out*

There is a kind of desire that moves to consume, to control, to incorporate, to exterminate, and erase. This kind of desire is nothing like the desire for justice Avery Gordon describes, this kind of desire and way of desiring will never make anyone free. To be the object of this desire, to be caught in its cage, is to have the fullness of your life and living suspended. It may very well be the death of you. The characters in David Lynch's 1992 *Fire Walk With Me*, the prequel to his massively popular television show, *Twin Peaks*, and in Jordan Peele's 2017 enormously successful and Oscar-winning horror debut, *Get Out*, are caught in such a trap, the objects of such oppressive desires, forced into a state between life and death, neither fully present nor absent, living ghosts, socially dead.

Desire to consume and possess racialized and gendered bodies are central to both films — for the white supremacist fantasy of the tragic, innocent white girl in the former and sexualized, deeply corporeal blackness in the latter. In writing about these films I will focus on the women at the center of both, fictional women who have continued to haunt me — Laura Palmer, the tragic dead white girl at the center of *Twin Peaks*, Rose Armitage, the weaponized white girl of white supremacy in *Get Out*, and Georgina, one of Rose's victims, the young black woman whose body has been colonized by an elderly white woman — first looking to see what they can show us about desire and other liminal spaces, how it consumes, how it propels, how it destroys. I will then explore the scenes in both that function like a type of emotional break or pivot — the scene of Laura Palmer weeping in a bar and Georgina weeping in a guest room, locating these images of women crying more in a tradition of 19th century sentimental art and literature than a horror tradition. I will consider how both films represent the abject failure of the

law, a standard trope of horror films, to save these women from the horrible deaths that await them, and also the love of their friends who attempt to fill that vacuum of care. Then I will visit the otherworldly realms at the narrative center of each film, *The Red Room* and *The Sunken Place*, thinking of them as nightmare versions of Gloria Anzaldúa's *coatlicue state*. Finally I will imagine what Laura and Georgina might have desired, instead of what the white men and women who took their lives desired from them. I will dream about what a feminist desire would look and feel like, what it might make possible, turning to thinkers from H el ene Cixous to Denise Ferreira da Silva and Audre Lorde.

WHY HORROR?

Before all that, let's think about horror, a genre dearest to my heart, beginning with a childhood where I would read nothing but ghost stories and urban legends. There is so much pleasure to be found in horror films, such exhilaration, such a collective and temporary bond formed in the movie theater as we, the audience, scream and then laugh about screaming together. There is also so much to be learned from horror films. In her foundational text, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, Carol J. Clover writes, quoting James Twitchell's *Dreadful Pleasures*, "What makes horror 'crucial enough to pass along' is, for critics since Freud, what has made ghost stories and fairy tales crucial enough to pass along: its engagement of repressed fears and desires and its reenactment of the residual conflict surround those feelings" (11), going on to explain that when we watch horror, we are meant to have an uninterrupted experience of what she calls "knowing" but I might call "feeling," with both the victims and monsters and heroes and killers. We are meant to really go there, be there, with the narrative as it unfolds, but also we come to see that we were already there all along, the fears on

the screen were already our fears, our desires, who we want to be and who we are afraid we might be. We are engaged, we can't look away, until sometimes we have to, when the horror of it becomes too much. In Barbara Creed's essay on Julia Kristeva and women in horror films, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection," she writes, "The horror film puts the viewing subject's sense of a unified self into crisis, specifically in those moments when the image on the screen becomes too threatening or horrific to watch, when the abject threatens to draw the viewing subject to the place 'where meaning collapses,' the place of death" (57). Against being "unwatchable," in *Fire Walk With Me* and *Get Out*, even the most brutal scenes in the films are too devastating to look away from instead of being too horrific to watch; as the viewer I feel required to meet these characters in the depth of their suffering, in the agony of their effort to escape. I feel so implicated. Through this implication, my own boundaries collapse, exposed as illusory, and my continuity or nondifferentiation with these characters is made perceptible, undeniable. In both these films, this "place of death" "where meaning collapses" becomes a potential site of new meaning-making, new communication, a place to fight against premature dying, a place beyond life and death, a place for another kind of living with a new way to value life. But to get there, we'll need to go deeper into the films.

I WANT TO TASTE WITH YOUR MOUTH

I want to think about what happens through oppressive, voracious desires in *Fire Walk With Me* and *Get Out*, first thinking about the tragic white girl object of Laura Palmer, and then the weaponized white girl object of Rose Armitage, and then the Armitage's white supremacist fantasy of blackness that first enslaves and then kills Georgina, and many others, more than we ever know, and almost does the same to the film's hero, Chris.

First we'll turn to *Fire Walk With Me*, in which Sheryl Lee delivers a fevered performance as the doomed teenage hero, Laura Palmer, moving through her own Stations of the Cross in the final days of her life, already hovering somehow between the living and the unliving. But while the story may begin with Laura, the movie doesn't. Instead we first enter at the scene of another murder of another teenage girl, Teresa Banks. In the world of this film, as with the world we all share, to be a teenage girl is to be in some degree of danger all the time, in danger because of the desire directed towards you, in danger because of the power you don't have, and in Laura and Teresa's cases, in danger because of the marginal, outlawed spaces they move inside because of their queerness, their drug use, and their roles as sex workers. Because of her class background and more obvious queerness, Teresa is rendered even more vulnerable in life than Laura. In the universe of the show, her death goes unmourned, and in the universe of ABC and the show's creators, her death could not become the central mystery of a primetime network television show, because it is not mysterious when a working class, queer, sex worker is murdered, her whiteness too far from the normative standard to save her, whereas it is mysterious when Laura Palmer, so often described as "the homecoming queen," which is to say someone whose whiteness would have been expected to save her, is murdered.

This specter of the innocent who should be protected, who should be mourned, is important here. The mystery of Laura Palmer's fate — a question sufficiently intriguing to make the television show its own pop culture phenomenon — is propelled by a sense that "all is not what it seems." Laura Palmer's murder inspires a certain fascination because of its incongruity with who she was otherwise assumed to be; a prom queen with prodigious extracurriculars, an innocent, a white girl. The tense drama of the narrative that pulls the audience in so tightly is

unsettlingly like the tension that attracts the demon (BOB) to Laura in the story — that which exists between the fantasy of her innocence and the fantasy of her defilement.

These opposing poles have long been an animating, constitutive part of the fantasy of whiteness generally, and the white girl specifically. One of the things that constitutes the category of whiteness in the United States is a fantasy of purity, of innocence, tied to the fantasy of the transcendent Christian nation that needed to maintain its self-understanding as innocent even through a history of enslavement and genocide in order to justify and forget that violence, and the ongoing violence it makes possible. One of the things white supremacy depends on is a vision of white innocence that can be extended to all people who qualify as white, who want to understand themselves as superior, more moral, more civilized, and guiltless. The death, destruction, and torment whiteness has systematically visited upon all non-white people could not be understood as criminal or as morally wrong for the fantasy of whiteness to be powerful enough to inspire a kind of patriotism of religious, identity-defining proportion it has for so many white people. It's a nationalist fantasy. This civilized and moral superiority was connected to the notion of a Christian nation, willed by God, and so of course free of any moral blame. As Regina Schwartz explains in *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*, “Once sovereign power is legitimated by transcendence, it is elusive (and unlike human sovereignty) inviolate. There is no check upon the will of a nation-God... Mystically produced and miraculously inviolate, the sovereignty of the divinely legitimated nation is, unlike its human counterpart, ultimately unimpeachable” (13). And as Jon Pahl adds to Schwartz's point in *Empire of Sacrifice: The Religious Origins of American Violence*, “The transcendent nation depends on an innocent people... To say that a nation is ‘inviolate’ and ‘unimpeachable’ is another way to say that it represents itself as innocent” (32). Innocence becomes a constituent, defining element of

whiteness, not connected to any one element of white behavior, but the very nature and possibility of whiteness. To be white is to be superior, to be white is to be innocent. To be innocent without being white becomes impossible, unthinkable. The closest possible approximation is to be subservient to whiteness, non-threatening to its supremacy, a noble, dying savage, or a good slave.

As whiteness is fundamentally innocent, the white girl is particularly innocent. As Hari Ziyad writes in his article for AFROPUNK, “How The Narrative Around White Women’s Innocence Taught Me To Let Them Get Away With Violence,” “White women have been positioned as the epitome of vulnerability and virtuosity to the point where they can hardly do any wrong, despite having done so much already.” The angel of the home, only safe when she stays close to the domestic sphere, the need to “protect” her anywhere outside of that has been mobilized to violent, murderous ends thousands of times. She can have no desires save the maintenance of her own purity, no knowledge beyond the knowledge of her own vulnerability, her dependence. She is innocent because she is helpless, powerless, and her innocence makes her a sacred object, a white girl. Laura Palmer is doomed because of this destructive desire of whiteness, and everyone watches as if there were no other way it could be.

Returning to the narrative of the film, after Teresa Banks’s murder in the opening scene, so sudden and violent we hardly have time to realize the intro credits are over, the FBI, led in this fictional universe by David Lynch’s character, Gordon Cole, is mobilized. But thanks to the special dramatic irony of the prequel, we already know they will fail, we know other girls will die, and we know Laura is next. We as the viewers are subjected to a gruesome autopsy scene, Teresa’s unseeing stare, Teresa’s blue skin, Teresa unmoving on the table, Teresa’s access to her own story foreclosed upon as it becomes the story of frustrated FBI agents unable to save anyone

from anything, including themselves. After the autopsy, the agents go to the diner where Teresa briefly worked. When asked about Teresa, the waitress behind the counter, perhaps truly indifferent, perhaps feigning indifference, replies, “I’ve been giving it a lot of thought. And I believe her death was what you’d call a freak accident.” To her, perhaps, Teresa’s death is just one of those things that can’t be questioned, inevitable as weather, but we know already this was no vagary of fate nor random stroke of misfortune. We know that she had agency and plans that were deliberately taken from her, along with everything else. We understand the systematic devaluing and dehumanizing that left her vulnerable to her death. We know all this about the secret lives of teenage girls before we even arrive in Twin Peaks, all this before we even see Laura.

In one of the central scenes of the film, she and her best friend Donna lie on the couch after school and talk about love, a familiar image of teenage suburban girlhood, undercut all the while by Sheryl Lee’s visible impatience with Donna’s naiveté, the distance she maintains from the conversation with everything we the audience know her to be hiding. Something about the topic inspires Donna to ask, “Do you think that if you were falling in space that you would slow down after a while, or go faster and faster?” A question to which Laura has the answer, because she has already been tumbling through her life with no guide and no support, no end but what has long been and felt inevitable, and so she replies, “Faster and faster. And for a long time you wouldn’t feel anything. And then you’d burst into fire. Forever. And the angels wouldn’t help you. Because they’ve all gone away.” Laura already knows there will be no salvation for her, she knows her role is to remain unsaved, propelled forward on an uncaring wind until she meets her fate and bursts into flames. The image of the “angel” appears throughout *Fire Walk With Me*, in a painting in Laura’s room and later at the climax of the film, but the angel is never more than a

visual sign, neither part of nor player in this world, powerless, just a picture of a beautiful white woman who looks kind but will not save you.

This is the same dark mood we see Laura in again, a day, maybe two later, when she goes to work for her friend/pimp Jacques at his bar. As she approaches the doorway, she's stopped by a mysterious woman, who we know if we've watched the television show has access to otherworldly knowledge. She takes Laura's hands and says to her, "When this kind of fire starts, it is very hard to put out. The tender boughs of innocence burn first, and the wind rises, and then all goodness is in jeopardy." And then like everyone she leaves Laura to her fate.

After her exchange with the Log Lady, Laura enters the bar and is met by another mysterious woman, dressed as if from another time, a mythic 1950's that never ends, who sings an eerie song from the stage, so out of place in this dive bar designed to appeal to laborers in the local logging industry, as if directly to Laura, as if she had a choice "Why did you go? Was it me? Was it you? Questions in a world of blue." Perhaps it was the Log Lady's words, perhaps it is the song, but Laura takes her seat at a table and weeps as if she now knows for certain all is lost, there will be no escape. It is horrible to watch. Soon after, two men approach her table, two future clients, and she asks them, "You gonna fuck me, huh? You want to fuck the prom queen?" They don't care that she's obviously upset. No one does, except Donna, who followed her there, but will also fail to save her. One day, maybe two later, Laura's dead, with no help from the angels.

When Laura weeps in that bar, trapped somewhere between life and death but much closer to the latter, it reminds me of another woman's rolling tears — Georgina in *Get Out*, played with devastating precision by Betty Gabriel. We'll return to those tears soon, but first I want to spend some time with the consuming desires that animate *Get Out*. As *Fire Walk With*

Me doesn't start with Laura Palmer, neither does *Get Out* start with Georgina, but with another woman, who doesn't cry, but instead wears the horrible satisfied smirk of a white woman who feels certain in her safety and power and the ultimate success of all her sinister endeavours, Rose Armitage, played by Allison Williams.

She's smiling as she surveys an array of baked goods at a coffee shop, carefully selecting which to bring to her boyfriend Chris's house before they head away for a quiet weekend where she'll introduce him to her parents at their beautiful family home by a tranquil lake in unspecified wealthy suburbs. Or that's what we think the first time we see the movie. Later we learn what that smile really means, the fate it rests assured in. If Laura Palmer is the tragic white-girl object, trapped by others' fantasies of her innocence, Rose Armitage is the complicit and weaponized white-girl object, the fantasy of her innocence used to trap others, in this case her black boyfriend, Chris, reminding the viewer of a long and terrible history of other black men similarly trapped and condemned when we consider how most lynchings were justified. As Aisha Harris explains in her article, "The Most Terrifying Villain in *Get Out* Is White Womanhood," "Chris joins a long historical line of black people, both real and fictional, who have had their lives threatened or complicated by white women's lies and/or the cultural perception of white womanhood as unfailingly virtuous and true." The evil of Rose Armitage is so well-hidden behind her white smile it becomes essentially invisible, despite the long, long history of that evil white smile and the blood it has spilled, it has laughed while spilling.

Rose smiles because she thinks she's already won, in the same way that her mother, Missy Armitage, played by Catherine Keener, smiles when she invites Chris over to sit with her, an invitation that is really a white woman's self-assured demand, the first time she hypnotizes him, the first step in stealing his black body to sell to the highest white bidder the next day at the

auction disguised as a family party. The next step, as we learn after the auction is complete and Chris is tied to a chair in the basement, is for the white buyer's consciousness to be surgically removed from his own body, and transplanted inside Chris's skull so that Chris's body might become his body, the most complete enslavement imaginable, with less than no hope of escape, without even the possibility of a temporary relief away from the enslaver's gaze. As the horrifying buyer explains, "So you won't be gone, a sliver of you will be in there, you'll be able to see and hear what your body is doing, a passenger, audience." This fantasy division leading to the most sick union — black body, the white mind or spirit — fits the foundational United States system of racial classification, as Coco Fusco explains in "Racial Time, Racial Marks, Racial Metaphors," "Whereas systems of racial classification from the eighteenth century onward reduced people of color to the corporeal, whiteness was understood as a spirit that manifests itself in a dynamic relation to the physical world" (37). The white supremacist Armitage family and their client-friends have found a way to achieve their perfect fantasy of control and possession of the black body without sacrificing their fantasy of the superior white mind and spirit.

This, we realize, is what happened to Georgina. We first meet her on Chris's guided tour of the Armitage home, when he and we as the audience still think this is just another awkward family-meeting made more awkward by well-meaning white liberals response to being around black people. She's standing in the kitchen when Chris and Dean Armitage, Rose's father, played by Bradley Whitford, enter, and Dean explains, "My mother loves her kitchen, so we keep a piece of her in here," later clarifying "We hired them [Georgina the maid and Walter the groundskeeper] to take care of my parents, and when they died, we couldn't bear to let them go." As the surgery is explained to Chris, we understand how literally Dean meant what he said —

Walter is the body and partial consciousness of a black man controlled by the consciousness of Rose's grandfather, and Georgina is the body and partial consciousness of a black woman controlled by the consciousness of Rose's grandmother. And although we never even learn their true names, those two black people aren't really gone, they're right there, trapped in their own bodies, objectified and possessed in the worst and most literal sense.

Get Out offers many examples of what white people desire to take from or get out of black people. At the party designed to put Chris on display for possible buyers, some of the white guests are interested in him for their fantasies of black male sexuality, or for perceptions of his cultural "coolness," or for his "genetic makeup" that could make him "a fucking beast." In the end, his appalling buyer explains that it was none of these desires that motivated him to live inside Chris, to live between Chris and himself, but instead it was his eyes, "those things you see with." We don't know exactly what reasons the Armitage grandparents would have given for why they wanted to live in the black bodies they steal, but when we see Walter running at night with his singular focus on virility, finally possessing the unbeatable physical strength of an Olympic medalist he had longed for in the white body he found insufficient, or when we see Georgina staring at her reflection in the window, marvelling in her beauty, touching her hair, we see them both revelling in it, having finally achieved the long held white dream of being black without really being black.

This desire, corporeal, sexual, is necessarily destructive and violent, as the desire is to dominate, to destroy. As Sherronda J. Brown writes in her article "White sexuality is a breeding ground for white violence," "When the very system of whiteness that you have been indoctrinated into since birth is a sexual fantasy in and of itself, it follows that white supremacy would manifest itself through sexual violence. When anti-Blackness is central to this system,

sexual desire for Black people has to be coded as hatred, dehumanization, and violence,” going on to explain, “People’s desire to dominate whomever they hate extends to sexual proclivities, but in sexual violence there also exists a need to both possess and destroy that which they are ashamed of desiring.” The desires of the Armitage family and their friends, the desires of white supremacy, are poisonous, vampiric, a plague on all the black people who have the misfortune of sharing a world with them. As Carlyle Van Thompson explains in *Eating the Black Body: Miscegenation as Sexual Consumption in African American Literature and Culture*, “... the sexualized racial violence that Black people experienced during the enslavement period and beyond constructs the trope of eating, which links the violence to vampirism — a human being becomes the source of another’s sustenance. Just as the forced labor and the extra-legal violence consumed Black bodies and provided economic sustenance through intimidation, rape and other forms of sexual violence had a similar physical and psychological effect” (18). The Armitage family and their friends literally want to consume the black body and to be consumed by it, to disappear into it while still maintaining even more perfect control of it. It is a desire to dominate, to endlessly torture, to exterminate over and over again. But they don’t see it that way. They still see themselves as innocent.

bell hooks traces this desire for blackness, for the “Other,” back to the fantasy of white innocence we have already explored. In “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance,” she writes, describing a group of white men she overheard discussing “prime target” sexual partners from across different racial categories, “To these young males and their buddies, fucking was a way to confront the Other, as well as a way to make themselves over, to leave behind white ‘innocence’ and enter the world of ‘experience’” (368), going on to explain “The direct objective was not simply to sexually possess the Other; it was to be changed in some way by the encounter.

‘Naturally,’ the presence of the Other, the body of the Other, was seen as existing to serve the ends of white male desires” (368). The Armitages and their friends want to change in the sense that they want to leave their white bodies like evil crabs and take on black bodies, but it’s not a transformation they seek, it’s not an escape from their whiteness, it’s a more complete functioning of their white supremacist desire to consume and control.

After gaining this new knowledge about what is really happening at the Armitage home, we are able to understand an exchange between Chris and Georgina from earlier in the film that before had seemed strange, but relatively innocuous. After being accused of unplugging Chris’s phone (which we now understand she did, but not for the reasons we thought), Georgina comes dutifully to apologize and explain herself to Chris. Uncomfortable in their positions as he understands them, Chris tries to connect with her, or perhaps to test her, sensing something is wrong, saying “All I know is sometimes, when there's too many white people, I get nervous, you know?” Her face in response doesn’t make sense in the way we expect human faces to make sense — her mouth is split in a grin, but tears are pouring from her eyes, which are lit with the strangest inner light. She shakes her head over and over and then she starts to speak, “Oh no, no. No. No no no no no no,” she says, “Aren't you something? That's not my experience. Not at all. The Armitages are so good to us. They treat us like family.” The first time you watch the movie, it’s disquieting, but the second time, it’s agonizing, as you realize the tears are from the black woman whose body and life have been stolen from her, they are erupting outside the control of the white woman who did the stealing, a trace of what is left of her, and the smile is that white woman, wrestling back her control to utter the phrase “like family.” It is a nightmare even to watch. It’s now time to talk about the tears.

SHE WEPT

Each time I watch these films, the scenes of crying, Laura at the bar and Georgina in Chris's room, make me cry too. I get embarrassed watching the movies with other people, as there doesn't tend to be a lot of crying in horror films. They haunt me, they undo me, I can't look away. Why?

Locating these images of tears rolling down a woman's faces in a tradition of sentimental literature is one way to approach their affective power. In her essay "What Is Sentimentality?" June Howard explains:

Most broadly — when we call an artifact or gesture sentimental, we are pointing to its use of some established convention to evoke emotion; we mark a moment when the discursive processes that construct emotion become visible. Most commonly — we are recognizing that a trope from the immense repertory of sympathy and domesticity has been deployed; we recognize the presence of at least some fragmentary element of an intellectual and literary tradition... But that does not undermine the importance of the recognition that sentimental works consistently engage us in the intricate impasse of the public and private, proclaiming their separation and at the same time demonstrating their inseparability. As emotion, embodied thought that animates cognition with the recognition of the self's engagement; as sympathy, firmly based in the observer's body and imaginatively linking it to another's; as domestic culture, in the peculiar intimacy of the print commodity; sentimentality at the same time locates us in our embodied and particular selves and takes us out of them. (76)

They cry because their lives have been / are being taken from them. When they cry, I cry. Their private pain, held so deeply inside, in Georgina's sliver of consciousness, through Laura's self-

medicating haze, their private pain that begins with the public problems of white supremacy and misogyny, is physically transmitted to me through the sentimental image of their tears, public again, shared again. Our boundaries collapse. I have said in horror there is not a lot of crying. Creed might explain that this is because in horror, while boundaries around the self may blur, they are always reconstituted, writing, “This process of reconstitution of the self is reaffirmed by the conventional ending of the horror film in which the monster is usually ‘name’ and destroyed,” going on to explain, “Fear of losing oneself and one’s boundaries is made more acute in a society which values boundaries over continuity and separateness over sameness. Given that death is represented in the horror film as a threat to the self’s boundaries, symbolized by the threat of the monster, death images are most likely to cause the spectator to look away, to not-look” (58). These images, while death images of a sort — Laura cries in part because she knows how soon she will be dead, and Georgina cries because she think she knows how soon Chris will be almost-dead, as she is almost-dead, socially dead — I find impossible to look away from, all boundaries impossible to maintain. As Howard explains of sentimentality, in the moment of viewing these scenes, I am located in my particular and embodied self, and I am also taken out of myself, I am undone. The monsters in these horror films — the murderous violence of white supremacy and misogyny — are not destroyed at the films’ ends, as Creed rightly points out is so often the case in horror, and so potentially the process of reconstituting the self is never completed; I am still with them, they still haunt me.

The tears, too, are like ghosts, this reminder of what always remains, what can never be completely consumed or erased or buried, no matter how deep the shovel goes. As Colin Dayan writes in *The Law is a White Dog: How Legal Rituals Make and Unmake Persons*, “Ghosts are never proof of vacancy but evidence of plenitude. They return chock full of memories and

longing. For them, nothing is ever past, and sometimes they appear to test the limits of death or its meaning in a world of terror. The many forms of the dead in the twenty-first century ask us to look again at the way ghosts invade the precincts of the normal” (9). The ghosts in these tears, the shadow lives of these women, are clues to how much more there is — how much more is hidden, how much more is possible, just below the surface or outside the frame. The tears show me something that cannot be stolen or killed, a type of strength existing outside of even the most complete systems of control and domination, a living that can’t be extinguished. In their humanity the inhumanity of all oppressors and destroyers is made plain.

AND THE LAW WILL NOT PROTECT YOU BUT YOUR BEST FRIEND MIGHT

I want to stay with Dayan and Creed a bit longer and think about the law in both of these films. In *The Law is a White Dog*, Dayan explains, “If, as I argue, the law creates persons much as the supernatural creates spirits, then such newly invented entities are not what we assume. A series of metamorphoses, both legal and magical, transform persons into ghosts, into things and into animals. But these terms — person, ghost, animal, thing — which we assume to have definite boundaries, lose these demarcations. Categories lost their distinctiveness” (xvii). The law, while appearing to reflect what pre-exists it, in fact conjures persons and ghosts and objects, can make a person any one of these things. These boundaries are not stable; sometimes they waiver, like bad specters. We watch them waiver in these films. The law is fragile, and it will not save you if it does not want to.

In addition to the abject that tempts the viewer to turn away rather than face the collapse of their boundaries, Creed describes another manifestation of the abject, writing “... abject things are those which highlight the ‘fragility of the law’ and which exist on the other side of the border

that separates out the living subject from that which threatens its extinction” (39). The fragility of the law is visible in both *Fire Walk With Me* and *Get Out* as law enforcement officers either fail to save the victims from their fate, or in fact are another threat against their survival.

As previously mentioned, a number of white male FBI agents feature prominently in *Fire Walk With Me*, but we know from before the start of the film that they will fail, that they will die themselves or disappear or be possessed by their own demonic forces. The law cannot protect Laura Palmer, the law can barely figure out who killed her. Even a Lynchian joint police and FBI task force, spiritually guided and pacifist, does no good whatsoever for Laura Palmer. This is one of the lessons the final girl of horror genre films teaches us — if a man comes to save you, he will surely fail — but it’s also more than that.

In *Get Out*, when Chris’s best friend Rod realizes something is wrong, he goes to the police for help. The police, unsurprisingly, laugh in his face, unbelieving and unmoved, and leave Chris to his gruesome fate. In the final scene of the film, after his heroic escape from the Armitage laboratory where he killed the people who wanted to do much worse to him, while Rose is bleeding on the sidewalk, having lost the strength to continue pursuing Chris, sirens appear in the distance and she smiles while Chris, and us the audience with him, groans. We know if the police arrive after all he endured, Chris will end up in jail, as a black man necessarily rendered the criminal just as Rose as a white woman will necessarily be read as the innocent victim. If this were another type of horror film, Rose would be the typical final girl — white skin, brown hair, a surprising capacity for violence. Even as he narrowly avoided enslavement made more complete by medical technology, the appearance of sirens’ lights in the distance remind (anyone who may have forgotten) that Chris is still not fully a person, not fully alive. As Lisa Marie Cacho writes in *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of*

the Unprotected, “Engendered by corporate capital and the neoliberal state, ineligibility to personhood refers to the state of being legally recognized as rightless, located in the spaces of social death where demands for humanity are ultimately disempowering because they can be interpreted only as asking to be given something sacred in return for nothing at all” (7). Having narrowly avoided the total social death of The Sunken Place — of being completely “without power except through another,” a “nonperson” (5) as Orlando Patterson explains in *Slavery and Social Death* — the specter of his “ineligibility to personhood” again threatens his survival when we hear the sirens. Instead of rescue, Chris would be swept up by the law, condemned again, a black man accused of the crime of harming a white woman.

But that’s not what happens. Chris is saved, by Rod, his best friend, who cares for him and protects him and watches his dog when he’s away and looks for him when he doesn’t come home. The law, in the business of bestowing and stripping rights only to strengthen its own control and oppression, can save no one, but an industrious and devoted friend who cares about you can. Or can try at least. I think also of Laura’s best friend, Donna, who shows up at the bar where we see Laura crying. She wants to save her, she follows her down into a nightmare to try and bring her back. She fails, perhaps because she’s too late, perhaps because Laura won’t let Donna put herself in the kind of danger she would have needed to, but her attempt, her love, counts for something nevertheless, it matters. It isn’t enough, but it isn’t nothing either. It shows Laura her life meant something to someone, and that her death will be mourned, and she will be remembered, even if never avenged.

WAITING FOR A CROSSING / *COATLICUE STATE*

There is one last place I want to go in both of these films before our time is up. Where Georgina is, where Chris is meant by the Armitages to go, is called The Sunken Place. The view from The Sunken Place is of a grainy television screen getting further away, the sound of The Sunken Place is muffled as if passing through water. Once inside, you are still aware of the world moving around you, of yourself moving through it (the “limited consciousness” explained by the horrendous buyer), but you remain distanced from that life. A person trapped in The Sunken Place is like a ghost who everyone can see but no one recognizes as such, their body a puppet with hidden strings, their blackness finally the powerless commodity the Armitage family and their friends have so longed to consume.

The Sunken Place, this world in-between life and death, a living purgatory, is depicted in the movie in a way strikingly similar to falling through space as described by Laura Palmer, but more slowly, something between burning and sinking or drowning. Laura has her own liminal realm between life and death to which external, perhaps supernatural, forces aspire to send her. Only accessible through mysterious portals — one deep in the woods, another a framed picture of a door ajar an old woman and her grandson give Laura in a parking lot — it’s a home for demons and their victims. It’s iconography is famous amongst Lynch fans, who refer to it as “The Red Room,” with its the red curtains, the white and black zig-zag floor patterns, surgeon’s table bright lights. After her violent death, while her body floats, “wrapped in plastic,” another part of Laura finds herself in the room. The missing angel she’s been looking for the whole movie is there too, and when she sees her, Laura laughs. The angel’s longed for arrival is far too late. Perhaps the angel still provides comfort, but we know now it’s no salvation, or at least not

the kind of salvation Laura would have chosen. She's still dead, she's still trapped, even as she escaped the demon's desire to possess her all her life.

Twenty-five years later, in *Twin Peaks: The Return*, when we first see Laura in episode two, she's still there, recreating her famous scene with would-be hero, Special Agent Dale Cooper. Her movements and speech are all recorded backwards and played forwards — she blinks backwards, her steps echo backwards, and her words spoken backwards require subtitles to be understood. In one exchange, Cooper asks her, “Who are you,” to which she replies, something we already know, “I am Laura Palmer.” But Cooper doesn't understand the rules of the strange purgatory in which this meeting takes place, and so asks, “But she's dead?” Laura, understanding the rules of this reality all too well, explains “I am dead. And yet I live.” Like those in The Sunken Place, like Schrödinger's tortured cat, she is neither, and she is both.

The Sunken Place and The Red Room to me can both be understood as their own nightmare versions of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Coatlicue* state. Anzaldúa writes, “*Coatlicue* is a rupture in our everyday world. As the Earth, she opens and swallows us, plunging us into the underworld where the soul resides, allowing us to dwell in the darkness... Simultaneously, depending on the person, she represents: duality in life, a synthesis of duality, and a third perspective — something more than mere duality or a synthesis of duality” (68). Although itself already a dark and dangerous place, the spaces we've been exploring are nightmare versions of *Coatlicue* because, while what makes the *Coatlicue* state so important is that it “Is A Prelude To Crossing” (70), The Sunken Place and The Red Room are both meant to be inescapable traps into which one is ensnared by forces far beyond their own control, condemned to dwell inside forever, not fully alive, but without the hoped for peace of the dead, and without the chance of a crossing or transformation.

As a prelude to a crossing, the *Coatlicue* state is more like a birth than a death, much closer to a gift than a curse. It tends toward transformation, and hopefully, eventually, liberation. The Sunken Place and The Red Room are meant to liberate no one, but instead to maintain and perfect systems of control that oppress the most vulnerable under a white supremacist heteropatriarchy. These places are built on oppressive desires, desires to oppress, to control, to limit and end life. But that is not the only desire.

CONCLUSION: OTHER DESIRE

What if we consider, instead of the desires of others to consume them, the desires of Laura and of Georgina? What if we follow Avery Gordon again as she urges us to consider what it is a ghostly visitor wants? She writes, following Spivak:

There is no question that when a ghost haunts, that haunting is real. The ghost has an agency on the people it is haunting and we can call that agency desire, motivation, or standpoint. And so its desires must be broached and we have to talk to it. *The ghost's desire*, even if it is nothing more than a potent and conjectural fiction, must be recognized (and we may be able to do no more than simply feel its haunting impact) if we are to admit that the ghost, particularly as it functions as a figure for that which is invisible but not necessarily not there, is capable “of strategy towards us.” (177)

What might Laura and Georgina desire? What might their “unfinished business” be? I think we can see, through their pain and through their great displays of strength and courage, that one thing they long for is to escape, one thing they desire is liberation from the bonds that limit their living, from the desire to consume them, one thing they want is freedom. I think, rather than the trap they find themselves in, where they are violently defined and violently contained or detained

by the forces that dominate their worlds, they would desire *Coatlicue* like the one Gloria Anzaldúa describes, writing, “My soul makes itself through the creative act. It is constantly remaking and giving birth to itself through my body. It is this learning to live with *la Coatlicue* that transforms living in the Borderlands from a nightmare into a numinous experience. It is always a path/state to something else” (95). They wanted something else, to be on that path out, and to have the power to create themselves.

I think theirs would be a feminist desire. Remembering Laura in *The Red Room*, beautiful and laughing, tears transformed, I think of Hélène Cixous writing in “The Laugh of the Medusa,” “this is what nourishes life — a love that has no commerce with the apprehensive desire that provides against the lack and stultifies the strange; a love that rejoices in the exchange that multiplies. Wherever history still unfolds as the history of death, she does not tread” (264). Against this history of death, for the strange, the multiple, the uncontainable, in motion, to nourish life, that might be their desire.

I see another guide in their liberatory desires in Denise Ferreira Da Silva and her vision in “Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World.” Following her, we can imagine how Laura and Georgina might “... halt the Play of Desire, the ontological rendering of efficient causality[.] Because without Desire, the object, the other, and the commodity dissolve; thus released from the grips of the *Subjectum*, the World is emancipated from universal reason, and other possible ways of knowing and doing can be contemplated without the charge of irrationality, mysticism, or idle fantasy” (90). Against universal reason, for fantasy and irrationality, which is to say the end of this world built on oppression and dying, the entrance of another world built on something else, so otherworldly.

Against the sexual violence that hunted these women all their days, we can imagine a very different erotic, following Audre Lorde who writes in “The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic As Power,” “When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives” (55). This life force is the opposite of the shadow life, the half life, Laura and Georgina were subjected to, it is so vast, it is so free. It’s an erotic energy of connection instead of alienation, a desire for liberation instead of consumption. Through it, Laura and Georgina might create instead of being destroyed, they might reclaim themselves with all their wisdom and strength, and they might share that wisdom and strength such that it could be valued for its potential to transform, instead of being degraded and objectified.

To consider the desires of Laura and Georgina, which is to say feminist desires to liberate and be liberated, instead of the desires for them, to consume them, opens up new ways to understand desire and possibility — irrational ways, strange ways, fantastic ways. It shows life and power where otherwise there was only death and pain. It’s a way to value life differently, outside of desires of white colonial heteropatriarchy and capital accumulation, for liberation, for love and friends, for life that grows outside of the limits of “universal reason,” for language reclaimed. As Lisa Marie Cacho writes in *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected*, “To make the unthinkable not just plausible but necessary, we have to reckon with restless ghosts and living people who share the status of ‘dead-to-others’ and demand from us nothing less than transformation” (168). We are all asked to pass through the *Coatlilcue* state and not look away, to return transformed, not just in ourselves but in our relationships to all the living and the dead.

Mourning, Place, and Possibility in the work of Eugene Lim

I have two favorite songs about heaven, at least. Both are from the 1980s. One is “Heaven is A Place on Earth” by Belinda Carlisle, because it is so beautiful it’s infectious, even though it is a lie. Heaven is not on earth, and not a place, and also heaven is not, it doesn’t “is.” The other is “Heaven” by the Talking Heads. In it, David Byrne also tells the lie that heaven is a place, but you know you were never meant to *believe* him. “Heaven is a place where nothing ever happens” he sings, but for where is that true? For nowhere, all there is is happening, and all at once, there is no heaven.

The Queens-based writer and librarian Eugene Lim also loves the song, “Heaven.” In his piece, “second person,” a beautiful and devastating memorial for his friend, Ning Li, he writes:

I tell Shannon I’ve made the Talking Heads “Heaven” my personal grief song and how I vow not to listen to anything else for a year. He tells me I’ll last three months. I only last a couple weeks. *You’re so full of shit.* Giggling where I lost all sense of time, all sense of self. Boyhood friends. *There is a party, everyone is there. Everyone will leave at exactly the same time.*

Reading Eugene Lim and thinking about mourning, about being both nowhere and right here, this place, so far from heaven, I imagine again another possible world, another set of possibilities against those foreclosed upon by the limitations violently enforced in this world. I think about another way of being together. And then I imagine we’re all there in this other world together, we made it. I mean we *made* it. I am so interested in Eugene Lim’s work because I understand creating the conditions of possibility for this other world to be part of what Lim is working on and towards as a storyteller.

Stories are a powerful way to imagine and build another world. In Lim's 2017 novel *Dear Cyborgs*, characters read stories, tell each other stories, tell and retell themselves stories, trying to use them like keys to answer the question — what is impossible though? What else might there be? How can we get there?

In one of my favorite of the enfolded stories, Dave, an artist (slash superhero) tells the story of what he did with a set of colored pencils gifted to him by a friend and fellow artist who, years after giving the gift, commits suicide, after nearly losing the use of her hands from an aggressive form of arthritis. After her death, Dave uses the colored pencils to make abstract drawings, an attempt to imagine where she had gone, “the place she had become” (32). However a problem soon arises, for how can he show anyone the drawings while both paying the debt of accountability and memory owed to his friend (i.e. naming them after her) while still allowing enough opening for the viewers to do their own work to understand the drawings in whatever complex way they might need to. It was a trap. How to tell the truth in art (as with life) in a way that doesn't efface or conceal but also doesn't needlessly foreclose, that grows instead of shrinks or slips away? That connects? He burns the drawings. I feel this problem here, in my own writing, in my effort to find another possible way to live and be together, with both the living and the dead. How to remember in a way that is specific and true to the one you remember, but that isn't insular, can be for everyone? That can continue to grow and change, to be so lively? I think for Dave the problem was that he thought if he shared what was too personal (his friend's name), then the work would only mean something to him and his dead friend, it would only be legible to them, and inaccessible to anyone else. But the personal does not act as closure, it isn't closed, it's an opening, a passageway. In our grief we meet, even when we grieve for different losses.

Dear Cyborgs is a book that grows. It's one of those books where the edges seem to stretch out so thin, when I read it, I start to see the narrator's lost boyhood friend, Vu, or not so much him but his traces, clues to his fate, in my own life. The fiction of the book exceeds its limits, and I follow it around, for another possible world, looking for Vu.

Thinking of the place of Eugene Lim's work, how it is this place and another, thinking of the no-place of heaven, thinking of where we might go, I am reminded of something the scholar and prison abolitionist Ruthie Gilmore writes in her essay, "Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence," "Abolition geography starts from the homely premise that freedom is a place" (227). The question then being how to get there?

Talking about a protest recently attended at Zuccotti Park, the narrator of *Dear Cyborgs* says to his friends, and this is a bit of a long quote, but it's so important:

"This is an idealism, a hope. As when someone is dead and you pray for them to be alive again. Which is an impossibility and yet one still has that dream. To escape the current state, which seems... a stable and perfect and *permanent* projection of our selfish natures... To escape this, well, to escape this is like willing the dead back to life. It's an impossible wish, yet deeply human, a desire to transcend our limitations. That's why it's important. It expresses an impossible desire as if it were not impossible." I stopped before saying the next bit because I was less sure of it. "And I guess the crux of the matter is whether this expression of the impossible can somehow lead to its possibility, that is, to it no longer being impossible." (22)

This question — what would make the impossible possible — is at the heart of all my other questions. When something appears impossible — dismantling systems of oppression, building new worlds, living justly, speaking with ghosts — but at the same time is urgently necessary,

what is left to do? What would make it possible? What if the the expression of the impossible somehow began its transformation, made it not so impossible? The possibility fills me with longing.

Longing and hoping and mourning go together. We love things and people we can't keep. We hope for and work towards worlds we maybe can't reach. But does that invalidate the work and the love of it? I don't think so. What else can we the living do but long and hope and "mourn and mourn and mourn" (163).

Living Memorial: Love and Mourning in Frank Ocean, Alice Notley, and Tina Takemoto

I remember a friend saying to me while going through a break-up that one of the hardest parts wasn't just losing this other person, but losing the person you were when you were with them, such that part of the pain is how the loss is doubled, is both external and interior. Or maybe that's from a movie and not a personal memory, I'm not sure. Either way, I feel it. And with a break-up, there's always the "maybe someday" one can use as a comfort for however long one needs that comfort, "maybe someday we'll be together again" or "maybe someday we'll be again as we once were," but when the loss is through death, the dream of some possible future reunion becomes mysterious to the point of the metaphysical — if someday, where, and in what form? Will we even recognize each other? Will we still feel the same?

Mourning for me has been an exercise in feeling powerless, in the overwhelming weight of the terrible promise of "never again," never again will we talk on the phone, never again will I feel the springs of the couch shift under your weight when you sit down next to me. You are lost to me, and who I was with you is lost too. Never again, and nothing to be done about it. It's a suffocating feeling. Even if, as I have argued, the dead are not so far away after all, their embodied presence, as a source of comfort, an anchor, is not the same as it is for the living, we do not experience it in the same way, or I do not at least. There is the feeling that something missing, something that should be here. There are many ways to attempt to fill that absence — parties, services, candles, personal memorials, wreaths made of hair. Thinking about mourning and remembering, I learn about Leila's Hair Museum in Independence, Missouri, the only official hair museum in the world, open from Tuesday to Saturday, 9:30 am to 4:00 in the

afternoon. Inside, Leila Cohoon displays her collection of over 600 hair wreaths and 2,000 pieces of hair jewelry.

Such mourning wreaths were a popular Victorian craft, where hair from the dead, and sometimes from relatives of the dead, was collected and then woven together, shaped around wire frames into decorative flowers and leaves, often formed into a horseshoe shape left symbolically open at one end. As Cohoon explained in an interview, “That is the only part of that human body that’s still here.”¹ The wreath is part of the work of mourning — making the absent present, even if only as a synecdochal trace, making the presence felt. I remember they had an example of such a piece at a Living History Farm Day Camp I attended as a child in Iowa and I was horrified by it, this remnant of the body that hadn’t properly decayed and disappeared whose presence seemed so jarring amongst the reenactors. I wondered what it smelled like behind its glass frame. But I get it now, I get how mourning makes a person long for any connection, something tangible, a little personal relic of someone loved and lost, a small scale monument for the things that feel bigger than life and death. I admire this impulse to make mourning visible instead of hidden, something on the wall to which one might gesture as if to say, “Here is what I lost, here is where it hurts, as it did before, as it still does now, as it will continue to do,” something that can be shared. In the introduction to the collection she edited, *Rebellious Mourning: The Collective Work of Grief*, Cindy Milstein writes:

One of the cruelest affronts, though, was the expectation that pain should be hidden away, buried, privatized — a lie manufactured so as to mask and uphold the social order that produces our many, unnecessary losses. When we instead open ourselves to the bonds of loss and pain, we lessen what debilitates us; we reassert life and its beauty. We open ourselves to the bonds of love, expansively understood. Crucially, we have a way,

¹ “Leila's Hair Museum,” *Atlas Obscura*, <https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/leilas-hair-museum>

together, to at once grieve more qualitatively and struggle to undo the deadening and deadly structures intent on destroying us. (4)

I want to think of mourning — not as I have in the past as something frustrating for the sense of futility it instills, like throwing stones too small to even make a sound across an unbridgeable gap — but as an effort to share a feeling and a struggle against “deadenings” of many kinds, and toward the fullest enlivening, against loss. I want to think again about what is possible through remembering, particularly when it is done from a place of love and through a desire to create and connect. It cannot reunite us with our lost kin, it cannot return the past but better this time, but a refusal to forget and move on, an insistence that the dearly departed and your love for them is still right here, still active, is still an act of resistance against the erasures and devaluing of white supremacist colonial capitalist heteropatriarchy, it is still a move towards another possible world and way. Heather Love writes in *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, “The effort to recapture the past is doomed from the start. To reconstruct the past, we build on ruins; the bring it to life, we chase after the fugitive dead. Bad enough if you want to tell the story of a conquering race, but to remember history’s losers is worse, for the loss that swallows the dead absorbs these others into an even more profound obscurity. The difficulty of reaching the dead will not keep us from trying” (21). The fact of the reach, extending out for the forgotten dead, this attempt to connect regardless of all promise of inevitable failure, means something, might just be enough to make the connection possible, to unswallow the dead from the history that obscures them.

It is to that effort to reach the dead that I now turn, considering three artists, Frank Ocean, Alice Notley, and Tina Takemoto, who through public feeling turned personal loss — an

unnamed love, an intimate partner, and a friend never met in this life, respectively — into memorials around which we might gather and grow.

WHITE FERRARI

In the fall of 2016 I was with most people in my impatient, one might say excessive, anticipation of a new album from Frank Ocean. A former member of the brilliant and influential hip-hop collective Odd Future, Ocean's debut album, *Channel Orange*, featuring the lead single "Thinkin' Bout You," was released on Def Jam in 2012 to resounding acclaim. Ocean's star was so bright, he was winning Grammys, touring the world, and according to some changing the future of R&B. Years passed, his fame did not waiver, but impatience for new music grew. Possible release dates for the new album approached with increasing online frenzy, websites refreshed over and over, questions about Tidal and Apple Music, and then the date passed, each time leaving me and the rest of the internet with a lot of abject and grumpy jokes. "Where is Frank Ocean?" I remember clarifying to my friends, "I'm just worried about him, do you think he's okay?" as if he were an untrustworthy and flakey relative, not returning my calls. Of course that worry was more selfish than anything, I had become convinced on some level that this new record was what I needed, a sonic panacea that would save my life.

And then it finally came out and, of course, it was and it did. It is a remarkable accomplishment from an artist under a great deal of pressure to accomplish something remarkable. *Blonde*, seventeen perfect tracks beginning with a call to remember A\$AP Yams, Pimp C, and Trayvon Martin and ending with an interview with Ocean's little brother about friendship and super powers, explores questions of Black life and love and desire, and desires for Black life and love, about art and labor and dreaming, about compulsion and restrictions, fear

and escape, finding and losing relief in others, being queer and wanting to be free. In his song “Solo,” he sings, “It’s hell on earth and the city’s on fire / Inhale, in hell there’s heaven,” describing the simultaneity of pleasure and suffering, creation and destruction, in a world as harmed as this. I remember marveling when it came out, greedily astonished that I could listen to these seventeen songs now as many times as I wanted, each track endlessly repeatable in the special way an album is, from the end back to the beginning again, the same every time, never the same twice. A whole, moveable world, a heaven unto itself, that like a blanket or screen the listened can use to cover this other world. His fans had wanted some type of miracle, and here it was.

“White Ferrari” is the fourteenth of seventeen songs. It’s only three minutes long. It starts without an instrumental introduction, just Ocean’s voice up front, but edited in such a way that while not unrecognizable (a fascinating thing to do when you are famous for your voice), it melts into the synthesizer that backs him, a technique used often on the album. The words he sings are “Bad luck to talk on these rides,” which recalls to me the silent star gazing in Vince Staples’ “745,” the very heavy quiet of it, the speechlessness of having too much left to say and too little time, of being perhaps understood already anyway. A tinny drum machine chk-chk sound starts fifteen seconds into the song when he first sings “white ferrari.” When I first heard the song, I thought it so beautiful the white Ferrari must be heaven, but the more I listened I realized it’s not that simple. In the story the song relays, the singer is driving a lover or otherwise beloved for what we come to understand is the last time. He drops his passenger off at Central, which in my projecting I imagined was Grand Central Station, a place I’ve said goodbye at before, but I’ve since learned is a neighborhood in New Orleans. Just before reaching their destination, Ocean sings “Sweet 16, how was I supposed to know,” as if in response to the line before, “Had a good

time,” but we know Ocean wouldn’t have been driving a Ferrari at 16, so time is already folded in a strange way, celebrity Frank Ocean and teenage Frank Ocean, the listener’s fantasy of Frank Ocean and the living person of Frank Ocean collapsing, or it’s a memory of not knowing, or there is no Ferrari, just the longing for one, speeding towards a separation, a splitting up, where paths don’t end but diverge, and from there it’s a mystery we know half the answer to, or at least we think we do, we think we know what Ocean’s fate holds in store, just like we think we know this song is about him. And then of course the question, “how was I supposed to know?”

After the unspoken goodbye at Central, Ocean sings, lines refracting over each other as if he were his own echo, “Stick by me / Close by me / You were fine / You were fine here / That’s just a slow body,” and just below these lines you can hear “Good time” repeated again. He breaks through this dizziness with a clear voice, punctuating three notes, “You left when I forgot to speak.” The emotions elicited by the slow body that can’t keep up with the demands made on it, or perhaps that doesn’t want to, are many and complicated — tenderness, disappointment perhaps, love. Time passing as a character in this song is slippery and merciless, against which a good time could never stand in triumph for long, in response to which the singer offers only an almost Wittgensteinian silence, which of course is broken, however long afterwards, by the song.

Suddenly, an acoustic guitar overtakes the foreground as Ocean sings, in a chorus of his own voice layered over itself, “I care for you still and I will forever / That was my part of the deal, honest / We got so familiar / Spending each day of the year, White Ferrari / Good times,” in a line that echoes both lyrically and melodically The Beatles’ possessive and somewhat fatalistic love song “Here, There, and Everywhere.” Something breaks at this moment, in the layering of Ocean’s voice that divides over and over again accompanied by the loneliness of the acoustic guitar and a barely audible drum machine, before they too drop out and it’s just his voice in

almost cacophonous chorus, as he sings for the next forty seconds, “In this life, life / In this life, life / One too many years / Some tattooed eyelids on a facelift / Mind over matter is magic / I do magic / If you think about it it'll be over in no time / And that's life.” This is a song about the pain but also the beauty of impermanence, about the memories that erode and the memories that haunt, about feeling powerless and meaningless against time’s passing, the loss of youth, the approach of death. Within the disintegration of this verse, even the magic, as it is only the magic of the imagination, seems insufficient.

But the song isn’t over. Ocean sings for a while wordlessly, as if almost to himself, over ambient, swirling and buzzing percussion and that acoustic guitar repeating a circular I-V-IV chord progression, and then we get to the last verse. In the last verse, Ocean’s voice is so edited it sounds like someone else is singing, “I’m sure we're taller in another dimension / You say we're small and not worth the mention / You’re tired of moving, your body’s aching / We could vacay, there's places to go / Clearly this isn’t all that there is / Can't take what's been given / But we're so okay here, we're doing fine / Primal and naked / You dream of walls that hold us imprisoned / It's just a scar, least that's what they call it / And we're free to fall.” The guitar is replaced by a keyboard, but the ambient percussion remains, like a setting we share between the space of the song and the space of the listener. Perhaps we’re in the other dimension where we are taller, or one of the places to go other than here Ocean mentions, perhaps the song has taken us there. The feeling described here, that “clearly this isn’t all that there is,” that there must certainly be something more than this, outside of this, this longing beyond both temporal bonds and the oppressive structures that haunt and doom our personal relationships, is the possibility of liberation in this song, “free to fall.” Not closure, and not an afterlife, it is a longing so great that perhaps, like a spell, it creates the conditions of its own possibility, even if only impermanently.

But static permanence was never the point anyway, endlessness was, changing, shifting, growing forever taller, the listeners along with it. This song because a queer sort of memorial, because the love or lover it remembers isn't over, isn't gone. They live on, they're still here, in the song, in a time that refuses to be linear, in a feeling that refuses to be contained.

AT NIGHT THE STATES

That type of unmeetable longing is at the heart of Alice Notley's 1985 poem "At Night the States," from her book of the same title, published in 1987 by Yellow Press. The book is dedicated to her friend, Peggy DeCoursey, and in memory of her husband, the poet Ted Berrigan, who died on July 4, 1983. The first 65 pages are full of fairly short, starlight clear, poems chronicling her grief. Almost all of the poems are dated, and mostly printed in chronological order, beginning in August 1983 with the crushing poem "Ted," "He's on the boat / in my heart / the sky part // On earth / we have only / his picture: / ourselves" (2), and continuing through December 1984 with the poem "Aside: Voice," which goes "I love your voice. / And when they died / their voices will still / live together" (65). The poems don't follow a direct healing journey, but they certainly track a shifting, a type of transitioning. As Notley writes, "Even as we get better / we say we / never will. It's / the truth, in a / way, I never / will. A place to / start from Paumanok" (35). Sometimes the poems are funny, but there is no pure relief. They aren't all about Ted, and even the ones that are about Ted are never all about Ted. There are moments of the mystical ("... I will pass / past the hut of my / own forehead and into / the litter light / of the preserve" (46)), and the quotidian, such as the list poems "The 10 Best Weathers Of 1983," "The Ten Best Issues Of Comic Books," and "The World's 21 Greatest

Animals: A Play,” that last one co-authored with her friend Elinor Nauen and her two sons, Anselm and Edmund.

Significantly longer than the rest, “At Night The States,” is the last poem in the book. Each of the seventeen stanzas begins with the refrain, “At night the states,” propelling us deeper into the poem, adding to the its trance-like, incantatory spell. I have listened to [this](#) recording of her reading it Buffalo, New York, on April 10, 1987, where she introduces it as her final elegy to Ted, hundreds of times over the last ten years, inspired as a poet by her craft, devastated by what I might call her honesty, her precision. For all the precision of both form and emotion, the poem retains its mystery. Definite articles and pronouns attach to unknown subjects, as if we are only hearing part of a conversation, perhaps between Notley and herself, past, present, or future, or between Notley and her husband, or her husband’s memory. There is a certain dreamlike quality, but then we are given to understand that the activity in the poem takes place at night, as with all private and secret things that happen while the world around sleeps soundly through. As Notley writes:

I have no dreams of wake-
fulness. In
wakefulness. And so to begin.
(my love.) (69)

The address of her love, Ted, is a strange sort of welcome to the reader — permitted into this personal space, but not to become its center, to stay somewhere more shadowy, to haunt the poem in a way, as Alice is haunted.

In “At Night The States,” Notley moves between the notion and sensation of presence and absence, visible and invisible. Part of what makes the poem so effective (and affective) is the way Notley uses words to push back against the unsatisfying and restrictive limitations of words, of meaning so constrained. I feel it writing about this poem, which even as I do it feels somehow

so unnecessary to me, as the poem already says everything. Notley writes, in her curving, rolling line, “Shirt / that shirt has been in your arms / And I have / that shirt is how I feel” (69), the shirt becoming a better signifier than any mere noun, even as it is a noun, the shirt somehow sharing in her pain through its own knowledge of arms that will never hold anything or anyone again. When she reads the line in the recording, she pauses after “Shirt,” as if she were delivering its definition to a contestant in a spelling bee. Shirt now means how Alice Notley feels. From there she continues to explore this intersection of words and matter(s), presence and absence, writing:

At night the states
 will you continue in this as-
 sociation of
 matters, my Dearest? down
 the street from
 where the public plaque reminds
 that of private
 loving the consequential chain
 trail is
 matters (70)

And then from there:

That I am, am them
 indefinitely so and
 so wishful passive historic fated
 and matter-
 simple, matter-simple, an
 eyeful. I wish
 but I don't and little melody.
 Sorry that these
 little things don't happen any
 more. The states
 have drained their magicks
 for I have not
 seen them. Best not to tell. But
 you
 you would always remain, I
 trust, as I will

always be alone. (70)

All the “matters” of private loving are both longed after — all “these little things” — but also are not in themselves everything, don’t add up as pieces to a whole. They are the “consequential chain trail,” but then there is something more too, something immaterial, something left when the magicks are drained, something that will always remain even if it is “best not to tell” about it. Again there is this turn to the unspoken, the unspeakable, not for its horror but for its light, its mystery, even as Notley swears “as I will always be alone,” there is this ongoingness that is a type of connection with what is lost, with others who have lost, who share the pain of mourning.

Later she writes:

At night the states
 whom I do stand before in
 judgment, I
 think that they will find
 me fair, not
 that they care in fact nor do
 I, right now
 though indeed I am they and
 we say
 that not that I’ve
 erred nor
 lost my way though perhaps
 they did (did
 they) and now he is dead
 but you
 you are not. Yet I am this
 one, lost
 again? lost & found by one-
 self
 Who are you to dare sing to me? (72)

What is lost is both the self and the way and also the love, but not all of the love (“he is dead but you are not”) nor all of the way. What is lost is found and lost again, such that neither state is permanent nor totalizing.

The particularity of the poem, its specificity of its “I,” also stands out in this stanza — “Yet I am this one,” indexically linked like a finger pointing through “this” to the speaker of the poem, who we understand, given the elegiac subject of the poem, to be Notley herself. But of course we can never be sure, the index is part of the mystery of both the content and context, the self never so secure, not even if we want it to be certain and secure. As Notley writes in one of my favorite stanzas ever written:

At night the states
whistle. Anyone can live. I
can. I am not doing any-
thing doing this. I
discover I love as I figure. Wed-
nesday
I wanted to say something in
particular. I have been
where. I have seen it. The God
can. The people
do some more. (71)

There is the desire to say something in particular, but it turns to “where” and “it” and “can” and “do some more.” But even in this vague landscape of feeling, so much clarity is conveyed in a word like “Wednesday,” that anchor to time and the world, or in the line “Anyone can live. I can.” which of course she can, she’s doing it all the time, no matter how impossible it may seem. She is who he is survived by. That means she survives. The poem is here because she lives. As she writes:

I remember something
about an

up-to-date theory of time. I
 have my
 own white rose for I have
 done
 something well but I'm not
 clear
 what it is. Weathered, perhaps
 but that's
 never done. What's done is
 perfection. (73)

Weathering, like surviving, is never over, it's ongoing, everyday. The "I" of this poem is so alive even while living in mourning, living with death, living with ghosts, such that life becomes just as mysterious as death, death just as familiar as life. Words that mediate between the realms, the words in this very poem, are so much more than words, are herself. She ends the poem, and with it the book, her final elegy writing:

At night the states
 you who are alive, you who are dead
 when I love you alone all night and
 that is what I do
 until I could never write from your
 being enough
 I don't want that trick of making
 it be coaxed from
 the words not tonight I want it
 coaxed from
 myself but being not that. But I'd
 feel more
 comfortable about it being words
 if it
 were if that's what it were for these
 are the
 States where what words are true
 are words
 Not myself. Montana, Illinois.
 Escondido. (75)

The states do many things in this poem. They whistle, they judge, they ride the train to Baltimore, they make life and explain nothing. These states are shifting and slippery, as they are in our daily language. One can be in a state of decay or a state of ecstasy, the state of living or the state of death, a state of disbelief, the state of Illinois. Here in closing, I understand Notley to be asking for a state where what words are true might be herself. Or perhaps she is asking for a state where she herself might be words, where just as “Shirt” means how Alice Notley feels, “Montana, Illinois, Escondido” means the truth of Alice Notley, of her being alive, of her being in pain, both alone and never alone. The poem is a memorial for Ted Berrigan, but it is told through the life and body of Alice Notley, because in death he is still with her, part of her now. She is where he is. His friends are where he is. His songs are where he is. This poem is where he is. It’s all part of the memorial.

Before the poem, there is a map illustration by George Schneeman, shaped something like a mix between Arizona and Maine, with a dot marking Escondido, Illinois, and Montana, and an unnamed star off center to the right, marking what I believe must be the capital of this mysterious imaginary place. Maps can serve both as a guide and as a record, and here I think it is both and more. In the poem Notley warns, “Who loses / these names / loses” (71), but we know that with this poem, and with this map, the names will never be lost on or lost to us. Even if it’s the final elegy, what it will be followed by is far from forgetting.

LOOKING FOR JIRO

In 2009 the scholar and performance artist Tina Takemoto entered into a relationship with Jiro Onuma, a man who worked as a laundry presser in San Francisco and enjoyed Earle Liederman’s mail-order bodybuilding program. Onuma immigrated to the United States when he

was nineteen years old, just before the Immigration Act of 1924 would have made his move impossible, and was incarcerated at Topaz Japanese Internment Camp during World War II where he worked in the mess hall. Onuma died in San Francisco in 1990. Takemoto explored what traces were left of Onuma's life in his limited archive — two photo albums, some homoerotic ephemera, and personal documents, and from that experience made the video, *Looking for Jiro*, which combines official WWII propaganda footage of Japanese internment camps with a drag king performance by Takemoto dressed all in white with a white cap as if working in a kitchen lip syncing ABBA's "Gimme Gimme Gimme (A Man After Midnight)." Never has the song, with its despairing pre-chorus, "there's not a soul out there, no one to hear my prayer," sounded more lonesome, considering the loneliness of a Jiro Onuma.

In her 2014 essay describing the project, "Looking for Jiro Onuma: A Queer Meditation on the Incarceration of Japanese Americans During World War II," Takemoto describes how when she began the project, she placed an ad in *Nichi Bei Weekly*, asking survivors of the camps to share with her more stories and more memories about queer relationships and survival in the camps, hoping through these conversations to expand or deepen what is known about this secret queer history, working on the project described by Heather Love to remember "history's losers" no matter how far down their stories are buried. While she received plenty of supportive messages, she also was met by a degree of outrage and offense, as if to tell this story would be a scandal, complicating the story as it had always been told, of families and innocence and patriotism on trial. Not only the photographic proof that there were gay people at Topaz, Takemoto explains that the scandal "also involves what Toni Morrison calls 'unspeakable things unspoken' by revealing the discursive limits of collective memory as well as what can and cannot be said about the future memory of Japanese American wartime history" (248). Or as

Heather Loves writes, "... it is the damaging aspects of the past that tend to stay with us, and the desire to forget may itself be a symptom of haunting. The dead can bury the dead all day long and still not be done" (1). The question is both how we remember and who we remember, what part of the story we keep repeating, what part we let slip away.

Takemoto explains that following these questions, as well as questions about erasure, normativity, memory and the possibility of "personal and affective attachments to queer individuals and absent memories through the objects and materials they leave behind" challenged her "to consider what is at stake in the process of looking for Jiro Onuma in the mute photographs and ephemera that constitute his material remains," going on to explain that, "this mode of working through the archive reflects not only my desire to provide a living context for Onuma's materials but also my grief over the impossibility of fully reanimating his partial and fragmented traces of remembrance" (243). I find this introduction to her project both extremely valuable and moving, pointing as it does to the intersecting personal and social forces informing the both the creation of the work and the story to which it responds.

Desire and grief are important motivating forces for this memorial Takemoto creates, and I would argue that they should be, given what is at stake — the memory of a whole person, the story of a whole life, connected to every other life and person, making the world what it is. Takemoto explains that "this modest mode of inquiry should not be denied on the basis of its speculative method. From a queer perspective, such acts of historical reclamations can inspire future encounters with other unexpected dimensions of queer history and memory" (263). For some things, particularly where the erased dead are involved, without speculation there would be nothing left. Instead of devaluing that knowledge because it cannot be verified, I wonder if we can see potential strength in its unverifiability, the way it is evolving and relational. Avery

Gordon calls this “sensuous knowledge,” writing, “and so we are left to insist on our need to reckon with hauntings as a prerequisite for sensuous knowledge and to ponder the paradox of providing a hospitable memory for ghosts *out of a concern for justice*” (60). What justice is possible for Jiro Onuma, for others whose names we still haven’t learned, when he is dead and buried? When your story is told by someone who loves you and honors you, and not by the state that hated and devalued you or the people who were ashamed of you, I think that is a small but important justice. It isn’t possible to undo gross historical cruelty and oppression, to right the wrongs done to the dead, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t try, and I think Takemoto’s attempt is an exemplary one.

In a post on Open Space SFMOMA’s website about the project, Takemoto is quoted as saying, “Jiro Onuma is my gay Japanese American role model, queer accomplice, and friend.” The idea that Takemoto and Onuma are friends is so moving to me, as it seems to suggest that such a reciprocal relationship is possible, and that through such a friendship some type of reclaiming or reinscribing might be achieved, against erasure, against forgetting. What memorial could be more alive than befriending the dead? Than continuing to love them actively, and sing about them daily?

MOURNING WHAT’S LOST / DEMANDING WHAT’S MORE

In the conclusion to her book *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected*, Lisa Marie Cacho considers how a roadside memorial for her cousin Brandon, who did not achieve and never wanted to achieve the marks of accomplishment laid out by the white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy, challenged her and her family to consider again how lives are valued and stories are told. She writes, “Brandon was

profoundly valued, but we could not tell you why. Still empty, the space of his absence holds ruptural possibilities, where we must reckon with what has always been unthinkable” (149).

Their love for Brandon was not the question that needed to be answered, their love was not the mistake that needed to be resolved, it was instead a sign that there was something more, something not thinkable in the logic of capitalism, a feeling outside that frame. This is the work mourning can do, how it might change both the mourners and the memory of who is mourned. She later explains, “To make the unthinkable not just plausible but necessary, we have to reckon with restless ghosts and living people who share the status of ‘dead-to-others’ and demand from us nothing less than transformation” (168). Transformation is not a one time thing, like a life it does not simply happen and then end, as reckoning and remembering and mourning are ongoing actions, so is transforming. It keeps going and it keeps us going in the effort to end this world and build another.

These memorials, this song, this poem, this performance, bring us to this new space where the unthinkable is necessary, where perhaps we can get back what we lost and what was taken away, though not unchanged. Or through them we might realize that nothing is ever lost or so very far away. We might be with our dead, or be alone, as we need and as we are needed. These memorials mean so much, matter so deeply, because they aren’t endings, they don’t bring closure, but instead open this other space where another type of communion might be possible, might indeed be happening all the time.

Another Car, Another Memorial: Vince Staples' "745"

"Black Art, which is to say Black Life, which is to say Black (Life Against) Death, which is to say Black Eros, is the ongoing production of a performance: rupture and collision, augmented toward singularity, motherless child, childless mother, heart-rending shrieks, levee camp moan, grieving lean and head turn, fall, Stabat mater, turn a step, loose booty funk brush stroke down my cheek, yellow dog, blue train, black drive."

- Fred Moten, "Black Mo'nin"

The 745 is a BMW luxury sedan. Cars like that, and like the white ferrari from Frank Ocean's "White Ferrari," make a person think about beautiful things, decadent consumption, fabulous wealth and all the pleasure it promises. But in both these songs, these cars are going somewhere else, not the party, or rather are going nowhere at all, or simply going away. And even if they are going to the party, they know everything that isn't there. Both Vince Staples' "745" and Frank Ocean's "White Ferrari" tell the story of a car ride in a luxury vehicle in their hometowns (Long Beach and New Orleans, respectively) near the end, or likely end, of a romantic relationship. The way these songs explore loss and connection and lost connections stretches beyond their narrated tales to ask questions about what kind of connection is possible, what kind of connection would matter. Even as they don't travel in the same make of car, they may still be in the same car nevertheless, in the sense that it is always the same car, coming and going, aimless and purposeful, searching for something perhaps already there.

"745," the fifth track on Vince Staples' second studio album, *Big Fish Theory*, has the same dark electronic Detroit techno sound that marks the album with a feeling of being from both the looming future (or a looming future, if not ours) and the close past. It's an ominous, sort of frustrated sound that you can dance to, that might make your limbs feel hard and slack at the same time as you dance. It opens with a pretty melody, a hook that never fully disappears from

the track, but only fades in and out of audibility, that is quickly overtaken by something that to me sounds like a mechanical wind that almost carries in Staples' voice, as if he's borne on that breeze, carried in by that storm, "I'm in that 745 / Hope I can come scoop you up round 7:45." That slip, between the car and the time, is the thrust behind the song, the link that appears and reappears. It's a pun, I would argue a really good pun, but it's also a bigger opening than that. In this song, it's both always and never 7:45, 7:45 is the container that Staples is always pushing up against and exceeding, 745 the vehicle propelling us forward without going anywhere, a dream and a trap or a trick, the site of all longing. It's already dark at 7:45, but the night is still all ahead, stretching out into both a predictable mystery and an unknowable space of possibility. Time stops and is heavy, the weight of every choice made and every potential choice present in this moment, wondering what is next, knowing there is no next, there is only this moment in this car. This BMW and the air around it are full of ghosts — those persistent ghosts of what might be, what might have been, and what difference might it make.

In the second verse we're looking out the window when Staples begins by saying "Eyes can't hide your hate for me," and then goes on to describe "These lonely streets/ Unpaved, unscathed/ Morning dew's giving you the coldest feet/ Said that you was comin' through after dark/ To look at the stars and hardly speak/ This thing called love real hard for me/ This thing called love is a God to me/ And we all just God's property/ So feel free to fulfill the prophecy." While the narrative of the song still describes a faltering love affair complicated by the constant pressure of celebrity and glamor, the way desire shifts depending on its proximity to celebrity and glamor, specifically in the experience of young black lovers from another world, I think also of Staples' relationship to whiteness. I remember when a white mom posted a video of herself to YouTube weeping over her terror at hearing his song "Norf Norf" on the radio, her terror at the

refrain “I never run from nothing from but the police,” (I would link to the video but its since been taken down). I remember how he told people not to tease her as she cursed him, because he reminded his fans that this was new to her, she didn’t know, I think about his relationship to his adoring white fans staring up at him on stage when he says “Eyes can’t hide your hate for me.” Love and hate, love and fear, here and far away, never and always are contested within the vehicle of this song. As Fred Moten explains in the quote with which we began, “Black Art, which is to say Black Life, which is to say Black (Life Against) Death, which is to say Black Eros, is the ongoing production of a performance: rupture and collision, augmented toward singularity...” (72), that singularity being all which is possible in the insistence of blackness, black life against all that anti-blackness which seeks to see an end to all black life and all black ghosts.

I hear it when Staples gestures to “these lonely streets,” vacant but for the car we are in, testament to and evidence of the stolen labor and stolen land that were the conditions of possibility for all streets in this land. “To look at the stars and hardly speak” could be part of the faltering relationship of the song, an uncomfortable silence of two people with nothing left to talk about, but I suspect instead the stars and the silence they demand are for Staples both the weight of all that has come before, and the wonder of what is yet to come. This song is still, after all, a song about wanting something, hoping for something (“I hope I can come pick you up at 7:45”). It’s while looking at the stars that Staples reminds us “And we all just God's property/ So feel free to fulfill the prophecy.” God’s property — bound to an unmoving higher power, and yet we are still told to “feel free to fulfill the prophecy” which suggests we are always free not to, or free at all. Staples is often described as a nihilistic writer, and perhaps this call to “feel free” is an example of his sarcastic nihilism, but at the same time when I hear a young black man speak of

prophecy, fulfilling or not fulfilling it, I think of all of the limits placed around black life and black men (for example: Kanye West from another era, in 2004 track from *The College Dropout*, “We Don’t Care,” declaring “We wasn't s'posed to make it past 25/ Joke's on you, we still alive”). The prophecy is that you will be a ghost, and that being the case you are as good as a ghost already, the fact of your living doesn’t matter against the promise of your dying.

At the song’s close, the same pretty melody continues, but it’s slowing down, like it’s collapsing, the wheels falling off, and then it cuts off. But not as if completed, as if it left, and I, the listener, am still here, left behind.

Old Buildings, New Buildings

A flyer for the community meeting explained that ours is the only neighborhood bordering Prospect Park with no zoning requirement restricting how tall a new development can be, which is one part of the explanation for why three enormous mixed-use buildings are under simultaneous construction as I write this, probably more by the time you read it. There are plenty of smaller ones too, including four in a one block radius of my apartment building, which according to a map I found online was built in 1931. The rest of the street are these single family houses, the kind you don't see too many of in other neighborhoods in Brooklyn.

One such house had been directly across Bedford from my building, but since I've lived here it's been torn down and replaced with a relatively small, terribly ugly new apartment building. One small comfort is that, when Ebbets Field was torn down and the Dodgers were moved from Brooklyn to LA by a white supremacist owner who disliked the team playing in a black neighborhood, property valuation shifted dramatically, and many residents were able to purchase their homes, so now when buildings are sold, the money from the sale goes to families and not real estate corporations more often than it does in other neighborhoods. Or this is how a neighbor once explained it to me, I get so confused and irresponsibly bored by property values and real estate, I often only have the vaguest outline of an idea about what is happening all around me. I'm not infrequently wrong, and I hope this isn't one of those times. The other small comfort is that I don't really believe you can tear down anything, I believe it's always there. As much as I love to visit ruins and relics, as exciting as I find the feeling of history enclosing me inside certain buildings, as often as I stop to read the plaques on buildings "Emma Goldman lived here," "Former site of a bread bakery," what have you, it's not like all of that would just

disappear if the building were demolished. For good and evil, it would not all be lost. As Toni Morrison writes in *Beloved*, returning to a quote we began with, “Even if the whole farm — every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what’s more, if you go there — you who never was there — if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you” (44). Nothing is so easily over and done with. It’s not that easy to exorcise a spirit.

The whole neighborhood, Flatbush, used to be farmland. Now brokers want to call it Prospect Lefferts Gardens, leaving out the fact the Lefferts were a slave owning family. I heard a story about a mansion built in 1749, Melrose Hall, full of hidden staircases and passageways, that once stood very close to where the house across from me once stood, where the new apartment building now stands. Now I’ll tell the story to you: two sisters lived in England, one was in love with a man, and the other, for reasons having to do with inheritance, was betrothed to him. The first sister begged her parents to let her marry this man instead, but they were immovable in their decision. So they were wed, the man and the sister who were not in love, and they the set sail for America to grow their already considerable fortune. Without their knowing, the other sister, whose name was Alva, followed them on the next ship. When Alva arrived, she did not know how to find the couple, not knowing that they lived in this mansion in my neighborhood, and she started working as a maid in Manhattan. Years passed, maybe, maybe not so long, I don’t remember, and the day came where she saw the man she loved on the street. She went to him, there was an embrace, he still loved her and longed for her as she did for him, and they formed a plan.

As I said, the mansion he lived in was equipped with secret rooms, hidden behind stairways and bookshelves, designed for the purpose of hiding Loyalist soldiers. She was to live

in one of those rooms, which could only be accessed through a concealed hallway in his office, beginning her new life as perfect secret ghost mistress in the walls. He was not the kind of man who would be delivering his secret mistress meals, or clearing away her piss and shit. He was the kind of man who made and grew his fortune through the enslavement of other people. He assigned an elderly enslaved woman he felt he could “trust,” the responsibility of caring for his secret mistress. Years passed in this way, or maybe not so long, I can’t remember, and the man was called away on business for a time. During his absence, the enslaved woman who enabled the survival of his mistress passed away. In the story as I heard it there were no details about this woman, unsurprisingly, but I’m sure her death was mourned by her family and friends, I’m sure they felt lost without her. Now no one in the mansion knew of the secret mistress’s whereabouts in the hidden room, but rather than betray her lover with calling out to be discovered and saved, she died silently in her room.

Untouched by all of this, through indifference for the former dead woman and ignorance of the latter, the wife, Alva’s sister, began preparations for a party to celebrate her husband’s return. Food, candles, maybe flowers were arranged in the ballroom, and all the local white landowners were invited. The day finally came and the man returned, I think in the early evening, just in time for the party. Not seeing her about, he asked one of the people he enslaved about the elderly woman, and learned of her death, and felt a deep terror at what that might mean, but he dared not leave the party and his wife and all his guests to check the secret room. Everyone was seated at a long table, or perhaps at a number of smaller tables like at a wedding, when the candles flickered, and the door burst open, and in full view of the world, Alva flew into the room, arm outstretched, finger pointing at the man, perhaps shrieking, perhaps silent, that’s

all I remember from the story. Maybe he died of fright, maybe his wife did, or maybe only later of shame, certainly some guests survived to tell the story.

Sometimes when I walk home at night, I do wonder if she's still here. There was one snowy night where I stopped to take a picture with my phone of the peaceful street, and looking at the picture was terrified to see a woman's figure right in front of where I was standing, and I rushed inside. That was some time ago, like two or three cell phones ago, and that picture is long lost or I would show it to you. I wonder why it wasn't the enslaved woman's ghost who returned with vengeance to terrify the partygoers, and I wonder again if there's something better than vengeance, if she was too busy protecting and guiding and being free to care about the man and his wife and their party and property.

A year ago I was walking home and all my neighbors were gathered in front of my building. I was rushing through the crowd because a man was following me, trying to hit on me. When I got to the door I felt all the air leave my body, a picture of my neighbor was taped up, he was dead. He was a young man, he lived with his mother in the apartment right next to mine, he was kind and funny and handsome and a father, and we spoke almost every day, and one time we walked around the neighborhood together. This man who was hitting on me didn't notice my reaction, and so was still talking, and I didn't know what to do, so I closed the door behind me and went upstairs. A few months later a woman knocked on my door, she said she was his cousin, she was looking for more family, and again I didn't know what to do.

Like I said before, I feel physically uneasy when I talk about the dead because I feel immediately like I'm stealing their story from them, I'm taking it over, I'm making it my story, I'm using it to make my argument. I feel that way now. If he could tell you his story, or the story of our building, which was utterly more his building, or our neighborhood, which is utterly more

his neighborhood, I don't know what he would say, I did not know him that well. I hope his mother is okay, I never see her anymore, but I know she hasn't moved. I think about her life right next to mine a lot, she may be just a few feet from me now as I write this.

I don't know how to live in this world where so many people are dead. To do right by them, I would do anything, light a million candles, tell a million stories, say a million prayers, listening forever, changing myself permanently. Maybe it is just a wish, to say that nothing is lost, but I do wish it. If wishing and mourning can make it so, then make it so. If it takes more, it can have more. There will be more.

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