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## *Ideas, language, action: The protest poetry of #MeToo and Black Lives Matter*

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Abstract:

The notion of poetry as protest is not new – Percy Bysshe Shelley famously advocated for radical social action in ‘The Masque of Anarchy’ (1819), for example, a response to the brutality of the Peterloo massacre. Far from making nothing happen, Audre Lorde notes that ‘poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought’; the form ‘is not a luxury’ but a ‘vital necessity’ from which ideas, language, and action might be wrought (1985). Certainly, in the context of #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter, poetry has occupied a central role in the expression of trauma and injustice, offering a critical means through which to speak truth to power, particularly from the margins, and via non-traditional publishing platforms such as Twitter and Instagram. This article argues that much of the protest poetry of #MeToo and Black Lives Matter activism operates in two key intersecting ways: as a transgressive variation of contemporary (anti-)elegy, and as a virtual performance drawing upon the network-building functions of social media. In both capacities, it is a form which resists the consolations of closure to demonstrate the ongoing social realities of systemic racism and sexism. Focussing on a range of poems which enact resistance, this article explores the ‘boundary-breaking potential’ of the elegiac performances of protest poetry, in which the ‘possibilities of a more equitable *what could be* take shape’ (Rutter et al., 2019, p. 24).

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### A vital necessity: An introduction to protest poetry

The ‘death’ of the poet as a culturally relevant figure has long been proclaimed, as has the significance of poetry as it disappears from mainstream artistic and intellectual life. In ‘Can Poetry Matter?’, a public challenge to the genre published three decades ago, Dana Gioia argues that despite its ‘unprecedented expansion’, poetry has ‘vanished as a cultural force in America’, and codified into little more than a niche scholarly discipline: ‘Today poetry is a modestly upwardly mobile, middle-class profession – not as lucrative as waste management or dermatology but several big steps above the squalor of bohemia’ (1991). As a marginal form located within an increasingly ‘closed group’ of readers and practitioners (Gioia, 1991), poetry risks the invisibility associated with confinement and the ‘prestige’ of the academy. Yet it is also the very outsider-ness of poetry – once stripped of anxieties about elitism – that has galvanised its global resurgence as a profoundly subversive and affective mode. Importantly, since Gioia’s discussion, numerous scholars have contended for the poet’s significance, including Heather Milne, who in the aptly titled *Poetry Matters* (2018) describes how ‘contemporary poets have been participating in and documenting protest movements as well as the political, social, environmental, and economic crises and conditions that have prompted people to gather in the streets’ (2018, p. 3). Indeed, as this article argues, both poetry and the poet are central to a series of contemporary protest movements – specifically, #MeToo and Black Lives Matter – advocating against structural inequalities and seeking far-reaching social change. In December 2017, for example, Korean poet Choi Young-mi published ‘The Monster’, in which she warns a young writer of an industry predator:

Don’t sit next to En  
 The poet ‘K’ advised me, a literary novice  
 He touches young women whenever he sees one  
 [...]
 Forgot K’s advice and sat next to En  
 Me too  
 The silk blouse borrowed from my sister got ruffled. (as cited in Seo, 2018, n.p.)

As the Korean #MeToo movement escalated, buoyed by the denunciation of prominent figures such as Ahn Tae-geun, a public prosecutor, and Lee Youn-taek, a stage director, Choi’s revelation of sustained sexual harassment in the literary establishment resulted in the exposé of Ko Un, the revered national poet of Korea, as a perpetrator of multiple abuses against women. The condemnation of Ko, once glorified by Allen Ginsberg as a ‘magnificent poet, combination of Buddhist cognoscenti, passionate political libertarian, and naturalist historian’ (as cited in Seo, 2018, n.p.) was swift and punitive; as Bo Seo describes, the Seoul Municipal Library ‘dismantled a three-hundred-million-won exhibition dedicated to his magnum opus, *Maninbo*. The artifacts that Ko had donated for the exhibit – clothes, glasses, and some three thousand books – would all be returned to him’ (2018, n.p.). Plans to build a commemorative Ko Un

literary house were scrapped, and in order to protect against the potential for a future legacy, ‘publishers removed the poetry of Ko Un from middle school and high school textbooks’ (2018, n.p.).

The relationship between poetry, protest, and activism can be traced to ancient origins. In addition to drinking songs, Alcaeus of Mytilene (620-580 BC), for instance, wrote lyric poetry protesting against poverty on Lesbos (Netzley, 1999, p. xiii), fragments of which later appeared in Aristophanes’ comedy *The Archanians*, a critique of ‘the circumstances surrounding the Peloponnesian War’ (Netzley, 1999, p. 6). Christine de Pizan, a 14th century poet in the court of King Charles VI of France, championed women’s equality in *The Tale of the Rose* (1402), an explicit attack on the antifeminism of Jean de Meun’s exceptionally popular *Romance of the Rose* (c. 1275). In Mexico, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a 17th century proto-feminist philosopher, composer, Baroque poet, and Hieronymite nun, was condemned by the Bishop of Puebla for writing poetry objecting to misogyny, the hypocrisies of patriarchy, and the hierarchical nature of religious authority (Merrim, 2020). In ‘You Foolish Men’, for example, de la Cruz describes those ‘foolish men who lay / the guilt on women, / not seeing you’re the cause / of the very thing you blame’ (1689/2004, n.p.). In the 19th century, Percy Bysshe Shelley advocated for radical social action in ‘The Masque of Anarchy’ (1819), a response to the brutality of the Peterloo massacre, while ‘A Song: ‘Men of England’’ (1839) called for workers to rebel, à la French proletariats, against wealthy landowners and industrialists: ‘Sow seed – but let no tyrant reap: / Find wealth – let no imposter heap: / Weave robes – let not the idle wear: / Forge arms – in your defence to bear’. Both Walt Whitman and William Wordsworth composed poems urging courage to the revolutionaries of France, while Phyllis Wheatley, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Countée Cullen, and Nikki Giovanni represent part of a sustained African American elegiac tradition centred on protest and political action against white supremacy. Beyond the Euro-centric or the Anglophone, in the wake of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Ai Qing and Lei Shuyan produced works which opposed the brutalities of Maoist totalitarianism whilst emphasising the strength and stoicism of its victims (Yu, 1983, p. 706). Following the horror of Tiananmen Square, poets often focussed on eulogising those who resisted Mao Zedong’s infamous Gang of Four, and promoted dissent as a means to achieve democratic civil rights: ‘Don’t depend on the mercy of the spirits, / Don’t wait for the handouts of God. / People demand the right to live, / Democracy should not be just window dressing’ (Qing as cited in Yu, 1983, p. 704). Similarly, in response to the murder of student and civilian demonstrators in the Tlatelolco district of Mexico City and its ensuing media blackout, an ongoing series of protest poetry emerged to act as both witness to an event censored from official histories, and resistance to the silencing of atrocity (Carpenter, 2005, p. 497).

The extensive and transnational history of protest poetry is thus shaped, as this article contends, by the premise that not only does the genre matter, but that it is one of the key mechanisms through which change as a conceptual possibility might translate into lived reality. As Audre

Lorde contends in ‘Poetry is Not a Luxury’, it is, rather, a ‘vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action’ (1985). Moreover, poetry is an inherently subversive, even political, artform, characterised by its impetus to disrupt and destabilise language, and problematise assumed connections between signifier and signified. In its particular attention to unsettling the patterns of the status quo, protest poetry is attuned to these transgressive potentialities, invested in producing dislocations – of language and history, as well as ideological and social spaces – in order to reveal and undermine oppressive networks of power. Certainly, if poetry is experiencing a revival in terms of mainstream interest and popularity, it is arguably in relation to a series of 21st century revolutionary movements; specifically, #MeToo ([2006] 2017-) and Black Lives Matter (2013), campaigns dedicated to protesting against sexual abuse and harassment, and racism and police brutality against Black people. Often organised online, both #MeToo and Black Lives Matter are invested in exposing the consequences of unequal power relations – particularly in relation to black, female, and queer bodies – while mourning loss and advocating for radical socio-structural change. As suggested, poetry has been utilised by activist poets as a vehicle through which to reveal the abuses of the dominant, create communities of shared experience, and agitate for the dismantling of structural inequalities. Protest poetry has flourished as a constituent form of cultural and political resistance on digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. In the context of anti-Black racism, Emily Ruth Rutter et al. observe, for example, how in ‘response to an evolving technological landscape that includes the real-time footage of violence against black bodies by law enforcement’, poetry has emerged as ‘one of the most utilised and poignant genres for expressing both grief and outrage’, as well as mobilising political action (2019, p. 14). Further, while ‘African American poets have never been silent’, social media offers a ‘grassroots venue for dissemination’ that reanimates the reach of spoken word, the energy of street rallies and demonstrations, and the role of the poet as ‘the voice of the masses’ (Hendriks, 2019, pp. 186-187). Licia Morrow Hendriks contends:

The rising prevalence of poets gaining an audience through posting content and accumulating followers challenges the conventionally established standard of an elite coterie of academy-groomed artists, each stamped with the pedigree of an MFA. Regardless of the poet’s origins, I contend that the new millennium is witnessing a resurgence in the relevance and impact of poetry as a means to express communal trauma and galvanise a response by channelling that pain and outrage into organised action. (2019, p. 187)

Shifting and dynamic, the protest poetry emerging from #MeToo and Black Lives Matter represents a profoundly critical form. While its purpose has always been to speak truth to power from (or on behalf of) the margins to evoke change, and to do so publicly with strong links to the theatrics of performance, its most recent incarnation takes place in a distinctly digital environment. The result in terms of the efficacy of protest poetry is substantial, producing more ‘fluid and agile’ reader responses central to ‘movement organising’ and collective action (Suk

et al., 2019, p. 2), as demonstrated by the effects of Choi's explosive revelations in 'The Monster'. As such, this article argues that much of the protest poetry of #MeToo and Black Lives Matter activism operates in two key intersecting ways: as a transgressive variation of contemporary (anti-)elegy; and as a virtual performance which draws upon the network-building functions of social media. In both capacities, it is a form which seeks to resist the consolations of closure in order to demonstrate the ongoing social realities of systemic racism and sexism. Further, by representing that which unsettles and confronts, protest poetry establishes a collective responsibility for readers to reckon with past and present injustices. Focussing on a range of poems which enact resistance, this article explores the 'boundary-breaking potential' of the elegiac performances of protest poetry, in which the 'possibilities of a more equitable *what could be* take shape' (Rutter et al., 2019, p. 24).

### **'This is a large voice': The disconsolations of Black Lives Matter (anti-)elegy**

In line with the rebellious tendencies of protest poetry, elegy is a slippery mode, characterised by its contradictions, its resistance to definition, and its ambiguous literary origins (Weisman, 2010, p. 1). In the 20th century, Jahan Ramazani observes, elegy 'changes at an accelerated pace, challenges traditional norms, shatters old decorums, and combines with other forms' (1994, p. 24). Like other genres, it is 'evolving, hybridising, self-subverting' (1994, p. 24), marked by transgression, and the occupation of liminal and uncertain spaces; an effect, perhaps, of its emphasis on the inefficacies of language. Indeed, Karen Weisman notes that while traditional elegy might generally be understood as attending to the transitional stages of loss from lament to solace, its modern expression falls 'between the extremities of life and death, joy and sorrow, the receding past and the swiftly moving present' (Weisman, 2010, p. 1). In these terms, the imbrication of elegy and protest poetry offers a powerful synthesis, able to articulate not only the profound grief which underscores outrage and dissent, but also the subversive potential of forms which address marginality and taboo in frequently provocative and unconventional ways. More obviously, too, there is an explicit link between the social realities examined by protest poetry – such as slavery, segregation, colonialism, and police violence – and death. As a result, Gavan Lennon highlights, the relationship between protest poetry and elegy naturally aligns with specific historical and literary communities; the African American elegiac tradition, for example, 'can be read as indicative of a wider narrative of the black freedom struggle', as the two progress in parallel 'from antebellum slavery, through the anti-segregationist movements of the middle of the twentieth century, to twenty-first century modes of racial resistance and protest' (Lennon, 2019, pp. 194-195). The African American elegy is 'expressive of political protest from the earliest examples of the genre', providing a means through which 'enslaved poets could circumvent prohibitions against direct discussion of the inhumanity of enslavement ... [and] the slow violence of antebellum life' (Lennon, 2019, pp. 196-197). In its contemporary evocation as Black Lives Matter elegy, the mode demonstrates how 'grief ... can develop into avenues of resistance, reform, and productive public memory', as it expands from poetic expression to a mobilising agent of change (p. 194).

As a transgressive version of the elegy, the protest poetry emerging from Black Lives Matter is also profoundly anti-elegiac, particularly in its resistance to consolation and unwillingness to ‘abandon the dead’ (Kennedy, 2007, p. 145). David Kennedy argues that the desire for solace which marks the traditional elegy has been replaced in 20th century by a need for ‘the dead to continue to walk among us’ (2007, p. 146), a form of haunting that speaks to the agitations of protest poetry and the importance of crossing the ‘threshold of invisibility’ in order to expose that which has been silenced or denied (Brewster, 2008, p. 71). Certainly, as R. Clifton Spargo describes, anti-elegy is deeply political, refusing symbolic restitution or commemoration as it reveals the conditions on which social order is based:

The death registered by the anti-elegiac mourner has provided insight into the injustice on which the world is founded. ... Commemoration is in jeopardy for the simple reason that remembrance cued by extant conventions seems only to deny the fact of injustice or the reality of loss by rationalising the social foundation of conventions that have taught us to look past (which is to say, away from) the depths of loss. (2012, p. 428)

The unease produced by anti-elegy is critical to the disruptions sought by protest poetry; as Rutter et al. contend, not unlike the ‘chants of ‘no justice, no peace’ and ‘say her name’’, Black Lives Matter elegies ‘emphasise that solace is not the desired outcome’ when the dead are the casualties of institutionalised oppression (2019, p. 24). The importance of exposing the violence of white supremacy is effected through the persistent recalling of its victims, a raising of the undead as reminders of the atrocities of structural racism. In *Citizen: An American Lyric*, for example, Claudia Rankine lists, in fading ink, those killed as a result of police brutality: ‘In Memory of Jordan Russell David / In Memory of Eric Garner / In Memory of John Crawford’ (2014, p. 134). With each reprint of the volume – eighteen to date – the list is augmented, the repetition of ‘In Memory’ offering a series of empty spaces waiting to be filled with yet further, seemingly inevitable, loss. It also suggests an address to white readers, whose privilege – and silence – implies complicity. In a subsequent poem, Rankine highlights the systemic nature of abuse, in which power is located within fictions designed not only to justify racist hierarchies, but also its murderous practices: ‘because white men can’t / police their imagination / black men are dying’ (2014, p. 135). Alternatively, in ‘Uniform; or things I would paint if I were a painter’, Cameron Barnett offers a re-visioning of history in which the dead rewrite and refuse narratives of white dominance in order to occupy positions of authority and control: ‘Rosa Parks in the driver’s seat, / black billie club slung from her waist; Eric Garner / wearing a six-pointed badge wrapped with a black / mourning band’ (Barnett, 2019, p. 184). Importantly, it is a sequence of images that embeds and encodes symbols of remembrance, a gesture against a culture of forgetting in which the horrors of the past are too frequently divorced from present realities: ‘Black Lives Matter’ / chiselled at the feet of the Lincoln Memorial; / Lady Liberty with handcuffs / clutched in her fingers, snapping at the chain’ (Barnett, 2019, p. 184). The recreation, in which MLK sits in ‘SWAT gear ... at a lunch counter’ and Solomon Northup ‘in black, powdered wig’ gavel a ‘courtroom into order’ (Barnett, 2019, p. 184), is an unsettling evocation of the ways in which black bodies are relegated to the margins, but perhaps more

significantly, also denied access to those structures and institutions which confer rights, influence, and resources on the powerful.

The anger associated with absence – and grief for an impossible vision of difference – manifests by way of a refusal to adopt the elegiac convention in which death is regarded as arbitrary. Alternatively, as protest, loss is anchored to those social and political realities which result in the erasure of the demonised ‘other’ from the body politic, and from traditions centred in whiteness, frequently through the use of the parodic. The approach might be understood as the product of a kind of postmodern parody-pastiche, what Linda Hutcheon describes as a ‘value-problematising, de-naturalising form’ (1988, p. 94) which seeks to destabilise assumptions about racial inequality. Indigenous Australian poet and scholar Alison Whittaker, for example, offers a critical repetition with difference in which Dorothea Mackellar’s ‘My Country’ is revised to challenge its colonial romanticism. In ‘a love like Dorothea’s’, Whittaker exposes how the vision of a ‘sunburnt country’, associated with a paternalistic Australian patriotism, relies upon the disappearing of First Nations people, whose guardianship of the land – and very presence – has been overwritten by Mackellar’s imperial gaze:

I loved a sunburnt country, dislodged in a memory  
 I never lived in time to love a love like Dorothea’s.  
 We’re cannibals of other kinds; the white woman has eat the sky  
 and where’s that leave them girls like I? – lost creatures chewing o’er the night

of our missing sunburnt country, on which our prone feet land. (Whittaker, 2018, p. 5)

Mackellar’s repeated use of the possessive – ‘Core of my heart, my country!’ – is repurposed by Whittaker to highlight dispossession and loss, and to position colonisation as a pestilence, a ‘fetish verse’ that devastates not only the landscape, but also the self, destroying the language of culture and identity: ‘I loved a sunburnt country, won’t it / gingerly limp back? / I can’t get past the concrete and my blak tongue’s gone all slack’ (Whittaker, 2018, p. 6). As a transgressive instance of anti-elegy, Whittaker mourns the annihilating effects of white rule, underscoring the genocidal realities of colonial nostalgia. Indeed, by re-narrating and overwriting a poem intimately connected to the performance of national rites and rituals, and one which has developed an anthemic status, Whittaker subverts its authority and assumed grace, reframing Mackellar’s bucolic ode as little more than an ideological device to justify violent subjugation. By linking past and present traumas to suggest new ways of seeing and understanding the impact of state-sanctioned persecution, it becomes possible to express the nightmare of the current moment, assert the ‘inadequacy of mourning practices that do not address the circumstances producing ... the death’ of black bodies (Vrana, 2019, p. 38), and advocate for social change. Rutter et al. thus observe how the elegy has ‘proven to be a vital vehicle for countering white media representations that either ignore black pain or individualise it, eclipsing systemic forms of oppression in the process’ (2019, p. 14). In ‘not an elegy for Mike Brown’, Danez Smith also draws upon parody as a mode of subversion by turning the

genre upon itself, invoking the elegiac tradition to articulate the fury of sorrow whilst ‘casting aside its utility for addressing the routine extinguishing of black life’ (Rutter et al., 2019, p. 15):

think: once, a white girl

was kidnapped & that’s the Trojan war.

later, up the block, Troy got shot  
& that was Tuesday. are we not worthy

of a city of ash? of 1000 ships  
launched because we are missed? (Smith, 2014, n.p.)

In doing so, Smith attends to the hypocrisies of mourning and the sympathies of civic address, particularly in relation to the public willingness to conceive of blackness in contradictory terms: as both invisible and hyper-embodied. Anne Brewster observes in the context of Australian Indigenous protest writing that the colonised female body is especially ‘always burdened with its history’, unlike the white male citizen who enjoys a ‘phantasmic freedom’ from the constraints of commodification in order ‘to assume the mantle of a disembodied cultural authority’ (Brewster, 2008, p. 69). As hypervisibility functions as a corollary of invisibility, a dialectic is produced which offers the potential for expressions of agency by defamiliarising the conditions of (corporeal) presence and silence. Brewster proposes, for example, that by ‘enacting the transition from invisibility (or hypervisibility) to self-defined presence, the body/voice becomes an instrument of cultural and political critique’ (2008, p. 69). Such an articulation arguably occurs in Smith’s anti-elegiac demand for the ‘dead boy’ to receive if not a war, similar to Helen, then at least ‘a song’ to rescue an ‘ordinary, black / dead thing’ from a seemingly endless list of victims of police violence. In ‘Assume the Position’, however, Jive Poetic captures the precarity of the black body trapped within these liminal spaces of embodiment, recounting the terrifying instances in which a ‘service weapon was pulled in my face’:

the eleventh time the safety and trigger argued  
through a range of black fiction. I could’ve been  
any made-up one of us: Ricky or Wee-Bey  
Mad Max or Tray; we all look the same under the right racism. (Poetic, 2020, n.p.)

The repeated experience becomes physically encoded, a readiness for confrontation which develops in a perversely Pavlovian form of instinctual training: ‘Read the signs; my body know / how Klan-rally a cop’s gun feels at eye level’. Poetic thus references a long history of racist police brutality and murder, located within a desire to complete the work of past generations and fed by an uncompromising genocidal fervour: ‘the tenth time, it told me it missed me / the last time; it said, burning black bodies is a / tradition / it was raised on’. In tracking the collision

of the ‘other’ with the machinations of white power, Poetic describes the delegitimisation of the black subject, who is forced into compliance with a system that seeks not only silence and conformity, but also erasure: ‘the eighteenth time I assumed the position without / anything / being said’. Similarly, in ‘Surveillance’, Maxine Beneba Clarke depicts a hellish landscape in which technology intersects with the urge to protect the ‘body in blue ... the body who holds the rein’, whilst the ‘blood-truth’ conveys the sinister abuses of power in which difference is repressed and denied:

it’s much less about the gun  
and much more to do with the body  
that it’s trained on

the body with the placard  
raised in its fist, the body  
brown, the body colonised  
the body of a struggling mind  
the body easy  
to get away with beating:  
clenching eyelids against a point-blank  
pepper-spray can, the body underneath  
the rearing riot horse, the body well trained

to fear

the blue. (Beneba Clarke, 2019, n.p.)

The attention to the idea of ‘the body well trained’ is, in Foucauldian terms, concerned with docility and control, an effort to exorcise the natural delinquency of the ‘other’ through discipline and punishment. The assertion of corporeality in elegiac protest poetry is therefore significant, signalling an unruly refusal to abandon the dead and ignore the social conditions of their dying by insisting upon their continued, haunting presence. The effect is a transgressive strategy through which to mitigate absence, a means to avoid being ‘lost in the disconnect of centuries’ (Johnson, 2019, p. 177) that has resulted in the silencing of black bodies and the ongoing, deeply-rooted violence and racism of white supremacy. Through the construction of a perpetual undead, the poetry emerging from Black Lives Matter both resists the disappearing of the ‘other’ and works to disrupt systemic injustice by exposing its contradictions, its exclusionary hierarchies of power, and its devastating consequences. Tony Medina underscores the interconnection of these elements via a deeply unsettling ironic humour that plays upon racialised discourses of the body and the radical twists of logic – if not cognitive dissonance – expressed by police officials in explaining black deaths in custody. In ‘From the Crushed Voice

Box of Freddie Gray’ – a title which subversively denotes embodiment – Medina portrays the ‘Magic Negro / The Black Houdini / Who done it / Done it to him self’ (Medina, 2019, p. 29). In tracing the persecution tactics of hyper-surveillance, designed to entrench compliance, Medina disrupts a racist dogma that transforms victims of police brutality ‘into criminals who somehow deserved their fate, thereby deflecting culpability from the justice systems and its officers’ (Rutter et al., 2019, p. 18). Such a metamorphosis constructs an impossible cycle in which the violence of law enforcement is translated into a protective act of innocence – saving the savage from its own worst nature – and blackness into a form of monstrosity intent on self-devourment:

See Ma? No hands!

I snatched the pistol  
From the white man’s  
Mind  
From the back of the  
Patrol car –

Suck on dis, Houdini!  
I grabs the gun  
And shoot my  
Self in the chest  
Neo-colonial style. (Medina, 2019, p. 29)

In its use of (anti-)elegiac strategies, the protest poetry of Black Lives Matter, Lennon notes, actively seeks to ‘foment political engagement and activism in memory of victims of white supremacist violence’ (2019, p. 194). While elegies, as Max Cavitch suggests, ‘are poems about being left behind’ (2007, p. 1), in its dissident, parodic forms it is also a genre about presence, evoking ghosts and counter-histories in order to resist forgetting and erasure. Indeed, it is a mode that challenges the disappearance of black bodies from public discourses of witnessing and remembrance, insisting on corporeality to expose the realities of state-sanctioned violence, and enjoin white readers ‘to engage in an ongoing learning process, whereby they are taught ‘twenty-first century lessons in how blacks live, how blacks die, how to mourn, and how to resist’’ (Rutter et al., 2019, p. 19). As Medina’s poem powerfully implies, the protest poetry of Black Lives Matter is thus also an indictment of the white silence central to ongoing racial injustice: ‘Yes – me / The Magic Negro / The Black Houdini / Who done it – / Dooze it all the time / To him self / His own / Damned self’ (Medina, 2019, p. 30).

### **‘Look at me’: On social media, performance, and resistance**

While elegy and protest poetry have become almost synonymous in the context of Black Lives Matter, it is a fusion that is also necessarily intersectional. While this is in part due to the focus

of the broader movement on affirming ‘the lives of Black queer and trans folk, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women, and all Black lives along the gender spectrum’ (Garza, 2014, n.p.), it also derives from the HIV elegiac tradition, in which, Lennon notes, ‘the communal politics of the LGBTQ and African American communities overlap. The threat of physical violence from white supremacists and police officers is enmeshed with the slow violence of illness’ (Lennon, 2019, p. 201). As queer poets of colour developed intimate responses to the effects of the virus, their works exposed a ‘broader narrative of African American death’ within a community already defined by loss, grief, and suffering (p. 203). Danez Smith, for instance, a poet who identifies as black, queer, and HIV positive, imagines the illness as ‘little / cops running inside my veins, hunting / white blood cells’, the diseased body a signal of contaminated structures of power from which there is no relief, and no possibility for escape:

today, Tamir Rice  
 tomorrow, my liver  
 today, Rekia Boyd  
 tomorrow, the kidneys  
 today, John Crawford  
 tomorrow, my lungs

some of us are killed  
 in pieces some of us all at once (Smith, 2017, n.p.).

In the evocation of the dead and the dying, Smith intertwines personal grief with that of a collective, highlighting the imbrication of racial oppression with hetero-sexist patriarchal norms, a network of differences that mark the self as profoundly ‘other’: ‘i got this problem: i was born / black & faggoty’ (Smith, 2017, n.p.). Further, the machinations of white supremacy have been assumed as an ‘internal inverse’ (Smith, 2017, n.p.), a force designed to destroy the black subject, whose death will occur either as the direct result of police brutality, or of the body finally made docile; taught to turn, in line with Medina’s tragic irony, against itself. Captured within the interstitial spaces permitted by exclusion and hatred, survival is thus figured as a macabre game in which the outcome is rigged, each day merely a hope against the inevitable: ‘America might kill me before I get the chance. / My blood is in cahoots with the law. / but today I’m alive, which is to say / I survived yesterday’ (Smith, 2017, n.p.).

Yet such intersectionality is not without its fault lines. Ijeoma Oluo writes in *So You Want to Talk About Race*, for example, that ‘even though Black Lives Matter was founded by black women, even though black women have been at the heart of every feminist movement ... nobody marches for us when we are raped, when we are killed, when we are denied work and equal pay. Nobody marches for us’ (2018, p. 73). As a result, one of the emergent, and arguably defining, features of contemporary elegiac protest poetry is its use of new technologies by BIPOC feminist poets to galvanise communities, provoke change, and bring attention to

institutionalised inequality via movements such as #MeToo. Social networks such as Facebook and Instagram have proven especially significant; Francesca Sobande et al. observe the use of online platforms in the UK to mobilise a ‘resistant struggle’ to dominant media (mis)representation that affirms the agency of black women as ‘cultural readers and producers’ (2019, p. 3), for example, whilst Melissa Brown et al. examine the ways in which hashtag activism such as #SayHerName utilises ‘intersectional consciousness’ as a pedagogical instrument of protest that brings ‘attention to violence against Black women’ and challenges systems of domination (2017, p. 1833). More specifically, Insta-poetry is increasingly understood as a vehicle through which alternative voices and perspectives might not only be articulated, but also amplified. Kristin Matthews contends that ‘social media has become the space black women needed’ to express and respond to ‘their particular struggles in twenty-first century America’ (2019, p. 395), utilising evolving technologies such as Instagram in order to bring about change ‘during a time of white supremacist and misogynoir resurgence in mainstream political and media institutions’ (p. 392).

In response to the emergence of #MeToo as a viral hashtag campaign, for example, poets such as Amanda Gorman, Rupi Kaur, and Yrsa Daley-Ward drew upon the mode to highlight the abuses of systemic sexism, but also to emphasise its imbrication with racial injustice: ‘I am a woman of color / my bones have been / bought and sold every morning’ (Daley-Ward, 2017, p. 213). Indeed, Matthews suggests that due to the suppressive effects of white feminism, which refuses a politics of difference (2019, p. 396), black feminists are developing uses of social media distinct from those of the mainstream. By seeking to bypass established reading and publishing structures and institutions, radical new ways to campaign for representation, community, and social justice are generated: ‘Why radical? First, book ownership has long been the privilege of folk with funds. Insta-poetry is available to anyone with Internet access – personal, school, or library. Second, Insta-poetry largely circumvents the publishing industry – an act which recognises how publishing historically has been a venture largely run by and profiting white men’ (Matthews, 2019, p. 400). While such observations often elide the class-based complexities of social media access, production, and use, Sasha Kruger (2017) similarly observes how emergent ‘mediascapes’ denote a ‘space for community building’ for those ‘historically denied access to traditional marketplace economies’, creating a digital exchange through which shared storytelling is enabled, and ‘communal resistance is forged’. In these terms, Insta-poetry presents an opportunity for the expression of alterity, troubling the borderlines of traditional literary culture in order to confront and dislocate patriarchal ideologies and behaviours, particularly the disciplining of women as silent.

Through these virtual communities, in which whiteness is not the default, it becomes possible to construct counter-narratives that bring attention to deeply entrenched inequalities, but also examine how the experiences of the ‘other’ are so often monopolised by (white) male self-interest. Importantly, the focus of subversive Insta-poets often specifically attends to promoting and vocalising the experiences of black women, a centering which serves, Brown et al. contend, as ‘both an anti-sexist and anti-racist effort to illuminate how social issues such as police

violence and the school-to-prison pipeline impact more than just ‘straight cis Black men’ (2017, p. 1833). As Monet emphasises in *#sayhername*, a poem of ‘all these nameless bodies / haunted / by pellet wounds in their chest’, black identity is woven within a traumatic history of slavery, death, and violence, a burden ‘too vast to be held’ (2017, loc. 970). Yet as *#MeToo* made clear in its accentuation of the voices of white privilege, it is a narrative from which black women are frequently excluded due to a failure to position equal rights discourses within intersectional terms. Because such a weight – ‘an inheritance felt between / the hips’ (Monet, loc. 970) – is unreachable to those who benefit from the collusions of systemic sexism and racism, the result is a pervasive silence which effectively disappears the murder and assault of black women, who are rendered invisible, nameless, and forgotten:

i am not here to say,  
 look at me,  
 how i died so brutal a death, i deserve a name  
 to fit all  
 the horror in. i am here to tell you, how  
 if they  
 mentioned me  
 in their protest and their rallies,  
  
 they would have to face their role in it,  
*too*, my  
 beauty, *too*. (Monet, loc. 985)

Following the tendency of contemporary (anti-)elegy to resist consolation, the black feminist poetry emerging from *#MeToo* insists on evoking past trauma in order to speak to present realities. Again, these ‘ghosts’ are portrayed in corporeal terms, an assertion of the physical self that challenges erasure, and conveys the impact of sexual abuse via a language of embodiment. In doing so, the poetry of *#MeToo* functions as both confrontation and insurrection, a disruption of the silence and absence enforced on those marginalised by (white) hetero-normative patriarchy. Daley-Ward’s ‘bone’, for example, presents a catalogue of unnamed but numbered aggressors, an inversion of Rankine’s ‘In Memory’ through which the elegiac tribute is addressed to a living victim and their multiple perpetrators:

To Four  
 who says,  
 ‘But you felt so good  
 I didn’t know how to stop.’

To Five who says giving your body  
 is tough  
 but something you do very well.

To Six  
 Who smells of tobacco  
 and says, 'Come on, I can feel that  
 you love this'. (Rankine, 2017, p. 6)

Through its attention to the physicality of the male antagonists, who are framed as active agents in control, the female body is counter-figured as an inert object trained into mute docility. Combined with a reversal of the gaze that rejects the surveillance to which women are subjected, the sequence is profoundly subversive, exposing the violations of patriarchal power by defamiliarising, and thereby heightening, the discourses of sexual violence. Similarly, in 'Men Follow Me', Safia Elhillo examines the pervasive scrutiny of women, whose bodies are regarded in terms of goods to be seized by the interests and desires of men: 'on instagram / on twitter / home from the subway station / through my front door / over the years wait for me to turn eighteen' (2020, n.p.). As suggested by Smith's imbrication of illness and police brutality, there is no escape from such an insidious presence, which is defined by its seeming ordinariness rather than monstrosity – 'with their children in the backseat / in the empty parking lot' – and is figured by the female speaker as a haunting that will persist even after death:

maybe even when i die & step away from my mottled body  
 i will look back to see them still                      one hand hot against their groin  
 the other reaching for my hair. (Elhillo, 2020, n.p.)

Importantly, the Insta-poetry aligned with movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo is linked to a tradition of performance and spoken word, offering a means through which to make public expressions of grief and violence, and through such, as suggested by the scandal of Choi's 'The Monster', hold perpetrators to account. (It is worth noting, too, the historic connection between spoken word and performance poetry for both Australian First Nations people and African American communities, which has centred their voices and expressions of protest for thousands of years). Indeed, many black feminist Insta-poets are also spoken word performers (as are Danez Smith, Jive Poetic, and Maxine Beneba Clarke), invested in how the articulations of the voice and body can amplify poetic expression, and aid in building communities of witness and solidarity when combined with online engagement. As an Instagram post observes below a video of Monet performing the poem 'Black Joy': 'Oh, Aja. So thankful for you who commands the power of words to inspire, uplift, unify, embolden, heal, and much more' (2020). Suk et al. argue personal storytelling in forms such as Insta-poetry as a mode of testimony, vital for protest and activism as it 'keeps trauma visible, speaks to suffering of others, and engages in the work of unmasking the truth' (2019, p. 4). Insta-poets such as Rupi Kaur, for instance, a Punjabi-Canadian writer whose debut self-published collection *milk and honey* (2014) sold over three million copies and remained on the *New York Times* bestseller list for 100 consecutive weeks, demonstrate the network-building capacity of

social media performance. Posting at the height of #MeToo, Kaur offered a poem dedicated to the movement on Facebook and Instagram, contributing to a global enunciation of shared trauma: ‘our knees / pried open / by cousins / and uncles / and men ... even in a bed full of safety / we are afraid’ (2017, n.p.). The expression of suffering and loss, rendered all the more confrontational by its exposure of intrafamilial sexual assault, resulted in thousands of women expressing empathy, and gratitude for being given a language through which to convey the unutterable: ‘Your poetry gives voice to all these thoughts/feelings which are hard to verbalise ... Thank you’ (2017, n.p.).

According to Netzley, ‘personalised suffering is an important part of social protest literature’ (1999, p. xiii) and is a critical part of the self-fashioning displays produced by Insta-poets of colour engaging with the transformative possibilities of #MeToo. Brewster observes that ‘visibility or audibility (either bodily or through technological reproduction) is an essential aspect of protest’ (2008, p. 59), particularly ‘corporeally expressive performance’, which is ‘both past- and future-oriented in its performance of remembrance and its motivating political imperative for justice and social hope in the present’ (p. 60). Speaking to the insistence on the body characteristic of both Black Lives Matter and #MeToo protest poetry, the social media presentations of Kaur, Monet, and Daley-Ward not only carve out a public space in and through which to voice discontent, anger, and loss, but also resist the idea that experiences of sexual violence ought to remain hidden and taboo. Importantly, as Erin Moure contends in line with Hendriks’ assertion about African American poets: ‘It’s not that women have not been speaking up. It’s that no one has had the ears to hear us, and we have been too scared or sad to realize the potential of a collective noise. And there was no social media, no ‘gone viral.’ Now you hear us’ (2018, n.p.). Certainly, feminist Insta-poets expose how social media affords a dynamic space in which systemic subjugation might be challenged and communities forged, not only for solidarity, but also, perhaps, for the provocation of real change. As Matthews contends, ‘black feminist social media users hold disruptive potential to institutionalized oppression in their fingertips’ (2019, p. 405).

### **Forcing loss into political visibility: Conclusion**

The protest poetry of Black Lives Matter and #MeToo ‘keeps mourning an open dynamic’ (Rankine as cited in Vrana, 2019, p. 37) as a way to insist that profound change is yet to occur. In its anti-elegiac refusal to ‘find restitution in the function of commemoration in culture’ (Spargo, 2012, p. 413), it is a form defined by its sense of loss and haunting, as well as its restless agitations. Marked by a desire to cross into visibility, by utilising social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram as modes of public performance, community mobilisation, and modes of witness, protest poetry is agile and productive, able to confront the atrocities of systemic racist and sexual violence. And, despite fears of the inefficacies of poetry, it is capable of creating genuine transformation, as suggested by the aftermath of Choi’s ‘The Monster’ and the viral responses to poetic expressions of abuse generated by online audiences.

Asserting the physical presence of bodies forced into the margins, resisting erasure and disappearance, and evoking a perpetual undead, the (anti-)elegiac characteristics that define contemporary protest poetry insist upon presence, and call for a reckoning. In doing so, sympathetic and empathetic networks of witness are formed, but the realities of deep-seated injustice are also made visible and disrupted – indeed, protest poetry is nothing if not a form of exposure. Protest poets insist on taking up space in countering anti-black and misogynistic social fictions and articulating the vision of change intrinsic to both #MeToo and Black Lives Matter. However, in a rousing call to action, there is also a profound sense of responsibility in the role of (white) readers, who ‘are encouraged to become more than passive bystanders. Instead, they are enjoined to participate in the liberation struggle, refusing the enervating forces of state violence, social apathy, and sociocultural amnesia about ... unjust past[s] and present[s]’ (Rutter et al., 2019, p. 14).

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