

Impossible Possibilities: On Loss, Disappearance, and Endlessness

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For mama and papa, who taught me the opposite of disappearing.

And for Sahana and Priya, my green meadow wherever I go.



INTRODUCTION

“There is a time for everything.” -Ross Gay

It is much too late, as Toni Morrison’s narrator describes in the final line of *The Bluest Eye*—but what now? Morrison’s ending here describes a tense of too-lateness that, at first glance, may seem resolute in its repetition of muchness. But what might we make of the vibrant blank space on the page that follows? And is there not a stalling of too-lateness—*much, much, much*—in her final line?¹ I begin this project by asking about this moment in Morrison’s novel as a way of inviting further questioning about the nature of too-lateness and endings. As both aesthetic form and embodied experience, endings constitute a delimitation of possibility. But what, then, of *much, much, much*—of the political and poetic gesture of (pro)longing? Of altering one’s relationship to colonial accounts of time, visibility, and history such that one embodies a critical orientation towards these entities?

This project studies responses to unimaginable, unrepresentable loss and trauma caused by state-sanctioned regimes of occupation, disappearance, enslavement and biopolitical control. I use conceptual thinking about mourning, trauma, and temporality to bridge two 20th century postcolonial canons: Black diasporic literature and film and Kashmiri visual culture. My aim is not to use one canon to inform my study of the other; instead, I hope to explore the consonances and convergences between the literary, filmic, and photographic traditions of Black queer diasporic subjects and Kashmiri subjects living

¹ I borrow this thinking about “much, much, much” from Professor Kevin Quashie’s comments in class.

under military occupation. Part of my project, then, involves finding parallels across seemingly disparate histories and landscapes of colonialism, occupation, and enslavement. Though I intend to avoid homogenizing idioms of loss and aim to preserve the cultural specificities of the Black diasporic and South Asian literary canons, I am interested in exploring the continuities between idioms of mourning in each. I find Roland Barthes' understanding of interdisciplinarity as the creation of "a new object that belongs to no one" (Gordon, 7) helpful in my bridging of Kashmiri occupation, the enduring legacy of the Transatlantic slave trade, and the early era of the AIDS crisis. This project centers interdisciplinarity and cross-cultural study as a vital strategy of studying what we might call an imperial poetics of disappearance.

Though the films, novels, poems, and theoretical works I explore span disparate geographies and historical archives, they also have a way of bleeding into one another through shared idioms, affective dispositions, and embodied gestures. What launched my thinking about the interconnectedness of Kashmir, AIDS, and Morrison was seeing the mourning figure of the Kashmiri mother in *Looking for Langston's* queer angel figure. Pictured above, these two subjects enact near-identical gestures of (re)presentation—and, more interestingly, are searching, inventing, and imagining as they memorialize the subjects in their photographs. In her recent work *Resisting Disappearance: Military Occupation and Women's Activism in Kashmir*, Ather Zia provides testimony from a Kashmiri mother about what the posture signifies: "We stand *for* the disappeared. Our loved ones have been kidnapped, but my *saethi* [comrades], my sisters, and I are here. We appear here in public *for* them" (Zia, 66). The mother's use of "for" makes clear the ways in which she and the other organizers stand *in place of* their loved ones, using their own

bodies to mark their absence. In a similar sense, *Looking for Langston*'s angel imagines and portrays the dimensions of Langston Hughes' queer life that historical archives fail to capture. The angel, who wears a BDSM harness and embellished white wings, provides Hughes' headshot with his own queer mode of embodiment. Thus both the Kashmiri mother and Julien's angel stand *for* and in place of, the subjects in their photos, lending their own material presence to mark said subjects' absence.

The framing of Kashmiri and Black queer being-in-time as a struggle towards temporal (and embodied) *sovereignty* may raise concerns about the institutional forms of political relationality that such a term prescribes, especially for political subjects living under settler colonialism. In his work *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination*, scholar Mark Rifkin flags the use of "sovereignty" in Native studies scholarship as a term that recognizes Native polities' existence as autonomous, yet can also "inser[t] and translat[e] Indigenous modes of governance and social life into settler forms" (180-81). Rifkin's intervention pushes us to think about how temporal sovereignty, as a framework, might generate tension regarding opposing notions of peoplehood and self-determination. For Kashmiri subjects struggling against Indian settler-colonial occupation, sovereignty must resemble a form of liberation and self-governance that exists apart from India's and Pakistan's visions of Kashmiri statehood. In this sense, Kashmiri being-in-time must necessarily—and does, in fact—fashion its own politics and aesthetics of sovereignty.

Critical temporalities also intervene into the trauma of the Transatlantic slave trade, its enduring legacy, and the early era of the AIDS crisis. Rifkin's notion of becoming also factors significantly into this project as a temporal, embodied, and aesthetic form of

indeterminacy and undoneness. Toni Morrison's novels, especially in their representations of ending and death, articulate becoming as both a relational ethic and a critical temporal orientation. Becoming thus aligns with other forms of critical temporality—for example, embodied time, proleptic mourning, ecstasy, the rerouting of traumatized memory, haunting—that this thesis aims to think about. These idioms and gestures form the conceptual skeleton of this thesis and animate my thinking through disparate accounts of historical and ongoing trauma.

This project thus takes after Rifkin in suggesting a form of temporal and embodied autonomy that does not necessarily align with settler-colonial articulations of sovereignty, national identity, and temporalities. We may, then, think about temporal sovereignty as a *critical, oppositional* form of temporal and embodied orientation. In his introduction to *Beyond Settler Time*, Rifkin writes, “to speak of temporal orientation suggests the ways that time can be regarded less as a container that holds events than as potentially divergent processes of becoming” (Rifkin, 2). Rifkin's thinking on divergent temporalities speaks to the nature of traumatic (and traumatized) time that this project aims to explore.

In my first chapter, “Listening to Bodies: On Beating, Breathing, and Embodied Time,” I study Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied* and Essex Hemphill's poem “Heavy Breathing” as works that mobilize critical temporalities. Using José Esteban Muñoz's notion of “straight time” and Rifkin's writing on temporal sovereignty, I explore the ways in which Riggs' and Hemphill's works use embodied gestures—breathing, snapping, gasping, heart-beating—to reorganize time. By staging time through the body, Riggs and Hemphill suggest an alternate metric for survival: one that reimagines the fatalistic connection between illness and time during the early era of the HIV/AIDS epidemic as a

reminder of survival—and transforms time, as an external, objective ledger of death, into an internalized, embodied, and fluctuating inventory of ongoing life and expressivity.

My second chapter, “Rerouting Trauma: Interruption and Embodied Reversal” studies how Marlon Riggs’ *Tongues Untied*, Dagmawi Woubshet’s “New World Alphabet,” and Toni Morrison’s *Sula* understand the relationship between trauma and time. Focusing on a scene between Eva and Hannah, I think about how reversal and inversion become embodied phenomena in *Sula*. I connect Morrison’s representations of trauma’s interruption into the present to a sequence in Riggs’ film that narrates the experience of being called queerphobic slurs. The scene in question uses spatial abstraction and disjunctive editing to situate his protagonist outside of the space and time of the slur’s original use. I also think about Woubshet’s use of metonymy and italics as recuperative narration strategies that intervene in the memory of traumatic happenings. Morrison’s, Riggs’, and Woubshet’s works are all interested in ecstatic diction and narration that do not undo trauma, but rather install a narrative space for its semi-private emergence. In this sense, interruption and reversal do not figure into my thinking as reparative tools. These gestures do, however, give shape to the traumatic and allow memory to emerge in ways that avoid re-traumatization.

In my third chapter, “Inventories of Loss,” I use scholar Dagmawi Woubshet’s notion of “a poetics of compounding loss” as a theoretical framework that speaks not only to poetry, prose, and film produced by Black writers and artists during the early years of the AIDS epidemic—but also to the ongoing enforced disappearances in Kashmir and the enduring legacy of the Transatlantic slave trade. When put in conversation with Marlon Riggs’ *Tongues Untied*, Isaac Julien’s *Looking for Langston*, Toni Morrison’s novels, and

the Association of Parents of Disappeared People's political organizing, Woubshet's thinking reveals the ways in which serialized death and disappearance requires mourning that anticipates loss before it occurs.

Central to my line of inquiry is an exploration of how Black writers and filmmakers have deployed prolepsis, a narrative device that represents a future event as already having happened, in order to account for compounding loss. This technique emerges frequently in Julien's and Riggs' films, as well as Essex Hemphill's poem "Heavy Breathing." Woubshet's interest in "proleptic mourning" reveals the ways in which AIDS, occupation, enforced disappearance, and the catastrophic trauma of enslavement render(ed) the lives of political subjects proximal to and punctuated by death. Within these films and collections of poetry, I aim to explore how quiet interventions—queer looking and touch, for instance—produce an [after]life that authorizes the physical and emotional intimacies forbidden by death.

Chapter four, "On After-Time: Ecstasy, Endings, and Impossibility," surveys instances of ending in Toni Morrison's *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, and *Jazz* in order to think about how Morrison unmoors her subjects from the embodied, psychic, and temporal limits of ending itself. Through their varying engagements of ecstatic time, prolepsis, flight, and surrender, Morrison's novels privilege the tense of after: a time constituted by the anticipation and aspiration of a future, of moreness and potentiality otherwise foreclosed by the constraints of the present. I use the work of Black Studies and Queer Studies scholars such as Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman, José Esteban Muñoz, and Aida Levy-Hussen to study Morrison's representations of death and her novels' endings. Muñoz's notion of "straight time" and Abdur-Rahman's writing on the Black ecstatic serve

as touchstones for my thinking about Morrison's rendering of flight as an act of becoming—one that involves surrender, relationality, and travel beyond embodied limits of space and time.

My fifth and final chapter, “The Right to Disappear: Visual Violence, *Azaadi*, and the Ecstatic Kashmiri Body” explores how Indian military occupation in Kashmir operates primarily through a visual register. I read the presence of barbed wire fences, army tanks, stationed military personnel, unmarked grave sites, and mass blindings through scholar Deepti Misri's thinking on the Indian state's “optical regime.” By superimposing symbols of militarized power and displays of death onto the landscape of Kashmir, the Indian state controls what can and cannot be seen—and who can be disappeared at any moment. Using Achille Mbembe's theoretical interventions on necropolitics, I think about how the Indian state's surveillance of Kashmiris hinges on enclosure and exposure, modes of visual and spatial violence that render Kashmir a state of siege. I also put Jasbir Puar's thinking on visibility and surveillance in conversation with Aaltaf Quadri's photographs of Kashmiri mothers to study how Quadri's use of shadows, an idiom of disappearance, differentiate between optical and haptic space.

CHAPTER 1

Listening to Bodies: Breathing, Beating, and Embodied Time

In *Queer Phenomenology*, scholar Sara Ahmed asks: “What does it mean to be oriented?” At the heart of Ahmed’s question is the notion of directionality, the way we turn to face some things and not others. “Depending on which way one turns, different worlds might even come into view,” Ahmed writes, “[and] if such turns are repeated over time, then bodies acquire the very shape of such direction” (15). Orientation is not so much a consideration of spatial relations as it is a mode of *possibility-making*, a profound consideration of how the world we face may not, in fact, be the only one that exists. To understand that all political subjects are oriented is to acknowledge the presence of divergent temporalities and critical modes of embodiment that attempt to “imagine otherwise” (Sharpe, 124).

What, then, might it mean for political subjects to be *critically* oriented, to turn away from one world in order to face another? We might think of queer studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz’s framing of queerness as “a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling of the present” (1). If queerness can, indeed, be a form of critical orientation, a mode of desire that “lets us feel that this world is not enough” (1), how might it create alternate worlds? Muñoz suggests that queerness’ critical temporality emerges from its rejection of straight time, a regime that “tells us that there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life” (22). Studying critical temporalities and embodiedness creates the potential for conceptualizing queer Black and Kashmiri being-in-time as an intervention into what Elizabeth Freeman calls chrononormativity, a regime

of time not unlike straight time that binds political subjects into useful or convenient modes of embodiment through “temporal regulation” (3). Black queer diasporic and postcolonial subjects remain critically oriented *in relation* to ongoing histories and collective experiences of enslavement, settler-colonial occupation, and suppression. Such political orientations create—and, in fact, necessitate—worlds that exist beyond the threshold of chrononormative, straight time. We cannot fully cohere the linkages between these two frameworks given that each involves its own constellation of political geographies, affective resonances, and collective histories. But it is worth studying how these regimes of time restrict how political subjects’ bodies move through space, the types of worlds that come into view.

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First presented at the American Film Institute Video Festival in Los Angeles, California in 1989, Marlon Riggs’ *Tongues Untied* is what some might call an experimental documentary, though such a term falls short of Riggs’ multi-dimensional project. In a 1991 interview, Riggs himself declines this label: “I even abandoned the term ‘documentary,’ seeking my own sort of embodiment and expression in video to represent these voices, their visions, their worlds” (Anderst, 76). Riggs’ emphasis on embodied expression is integral to the ways in which *Tongues Untied* film moves through music, poetry, photography, monologue, and dance. The film abandons any semblance of plot or backstory, staging instead an anthology of voices and expressive gestures.

Riggs did not make the film with the intention that it would be broadcasted for a wide audience (Anderst, 77). However, following the film’s success at festival screenings, Riggs agreed to PBS’s offer to broadcast *Tongues Untied* through their documentary series

P.O.V. As scholar and documentary filmmaker B.J. Bullert writes in *Public Television: Politics and the Battle over Documentary Film*, Riggs' film "became a reckoning for programmers, station managers, *P.O.V.*, and PBS (Bullert, 91). Producers of P.O.V. attempted to negotiate cutting scenes in the film that depict partial nudity and queer intimacy. Riggs, however, insisted that his film would be televised only under the condition that it not be censored or altered in any way (Anderst, 77). Television programmers and local station managers in certain parts of the United States refused to show *Tongues Untied* and composed lists of 'community standards' in order to censor the film's portrayals of queerness. In this sense, the film thus pushed those in charge of local PBS stations to define their community values in relation, and in fact, in opposition to the film's politics. A similarly vehement reaction occurred on the national level: during the 1992 presidential campaign, candidate Pat Buchanan doctored a clip from the film to claim that George Bush's funding of PBS abused tax-payers' dollars. The film's reception characterized the miasma of social anxiety surrounding representations and testimonies of the AIDS crisis.

This chapter examines two visual and literary texts that think about Black queer being-in-time: Marlon Riggs' film *Tongues Untied* and Essex Hemphill's poem "Heavy Breathing."² These two works were produced in the late 1980s and early 1990s, during what Muñoz characterizes as a "boom" in Black queer diasporic cultural production (57). During this period of political artmaking, Black queer writers, artists, directors, and choreographers responded to the seemingly endless flow of AIDS related deaths in Black queer communities, the rise in queerphobic, racist hate crimes, the under-reporting of AIDS in broadcast journalism and print media, and the Reagan and Thatcher administrations'

² The poem is part of a larger collection of Essex Hemphill's writings called *Ceremonies*

violent neglect of those affected by the crisis. Riggs and Hemphill were close friends and collaborators; in fact, Hemphill plays a prominent role in Riggs' *Tongues Untied*, and his poem "Heavy Breathing" is also read aloud in the film as a monologue. Riggs's film and Hemphill's poem use embodied gestures—breathing, snapping, gasping, heart-beating—to account for and reorganize time. By staging time through the body, Riggs and Hemphill suggest an alternate metric for survival: one that reimagines the fatalistic connection between illness and time during the early era of the HIV/AIDS epidemic as a reminder of survival—and transforms time, as an external, objective ledger of death, into an internalized, embodied, and fluctuating inventory of ongoing life and expressivity.

Heartbeats feature prominently in *Tongues Untied* as both sounds and embodied experiences. Riggs uses the same audio clip of heartbeats throughout the film, mapping the sound over scenes that feature a subject against a black backdrop, groups of Black gay men in public settings, and montages of obituary clippings and black and white photos. The heartbeats enter these scenes without warning and with little indication as to which subject's body (or bodies) they emerge from. In this sense, the beats are both embodied sounds and disembodied sounds, diegetic and nondiegetic, worldly and otherworldly. The heartbeats resist being contained in one easily discernible body and thus transcend the camera's indexical qualities.

Part of Riggs' project, therefore, is to render the heartbeat normative and unchanging, a shared experience between the film's subjects that transcends the specificities of action, setting, emotion, and health status. The reoccurring heartbeat also has a medical resonance, especially in a film that tackles Riggs' own experience of living with HIV/AIDS. That the embodied beat resists fluctuation and transcends one

representational body on the screen suggests that it constitutes a force beyond medicalized understandings of embodied life. The film thereby explores the ways in which a heartbeat might contain vitality that is not tied solely to biomedical calculations of life.

The first and perhaps paradigmatic emergence of the beats occurs concurrently with the film's title sequence. The heartbeat slightly precedes the title's first word, "Tongues" (0:02:08) and choreographs the rest of the title's appearance on the screen. The title "Tongues Untied" thus relies on the beating of the disembodied heart to manifest itself against the sequence's dark background. Through this gesture, Riggs signals embodied sound's primacy in the film and its power to preemptively frame visual messages, gestures, and dances on the screen. Like the heartbeats that precede and coordinate the film's title sequence, the phrase "brother to brother" begin the film and constitutes its first words. A disembodied voice utters "Brother to brother," also the title of Riggs' 1991 anthology of writings by Black gay men, in complete darkness. The voice repeats the phrase and, finally, four seconds into the film, we see the back of a Black, masculine-presenting subject's head. These moments of visual absence, though fleeting, privilege the aural dimensions of "brother to brother," the cadence, rhythm, and compounding volume of the chant.

The synchronicity of the sequence's audiovisual elements as such enmeshes the title's privileging of verbal expressivity—tongues being untied—in the dynamics of embodied sound and gesture. For subjects living with illness, the latter constitutes a semi-private mode of expression; though heartbeats are produced by, and contained within, one's body, medical care providers must account for, manage, and optimize the heartbeat in order to ensure a patient's survival. Riggs' close association between heartbeat and expression,

therefore, suggests that heartbeats themselves contain a lyric capacity, the potential for embodied expressivity.³

Riggs attentiveness to this vibrant capacity does not overlook the ways in which heartbeats are markers of death for those living with HIV/AIDS. In a 1991 interview, he talks about the heartbeat as a paradox: “a source of life and then eventually a source of death, since entwined with its ticking is the virus.”⁴ Riggs’s invocation of “ticking” calls forth the resonances between heartbeat and temporality, the ways in which his heart becomes a teller of time. His adaptation of “ticking”—language used to describe the function of a clock, the movement of non-embodied time—to describe his body’s experience of time raises the following questions: What would it mean for heart-beating to be externalized as ticking? What might it mean for ticking to be internalized as heart-beating? Riggs’ framing of heartbeats as a metric of time reduces terms of the temporal to terms of the embodied, thus creating an experience of time different from a social or medicalized one.

In her article, “Calling to Witness: Complicating Autobiography and Narrative Empathy in Marlon Riggs’ *Tongues Untied*,” Leah Anderst claims that Riggs’ first dance sequence in the film, staged against the sound of “steady and strong” heartbeats, depicts him as “muscular and healthy” (74). The scene to which Anderst refers occurs three minutes into the film, interrupting the black-and-white opening credits: Riggs moves across the frame, at times crouching, and uses his hands and arms to shield his face from the camera’s view. The soundtrack to the sequence is the same clip of heartbeats that

³ Woubshet, in *A Calendar of Loss*, makes a similar claim regarding Melvin Dixon’s use of heartbeats in *Love’s Instruments* (45)

⁴ From an interview cited in Leah Anderst’s article “Calling to Witness” (74)

repeatedly punctuates the rest of the film. This dance sequence is staged in slow motion with Riggs moving against a black background as his own voice-over begins: “Silence is my shield, it crushes...” (0:03:01). Anderst writes: “Later in the film, [Riggs] will share his HIV positive status, what he calls a ‘time bomb ticking’ in his blood, but here at the outset, his body and the beating heart call attention to his health and his vigor” (Anderst, 74).

Anderst’s attentiveness to the robust aural quality of the heartbeats does indeed capture the ways in which Riggs’ use of the sound animates a kind of interior vibrancy. However, her explicit associations between muscularity and health, heartbeats and vigor imagine that these embodied capacities must exist in contrast to Riggs’ HIV/AIDS diagnosis. Anderst understands the heart-beating in the opening dance sequence as capturing a vitality that no longer exists (or, at the least, changes in nature) at the onset of Riggs’ sharing of his status. These observations assume that HIV/AIDS—as embodied disease, as idiom, as discursive force—is self-evident, visually discernible, and readily available for evaluation. They also presuppose that the sharing of one’s HIV/AIDS status constitutes an event with conceivable temporal limits, a before and after that bookend linear transformation or deterioration. Yet, perhaps most concerning is the ease with which Anderst’s values Riggs’ body as “muscular and healthy” (Anderst, 74)—and her assumption that embodied vitality must exist in opposition to HIV/AIDS. Anderst’s thinking about embodiment and sound in *Tongues Untied* raises questions about the limits of visual representative logic as it pertains to the AIDS crisis.

Can you know HIV/AIDS when you see it? Can you *know* HIV/AIDS at all? In his 1987 article, “The Spectacle of AIDS,” Simon Watney writes of the “regime of massively

overdetermined images, which [were] sensitive only to the values of the dominant familial ‘truth’ of AIDS and the projective ‘knowledge’ of its ideally interpellated spectator, who already ‘knows all he needs to know’ about homosexuality and AIDS” (Watney, 78). Watney uses the language of family to convey the ways in which “‘the general public’” (Watney, 73), those who had not come into contact with the disease, arranged themselves into smaller social units built along the faultlines of the disease, its social implications and purported truths. These units of society, often informal and discursive, formed through publicly available medical knowledge, rumors, and the anxieties that AIDS provoked. The truths and knowledges ascribed to AIDS eventually mobilized family-building, nation-building discourses of common decency, precaution, and safety.

As Watney writes, “AIDS is thus embodied as an exemplary and admonitory drama, relayed between the image of the miraculous authority of clinical medicine and the faces and bodies of individuals who clearly disclose the stigmata of their guilt” (78). Anderst’s roots her reading of Riggs’ purported “health and vigor” (Anderst, 74) in an external, medicalized evaluation of his body. Read through Watney’s crucial interventions, Anderst’s analysis betrays its investments in a normative—and, indeed, overdetermined—image of the AIDS patient: bed-ridden, frail, *lifeless*. These images were proliferated through newspapers, health pamphlets, films, and government-funded advertisement campaigns and gradually entered public consciousness as representations of AIDS as a coherent, comprehensible entity.

His monologue in the film: “Still I listen to the beat of my heart, let the primal pulse lead me, though lately I’ve lived with another rhythm. At first I thought just time passing, but I discovered a time bomb ticking in my blood” (48:36-48:50) draws our attention to a

form of embodied time that is neither heartbeat nor time. The “time bomb” in his blood fuses the rhythm of embodied beat and the ticking of externalized time to form a new temporal force, one that marks the passing of time through and with the body. Riggs maps the sound of this embodied time over the obituaries of loved ones, as he continues to speak in the “I” voice: “I watch. I wait” (49:03). The heartbeat, therefore, emerges as a force of embodied time without a distinct source; its unchanging rhythm and capacity to signify both collective and individual vitality captures Riggs’ “ticking” and lends an embodied beat to those who Riggs mourns.

In this sense, the aural idiom of the heartbeat contains the potential to denote embodied life and disembodied life, embodied time and disembodied time. Riggs elaborates on this notion of spectral lingering in an interview: “If I have work then I’m not going to die. Because work is the living spirit in me—that which wants to connect with other people and pass something to them that they can use in their own lives and grow from” (Anderst, 45). Riggs’ work—which could describe the work that he had yet to complete at the time of the interview and also the body of work that he has left us after his death—thus emerges as the source of his continued living and the means through which his spirit lives on after his death. His emphasis on connecting with other people even after he stops producing work demonstrates the capacity of his “living spirit” to continually renew and reformulate his relationship with his viewers. In this sense, his work provides his mode of survival and his assurance that he will not die.

We might think of embodied time through “Heavy Breathing,” an epic poem by Essex Hemphill that uses a late night bus ride through Washington D.C. to meditate on a constellation of issues: urban violence in the 80s, the HIV/AIDS crisis, sexism, colonial

legacies of slavery. The poem's long form meanders through these topics, moving in and out of real and imagined scenes. The poem begins with the following epigraph from Aimé Césaire's "Return to My Native Land":

"... And the N*gro every day lower, more cowardly, more sterile, less profound, more time spent beyond himself, more separate from himself, more cunning with himself, less straight with himself. I accept, I accept it all..." (4)

Like heartbeats, the idiom of breathing in Essex Hemphill's epic poem "Heavy Breathing" constitutes a vital, inappropriable force—both an embodied gesture and a form of embodied time. The force in "Heavy Breathing" emerges from its speaker's moving "in and out" (12), his gliding through intimate scenes of queer Black living, citations of seminal texts, and his lived present. Hemphill's poetic form hinges upon its own kind of travel as it returns constantly back to its first line, authorizing the continuation of breathing as both poetic idiom and embodied practice. The logic of this repetition suspends time in a dynamic state of finality, envisioning endness as a space for self-inhabitation, ecstasy, and ongoing life.

Paired with Jacques Derrida's framing of poetic force as carrying the verbal body of poetry "beyond itself" (Derrida, 181), the epigraph's language of existing "separate from" oneself (4) helps frame movement and "beyondness" as formal and ontological questions for the speaker; yet, we cannot divorce these considerations from the speaker's somatic engagement of travel. Many of Hemphill's lines begin energetically and declaratively: "I prowl... / I harbor... / I solicit... / I celebrate" (4), thus outlining the poem's interest in corporeal activity and inhabitation. The sustained idiom of witnessing (5, 9, 11) reveals the quieter dimensions of the speaker's movement—the restraint required

to “prowl,” (4), observe landscape (5), and “remain” (11) in the presence of other subjects—while also framing the act as agential and inquisitive. Hemphill does not render witnessing passive, but rather a continued practice of seeing and contextualizing his experiences. The semicolon conjoining Washington’s shifting eye color and the speaker’s considerations of mutation and destruction (5) marks this movement from observation to interiorization; the punctuation, therefore, builds on the dual resonance of blueness and helps configure witnessing as both an expressive engagement with one’s surroundings and a private consideration of being.

The final stanza of Hemphill’s poem reads:

At the end of heavy breathing

the dream deferred

is in a museum

under glass and guard.

It costs five dollars

to see it on display.

We spend the day

viewing artifacts,

breathing heavy

on the glass

to see—

the skeletal remains

of black panthers,

pictures of bushes,

canisters of tears.

In its final iteration, witnessing becomes possible only through “remain[ing]” (11), a mode of living staged in the tense of *after*. Though ghostly forces are often characterized as visiting⁵ subjects and places, traveling outside of their own constitutive boundaries, the speaker resides spectrally within his body. The self-reflexivity of his haunting suggests the speaker is at once a guest and a stranger to himself, thus embodying the constant tension between inhabitation and ecstasy, “throw[ing] up” (10) and “suck[ing]... in” (11), “moving in and out” (11) of one’s bodily form. These pairings intimate the inward-outward dynamic of heavy breathing and witnessing: the processes by which the speaker vibrantly interacts with his surroundings, then retreats to an interior space to consider questions of living and dying. The speaker’s re-visitations of “the end of heavy breathing” generate, then swiftly defy, their forecasting of finality. Hemphill’s poem thereby bleeds past its own formal, figurative, and textual demarcations, sustaining “heavy breathing” as a spectral presence, an embodied gesture of living, and the speaker’s own refusal to conclude the poem. As idiom and practice, heavy breathing suggests both a lack of breath and an extraordinary capacity for it; indeed, the phrase just as easily signifies physical and psychic strain as it does a fullness of embodiment, an extraordinary capacity for pleasure, and a persistence to keep living.

Hemphill stages this poetic ambivalence and the quiet dynamism of heavy breathing through the speaker’s imagined intimacy with the “dead man” (14). That the speaker’s repetition of “wanting” (14) marks the man’s absence and the speaker’s ongoing

⁵ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines haunting as the following: “Of imaginary or spiritual beings, ghosts, etc.: To *visit* frequently and habitually with manifestations of their influence and presence...” (emphasis added)

desire for him orients the recognition of lack around the present and renders desire a force that looks towards futurity and possibility. In *Time Binds*, Elizabeth Freeman claims that “longing produces modes of both belonging and 'being long,' or persisting over time” (13). Freeman goes on to write that queer longing is “historiographical,” a way of inscribing one’s object of desire into the present (13). The potentiality of the speaker’s “wanting,” therefore, generates an imagined scene of intimacy that allows the speaker to recognize and fulfill his physical desires, while performing the necessary work of traveling through memory to do so. The poem extends this interest in travel to its reader as well. Read aloud, the long “oo” sounds in “Do you daddy daddy / do you want me to coo” (10) forces us to “squeeze [our] lips together” (10), hence embodying and responding to the intimately rhetorical question the speaker asks his lover⁶. The speaker juxtaposes the gentle, amorous “oo” sounds with the long “O” in “Overcome” (10), thereby staging the tension between his queer identity and the masculinist, heteronormative politics of “Brother[hood]” (10). This contrast anticipates the speaker’s continued use of sound as representation of domination and submission in the masturbation scene; indeed, the “O” sounds—legible in “Occasionally,” “long,” “stroke,” “wishbone,” and “full-grown”—outnumber and overpower the “oo” sounds in “shoots,” “do,” and “blue” (14). This dynamic corresponds to the speaker’s description of the man as “alive and aggressive” (14), demonstrating the ways in which the speaker’s attention to sound mirrors the lovers’ physical communication. The merging of “oo” and “O” sounds in the word “produce” (14), enacts their imagined lovemaking phonetically, rendering—and, in fact, producing—the speaker’s fantasy through the poetic text. Though the speaker claims that the “fire quickly diminishes” at the

⁶ Though the lover in these two places in the text are not necessarily the same.

end of his own heavy breathing, he stunningly evokes “burning” in the next stanza (14), prolonging the end until it becomes a site of invention, continuation, and embodied heft.⁷

We might connect the speaker’s sustained breathing to the elongated final sequence of Riggs’ *Tongues Untied*. Heartbeats once again choreograph the ending credits and eventually give way to writer Steve Langley singing an original composition titled “Do What You Wanna Do.” The camera oscillates between the credits and Langley, who sits in front of the same black background as the other actors in the film. His singing repeatedly interrupts the credits’ progression (53:49), prolonging the last minute of the film. As the credits end, the camera cuts again to Langley, whose final notes are overwhelmed by the disembodied chant of “brother to brother” (53:54). In this sense, the film does not end *lightly*; its ending credits lag, repeatedly suggesting and then circumventing an end. Riggs’s use of heartbeats and the rhythmical chanting evokes Hemphill’s speaker’s sustained breath, his “remain[ing]” (11) past the constitutive limits of ending.

Returning to this chapter’s initial inquiry into critical temporalities and modes of embodiedness, we may think of the ways in which Hemphill’s and Riggs’ works give rise to forms of embodied time that are qualitatively distinct from normative accounts of temporality. As a form of critical orientation, embodied time reorganizes the extent to which endings are violently imposed on queer, Black subjects living with HIV/AIDS. By reorienting the world that comes into view, as Sara Ahmed might put it, Riggs’ and Hemphill’s interventions make possible a register of time that is subjective, internalized, and ongoing.

⁷ I’m thinking, here, of the line “wanting him upon me” (14)

CHAPTER 2

Rerouting Trauma: On Interruption and Embodied Reversal

Around eleven minutes into the film, Riggs once again sits in front of a black backdrop and narrates his younger self's reckoning with his queer identity and the racist, queerphobic bullying he experienced as a child. Riggs explains: "I heard my calling by age six. We had a word for boys like me" (11:34). The camera abruptly cuts to an extreme close-up shot of a young subject, racialized Black and gendered male, who says, "Punk" (11:34). The camera does not linger on this subject and transitions immediately to Riggs, who echoes the unnamed subject: "Punk" (11:34). In the sequence that follows, Riggs narrates his first kiss, experiences of receiving slurs, bussing in Georgia, queerphobic, and class divisions within the Black community he was a part of in and outside of school. The slurs, ranging from "f*ggot, freak" to "Uncle Tom" and the N-word, continue to interrupt Riggs' narrative reflection through abrupt, extreme close-up shots of racialized-white and racialized-Black subjects' mouths.

The slurs thus punctuate Riggs' narration of his past, seemingly entering without permission. He reflects on the experience of receiving these slurs: "Cornered by identities I never wanted to claim, I ran. Fast. Hard. Deep inside myself where it was silent" (13:35-13:50). As he says this, the camera zooms in gradually, closing in on his eyes. His diction of "cornered" (13:35), paired with the camera's zoom, maps the aural narration of the past onto the visual implications of the present. Corneredness, as embodied experience and visual effect, is imperative to the sequence's restaging of trauma. Riggs, as director, inserts no pause between his narration and the interruptance of these slurs. Rendered through the

audiovisual, the slurs push up against, and spill over into, Riggs' narration of the past—and also impede upon the visual space his face occupies in the frame. The slurs thereby inhabit a dangerous spatiotemporal and emotional proximity to Riggs' present—dangerous, in part, due to their potential to retraumatize and also collapse the boundaries between past and present.

The harsh, disjunctive visual effect of Riggs' cuts to the subjects' utterances of slurs mimes the intensity of the slurs themselves. Riggs' position against a black background evacuates Riggs from the time and space in which the slur was originally used. The film's re-enactment of these intensities is intentionally limited, given Riggs' choice to use extreme close up shots to depict those using the slurs. The slurs, which attempt to deride Riggs' racial and sexual identities, are each deployed several times; the intensity of each word, and the instance in which it was spoken, therefore, compounds and intensifies.

As Riggs himself narrates his childhood first kiss, an extreme close up shot of a man exclaiming “homo” interrupts the story (12:11). The shot's frame cuts out everything but the man's mouth, thus abstracting the specificities of his face, his identity, and his relationship to both young and old Riggs. Riggs' position against a stark black background situates him outside of the space and time of the slur's original use. The background thus provides a *lack* of setting, a removal from a world in which anti-Black, queerphobic language is deployed to harm Black queer political subjects.

Though the slurred speech that punctuates Riggs' narration emerges from the past, it has a visibly emotional effect on the representational figure of Riggs in the present. The gaps of time and space that permeate the cuts resemble haptic space because the effect of slurs is often embodied and haptic, not optical and perceivable. Space here gets configured

as the expanse of time and space that exists between Riggs and his perpetrators and also us, as viewers. That the extreme close-ups of the subjects abstract them from any specific time or place plays with time, thus creating the possibility that they are situated in the past *or* the present.

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A similar rerouting of slurs emerges in queer studies scholar and writer Dagmawi Woubshet's essay, "New World Alphabet." The essay takes place in 1989 (coincidentally, the same year that Riggs' *Tongues Untied* was produced) and details Woubshet's speaker's experiences with homophobia and racism as an Ethiopian student at an all-boys boarding school in the United States. Woubshet depicts slurred language as a point of contact between the speaker's mother tongue Amharic and English. Like Riggs' film, "New World Alphabet" is interested in a reparative aesthetic, one that reroutes the traumatic in order to lessen its capacity to cause further harm.

Woubshet's essay begins with: "The first word I learned in the New World was f*ggot" (118) and goes on to reflect upon his speaker's complicated navigations of queerness and homosocial bonding. The proximity between "Looking back" and "now" visualizes and metonymizes the present's punctuation of the past through narration (121). Woubshet's speaker narrates his experience with the F-slur cautiously, delaying detailed reference to the incident and muddying references to the slur by confusing it with "maggot" and listing other epithets that JR used against him (Woubshet, 118-120). The speaker's narration is gentle towards his younger self, re-contextualizing embarrassing moments with revelations only his present self could articulate: "The tongue is hard to tame, language difficult to master" (118). This poetics of comfort is not only retrospective, but also

prospective: the speaker's intervention anticipates and softens the impact of the F-slur in the following sentence (118). The text's ethical commitment, therefore, reveals itself to be two-fold in its attentiveness to the speaker's past and present selves.

The speaker's repeated use of the word "remember" (Woubshet, 121) in the last lines of the texts carries both the resonance of summoning memory, in addition to, quite literally, re-membering his recollections of the past. In shifting from the moment of JR's imminent death to a quiet moment of lying on top of one another, the speaker restores "weight" and integrity to his body (121), undoing the embodied trauma from the lines before and reconstituting JR's body as it might have been during JR's childhood. The speaker's "remember[ing]" JR's "wayward breath" (121), then, performs a type of resurrection, restoring vitality to JR through memory and narration. The speaker's restraint in leaving the "something intractable" (121) unnamed gestures to the subjectivities in the piece, including his own, that exist, always, in excess of their names. Woubshet's italicization of his dialogue with JR renders even their spoken language interior, quiet, visually close to—and within the control of—the speaker's own narrative voice; however, that "*Mercy*" is both italicized and abstracted from any explicit reference to JR's soul (121) marks this last iteration as different—and almost ghostly. Woubshet's ending generates the possibility for the final invocation of "*Mercy*" to be JR's own, allowing the speaker's poetics of mercy to be both self-reflexive and self-redemptive.

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These examples of the trauma of slurred language resonate with Toni Morrison's representations of traumatic (and traumatized) memory in her novel *Sula*. The particular moment I intend to study involves a character named Eva who non-linearly narrates a

harrowing experience to her daughter Hannah. Eva's memory takes place in the outhouse in which she attempted to extract a piece of stool that was stuck in her son Plum's rectum. Morrison stages her rerouting of trauma through processes of embodied exit and entry. As Eva's experience of recalling the outhouse demonstrates, trauma and its reverberations contain the capacity to displace subjects from the immediate present.

We might characterize this displacement using the idiom of the ecstatic. In Ancient Greek, ecstasy signifies removal and travel outside of one's self—and, ultimately, a process of bodily or spiritual alteration. The ecstatic is thus inextricable from the traumatic and the temporal. We might also understand reversal through heart-beating and breathing—two embodied processes that Eva attempts to optimize for Plum (71)—and their reliance on retention and reversal, the entry and subsequent evacuation of vital material. Reversal is, therefore, an ongoing embodied practice for all human subjects—and one that materializes in *Sula* through diction, time, and traumatic acts. This section aims to explore the ways in which reversal and ecstasy, two idioms that animate the passage's movement—constitute states of embodied and temporal transformation.

The passage that this section takes up reduces trauma and time to terms of embodiment. Morrison's use of embodied reversal works in conjunction with her narrator's diction, mapping young Plum's experience of anal penetration onto Eva's inverted experience of time. The passage's use of ecstatic diction, which simultaneously bears the weight of the present and past, thus enacts the inverted trauma of penetration, facilitating the re-entry of the past/passed through embodied and temporal sites of exit.

Eva's and Hannah's conversation engages the ecstatic through its staging of disjunctive time and narrative distance. We might think of the question, "What'd you kill

Plum for, Mamma?” (70) as inviting the entry of Eva’s past trauma into the present. Her internal response, rendered legible through the narrator’s withdrawal from (and refusal of) the question, situates her in the specificity of the present, “a Wednesday in August” (70). The narrator’s travel *beyond* the question’s constraints—and Eva’s momentary evasion of its demands—install a layer of opacity behind which Eva can process the impact of the question. Indeed, the paragraph that follows evacuates Eva entirely, shifting into the point of view of a generalized second person, “you” (70), while refusing to mention her name. The narrator thus displaces Eva’s inner turmoil onto the ice wagon’s arrival, the momentum of its “coming and coming” (70).

This narrative evacuation performs what we might call the “barest repair”⁸: the move cannot undo Eva’s re-traumatization, nor can it retrospectively intervene in the course of originary traumatic events. Instead, what the narrative distance does is give form to Eva’s re-experiencing of trauma and invest fully in the nonlinear, disjunctive qualities of traumatization. It is important to note that this narrative disjunction is not limited to cushioning Eva’s re-traumatization; it also intervenes to cushion the narration of Plum’s traumatic penetration. That the narration jumps from “when she slid her finger in” to “all because she had broken the slop jar and the rags had frozen” (70) mimics the disjunctive, traumatic nature of Eva’s penetration. Yet, this jump also displaces the impact of penetration—the shattering of Plum’s embodied limits and the “[sudden] quiet” that follows (70)—onto the slop jar and the rags. The diction of “broken” and “frozen” (70) relocates Plum’s experience of shattering and subsequent freezing, a legible response to the “shock” of trauma (70). The narrative distance here thus emerges through the narrator’s

⁸ From page 361 of “The Black Ecstatic” by Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman

attentiveness to the impact of Eva's traumatic force and their reluctance to depict Plum himself as "broken" or compromised. The resounding quiet that follows allows for Plum's response to penetration to remain illegible, to at least partially evade the reader's discerning eye. As both the traumatic impact of Hannah's question and of Plum's outhouse experience demonstrate, trauma itself is ecstatic in nature. The narrator's use of disjunctive time in both moments embodies and, therefore, *permits* the ecstatic capacities of trauma, its tendencies to physically and psychically wrest subjects from their immediate present and transport them elsewhere.

Eva's deflection, therefore, also performs ecstatic time-work, displacing and subsequently intermingling the present with resonances of past trauma. The wagon's "coming and coming" (70) recalls the continuous stream of Plum's stool, the ongoingness encased in the narrator's description of the outhouse incident as it happened: "[Eva] pulled it out and others followed" (34). We might connect this momentum to Eva's later declaration, "It was such a carryin' on" (71) and her use of diction that conveys ongoingness and sustainment: "*gettin'* him out and *keepin'* him alive" (71, italics added). The diction of "bits of the driver's song" and "a lil ole piece" (70) further evoke the pebble-like nature of Plum's stools (34), linking the excess of traumatic memory and the excess of excrement (excess itself). The protracted, almost unending narration of Eva's traumatic act, beginning with "until it reminded her..." and ending with "frozen" (70), mimes the irrepressibility of the exiting stool itself. The passage understands excrement and traumatic memory as two similarly unremitting forces that defy management or control. "Coming and coming" (70), therefore, undertakes multiple valences and temporalities: the wagon's momentum in real-time, the ongoing, compounding nature of Plum's excretion, and the

repeated entry of Eva's traumatized memory. The diction of "coming and coming" (70) and "carryin' on" (71) functions like trauma itself: facilitating the entry of the past into the present. The diction's burden of describing multiple events and dynamics taking place at different points of time thus allows it to perform vital time-work, encasing the traumatic and creating a place for it to live in the present. Morrison's ecstatic, freighted diction thus registers Eva's experience of time as inverted, transforming the past into a force that enters the present through sites of trauma.

The diction's inversion of time replicates the trauma of embodied reversal in the passage. Young Plum's colic stems from his lack of bowel movements and inability to ingest food (33), rendering his body incapable of consumption and excretion, the processes of entry and exit that sustain life. Eva's traumatic, yet life-saving intervention, her penetration of Plum's rectum, constitutes a reversal of an internal site of exit. The passage's diction demonstrates a preoccupation with embodied and spatial insides, while continuing to recall the primacy of anality from the past: Eva tries "to see the insides of the icehouse" and scoops up the last bit of lard from the "sides of the can" (70). Eva's pulling of the stools (70) through an embodied passageway meant for pushing, her traumatic entry into a site of exit and excretion, thus enacts a gesture of inversion. This embodied inversion reflects the passage's reversal of space as well. The outhouse conventionally constitutes a site of excretion and release; yet, Eva's act of penetration, her "sliding a finger in" (70), transforms it into a space of traumatic entry. These motions are not limited to Plum and, in fact, extend to Eva's womb as well. Plum's insistence upon re-entering Eva's womb recalls his mother's original invasive act and the trauma of inversion that she inflicted. That Eva declares, "There wasn't space for him in my womb" (71) recalls the passage's earlier focus

on internal spaces and passageways. Plum's crawling back (71) thus signifies its own inversion of Eva's womb, a repurposing of an embodied site of release into a site of penetration and retention. The text's parallel repurposing of the outhouse thus recalls the passage's overarching interest in embodied reversal, the conversion of the womb and the rectum into spaces of invasion.

Together, the passage's use of inversion and ecstatic diction transform embodied, temporal, and spatial sites of exit and release into sites of entry and retention. As the impossibility of Eva's re-gestation suggests, instances of reversal can prove dangerous to embodied rhythms and processes of life. The womb and rectum thus come to harbor the potential of fatality, not simply because they are sites of entry and exit, but because they are rendered available for traumatic invasion. Yet, inversion also informs the redemptive work of diction in the passage. Though ecstatic diction burdens language with the past, it also collapses and reconstitutes time in order to evacuate Eva from the trauma of the present. Ecstatic diction does not undo trauma, but rather installs a narrative space for trauma's semi-private, semi-opaque emergence. My use of the term "semi-private" aims to recognize the ways in which Eva's traumatic memory of the outhouse embeds itself in the action of the present, becoming legible only through the diction of momentum and continuity. In this sense, diction does not quite figure into the passage as a reparative tool for the present, nor can it lessen the burden of Eva's memory or the harm she inflicted upon Plum. Instead, the work of diction in the passage is to give shape to the traumatic, to invest so fully in the terms and experiences of embodiment such that it embodies, and gives form to, the acts and memories of trauma itself.

CHAPTER 3

Inventories of Loss

Simon Watney begins “The Spectacle of AIDS” with an excerpt from Polish poet Zbignev Herbert that meditates upon the need for precise inventory when memorializing loss:

accuracy is essential
we must not be wrong
even by a single one

we are despite everything
the guardians of our brothers

ignorance about those who have disappeared
undermines the reality of the world.

Though Herbert was a post-war Polish writer, thinking about World War II ledgers of death, his poem’s call to statistical accuracy echoes Woubshtet’s claim that inventory taking formed a “central element of the collective trauma of queer life in the 1980’s and ‘90s” (Woubshtet, 3). The speaker in Herbert’s poem forges a link between the dead—lives who some might perceive as remaining in the past—and the present reality (and potential future) of the world. The speaker’s use of the word “disappeared” to describe those who perished in the war avoids legitimizing the determinacy of death. The optical register of “disappeared”—defined as ceasing to be visible—suggests that disappearance, here, is as much an idiom of death as it is of memory and visibility.

In “The Spectacle of AIDS,” Watney forges an explicit link between statistics and the ghostly: “Thus the ‘homosexual body’ continues to speak after death, not as a *memento mori*, but as its exact reverse, for a life that must at all costs be seen to have been devoid,

unregretted, unlamented, and—final indignity—effaced into a mere anonymous statistic” (Watney, 80). Watney’s inversion of *memento mori*, Latin for *a reminder that you must die*, reveals the ghostly resonances of life marked and remembered by statistics. Public health statistics that aim to advertise the death tolls of AIDS—what we might call medicalized memory—remain limited in its ability to memorialize and honor those who have passed.

Inventory factors significantly into Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*, which narrates—and often refuses to narrate—the enduring afterlife of enslavement. The dedication page of *Beloved* reads: “Sixty Million and more,” conveying the novel’s similar interest in memorializing the countless number of Black lives that were brutalized under slavery, as well as the impossibility of ever fully being able to understanding the extent of this brutality. It is here that Morrison’s interest in storytelling as a method of filling certain epistemological and experiential gaps emerges. Morrison foregrounds the acts of witnessing, remembering, and storytelling as critical methods of our representations of the past and forges a connection between trauma that is experienced, narrated, and inherited (both physically and psychically). She blurs the boundaries between the past and the present in order to display the multitude of methods with which her characters remember and process the traumas of slavery. By articulating the limits of language as a means to describe and process trauma, rendering the body as a discursive text, figuring memory as a physical manifestation of slavery’s lingering pain, and depriving the reader of any semblance of a linear storyline, Morrison invites us to reconfigure and hold accountable public history within a framework of transgressive, private memory.

Morrison continues to reveal language's inability to recapitulate memory and trauma when Beloved insists: "Tell me your diamonds" (69). That she omits the grammatically necessary "about" solidifies the notion that verbal narration remains an artificial rendering of the past and that Sethe's words cannot possibly "tell" or capture the extent of theft and violation that underpins the loss of her earrings. Morrison, therefore, destabilizes formal constructions of language in order to expose how language itself, despite its role in countless academic, historical, and scientific texts, cannot grasp the lived realities of race and the violence that underpins it.

Morrison continues to push the boundaries of language by creating her own words to describe experiences for which our existing language is inadequate or has not been permitted. The most significant part of her new language, "rememory" (43), presents the notion that memory is not only psychic, but physical. Rememory also challenges the notion that private memory is subjective and, therefore, unreliable as a means of record keeping. In this way, "Rememory" (43) configures private memory as legitimate public record; that you can "bump into a rememory that belongs to someone else" (43) suggests that trauma leaves physical vestiges. Rememory, therefore, legitimizes the notion of collective memory, as well as the emergence of history in the present moment. The word allows for a sense in which property, whether a physical house or a biological daughter, can be resurrected psychically. Rememory, therefore, is an incredibly significant form of ownership in a novel that focuses on how Sethe cannot claim her own breast milk (19), her body, and her children's bodies. In defying certain boundaries of language that force words to be either nouns, for example, "memory," or verbs, such as "remember," Morrison tests the limits of language by joining the act of recalling a memory to the memory itself, thereby

getting as close as perhaps linguistically possible to imitating literal action within the bounds of words. Similarly, the very word “Beloved” is a noun and adjective, shrinking the space between an entity and the characteristics used to describe it. Morrison’s use of “disremembered” (323) creates a liminal space in which Beloved is neither remembered nor forgotten. She also invokes a materiality in her process of constructing, dismantling—as the word “disremembered” evokes—and reconstructing language to be a better container for the expression of trauma. In this sense, Morrison adapts and strengthens the ability of words and verbalizations of memory to revive the past and resist white supremacist systems that attempt to distort it.

Beloved’s insistence on the framework of nonlinearity reveals how narratives of the past, especially those concerning the trauma of oppression, cannot and do not remain in the past. Indeed, the past is a force that manifests physically and needs to be “[beat] back” accordingly (86); it does not enter the present with permission, but rather when it is least expected. The lack of clear beginning or ending to the story, as well as the various shifts in who can and does tell the story, places readers in an ongoing present. That the smell of Denver’s hair triggers, for Sethe, a “remembering [of] something she had forgotten she knew” (73) suggests that memory often resurfaces in response to seemingly unrelated physical action. Sethe must “do something with her hands” (73) after being forced to confront the past, exhibiting the integral role that physical healing plays in the process of grappling with involuntary, psychic visitations of the past. Despite the extent to which Morrison adapts language to the project of her novel, *Beloved* reveals how physicality plays an essential role in storing and reviving memory when language fails to do so. She renders death an impermanent state in her text; indeed “nothing ever dies” (44), at least not in any

lasting way. The arrival of Beloved in the story forges an understanding in the text overall that there may indeed be forms of existence that transcend death, as the conditions of slavery often exacted it. That Sethe insists: “If I hadn’t killed her, she would have died,” (236) articulates a conception of death that transcends physical death. Morrison, therefore, configures the body into a vehicle for resistance, both against the bodily harm that slavery imposes and the historical erasure of narratives that have resulted.

Morrison renders the body a discursive text that can be read, one that carries narratives of pain and violation. Sethe’s body, for example, is described as a “graveyard for six-month baby’s “last hours” (42), exhibiting how her living body physically and psychically houses another body’s death. Indeed, Sethe’s body is a burial ground for not only her lost child, but the sexual agency that she was deprived of during her assault; her “exhausted” (321) breasts carry a vestigial “responsibility” and “weight” (21) from the psychological trauma of violation. Sethe’s back scars, in particular, are a text that can be named and read in different ways. Amy Denver, for example, calls them a “chokecherry tree” (18), Paul D calls them a “wrought-iron maze” before deciding on calling them “a revolting clump of scars” (25), and Baby Suggs interprets them as being “roses of blood” (109). Sethe’s back is, therefore, not only the physical site of trauma, but also a text that conveys the experience of trauma to others. In this way, the body is a more effective mechanism than language to represent the vestiges of trauma; after all, Sethe’s skin bears the ability to grow “cherries” (18) or perhaps even transform the original mark of brutality into something new and healed. Morrison continues to compare language and physicality as different means to convey trauma. Language fails as Paul D is unable to summon adequate language to communicate his shock at seeing Sethe’s back; he chooses, instead,

to say, ““Aw, Lord, girl”” and “touch[es] every ridge and leaf of it with his mouth” (21), performing a physical reading. That he touches the scars with the part of his body that forms language signifies how the mode of physicality is a necessary replacement for the words he cannot form in response to her trauma.

Isaac Julien’s *Looking for Langston* is similarly interested in accounting for and representing death that resists representation itself. The film was part of the same “boom” of Black queer artistic production out of which Marlon Riggs’ *Tongues Untied* and Essex Hemphill’s “Heavy Breathing” emerged. Produced in 1989, the film merges archival footage of 1920s Harlem with original sequences shot in black-and-white. Julien draws from the works of Langston Huges (the film’s namesake), James Baldwin, Essex Hemphill, and others, while staging scenes of the film in both speakeasies and ‘80s era gay clubs.

The film is neither fully prospective nor retrospective in its treatment of death. Contrary to Dagmawi Woubshet’s description of Marlon Riggs’ *Black Is...Black Ain’t* as “visual[izing] pending death” (10), Julien’s film emerges from deaths that have already happened—and, yet, are ongoing and unresolved. Engaging *A Calendar of Loss*’ theoretical interest in “proleptic mourning” (48) and citationality, Julien’s film renders its subjects’ lives proximal to and punctuated by death. The works’ representations of queer looking as agentic produce an [after]life that authorizes the physical and emotional intimacies forbidden before, and by, death.

In establishing visual and textual continuity between scenes of life and death, Julien formulates notions of mourning that can account for death before it arrives. *Looking for Langston* begins by producing (and subsequently disturbing) a spatial dichotomy between mourning and celebration: the camera’s shift from the funeral to the speakeasy below and

its ultimate reversal of this progression (0:02:43, 0:16:51) performs a visual chiasmus, first presenting the two scenes as normatively antithetical and proceeding to collapse their constitutive boundaries. Julien's cinematography reveals the enmeshed nature of life and death, recontextualizing the funeral attendees' downward gaze at the casket (0:02:02) as mourning both Julien and the dancing patrons below. The film, therefore, configures looking as a "collective enterprise" (Woubshet, 12) that not only mourns Hughes and Baldwin but also resurrects—"look[s] for"—their memory in public consciousness and memorializes death before it occurs. The film's attention to death, therefore, encompasses the deaths that precede the film's making, the death staged on screen, and those that will occur beyond the camera's frame. In this sense, the film renders death inextricable from life and allow for the dead to reside with the living.

Under conditions of impending death, Julien's subjects must substitute looking for intimacy and touch for emotional knowledge. The desire animated by Alex's looking transforms a moment of hesitation and "shame" into an act of intimacy with Beauty (0:14:45). Alex's conditional tense in "I would kiss your lips" (0:14:52) generates a space of possibility and anticipation which the film very quickly resolves in depicting their kiss in the next shot. That their kiss almost interrupts Alex's downward gaze at Beauty in the previous scene signifies the ability for looking to produce action, to transform a moment of hesitation into an active recognition and pursuit of queer intimacies. Alex's slight shift from gazing at Beauty's closed eyes to his lips, the focus of his desire, seems to authorize and validate his question: "Or was it shame?" (0:14:35) The scene represents looking at (or for) another as a form of self-orientation and identification, thereby transgressing socially-enforced distances and also allowing the looker to cultivate intimacy with their self.

It is no coincidence that Julien's film is largely silent. Due to a copyright dispute between Julien and the Hughes estate, certain sequences of spoken poetry were muted during screenings.⁹ In the absence of dialogue, an attention to looking—or, in other words, looking at looking (17:04)—constitute a large part of the film and its emotional development of characters. The film is, therefore, especially reliant on communication rendered through looking at, and moving through, landscapes. Julien's lack of wide angle shots further necessitate the camera's continuous movement around scenes of clubbing, mourning, and physical intimacy as a means of weaving these scenes together.

Though *Looking for Langston* is interested in distorting the line between the living and the dead, its portrayals of dying are left strangely un-pathologized. The ambiguity of whether Isaac Julien portrays the representational figure of Hughes or himself—compounded with Toni Morrison's opening eulogy for James Baldwin (0:01:28)—frames the film's funeral scene as a metonym for Black queer death. In refusing to provide explanation for Julien's dramatized death, the film opens up the possibility of there being no singular cause for his death, but rather a compounded series of events or range of material conditions. The police's inability to inflict violence upon the clubgoers (37:40) leaves some aspect of their invasion unresolved. In some sense, then, the impacts of their intended violence circle back to the beginning of the film, in which Julien is staged as a victim of some undisclosed embodied trauma. Compounded by the fact that many of the film's lead actors later died from AIDS¹⁰, deaths that fill and extend beyond the camera's

⁹<https://www.nytimes.com/1989/10/01/movies/film-festival-a-trip-into-the-middle-ages-and-a-view-of-langston-hughes.html>

¹⁰<https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/isaac-julien-i-dream-a-world-looking-for-langston-review-victoria-miro-london>

lens overwhelm the film's own capacities to account for them. Each scene constitutes a vital record of the lives lost to policed intimacies and the emotional vulnerability that was never fully rendered in language.

CHAPTER 4

On After-Time: Ecstasy, Endings, and Impossibility in Morrison

“All of it is now... It is always now,” says Beloved, gesturing to the constellation¹¹ of past and present that constitutes Morrison’s novel of the same name (*Beloved*, 248). However, “always” also constitutes a disposition towards the future, and the enduring promise (and fantasy) of futurity itself; the word’s proximity to “now” thus enmeshes terms of what shall come in the immediate present. Beloved’s positioning of these two words enacts the type of impossible time-work that this chapter takes interest in: namely, the potential for a recuperative *beyond* within the now. In instances of ending—defined, for our purposes, as the recognition of formal or mortal limits—Morrison unmoors her subjects from the embodied, psychic, and temporal limits of ending itself. Through their varying engagements of ecstatic time and prolepsis, *Sula* and *Song of Solomon* privilege the tense of after: a time constituted by the anticipation and aspiration of a future, of moreness and potentiality otherwise foreclosed by the constraints of the present.

As Aida Levy-Hussen reminds us in her work, “Against Prohibitive Reading (on Trauma),” attentiveness to what is possible must often be encased in the terms of its impossibility.¹² Levy-Hussen’s provocation guides this chapter’s considerations of ecstatic time and cautions against the tendency to overdetermine the reparative possibilities of afterness. If, indeed, ecstatic time can function as a type of rejoinder to Elizabeth Freeman’s notion of *chrononormativity*, the processes through which ““naked flesh is bound into

¹¹ Drawing from Stephen Best’s citation of Walter Benjamin; “On Failing to Make the Past Present,” pg 462.

¹² A paraphrasing of Levy-Hussen’s claim about queer time: “Thus it is most often experienced as a fleeting, private, or phantasmatic glimpse of possibility, bounded by the trauma of its own negation” (43-44).

socially meaningful embodiment through temporal regulation” (Levy-Hussen, 43), or Muñoz’s comparable framework of *straight time*, in which “there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life” (Muñoz, 22), ecstatic time must still partially emerge from the regulatory logics that straight time imposes. To suggest that ecstatic time is fully reparative, that it contains the potential to reverse calamity, to undo conditions of enslavement, or to dodge pending death, is to overstate its capacities. To suggest that the ecstatic stands completely outside of normative, linear time similarly mistakes it for something far more otherworldly and ‘othertimely.’ In the spirit of Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman’s attentiveness to the Black ecstatic’s revelation of the “inarticulable emancipatory possibilities, the barest repair, and exuberant joy in the continuing, catastrophic present (Abdur-Rahman, 361), this chapter hopes to focus on the potential of Morrison’s deployment of the ecstatic to rupture regimes of linear time and comprehensible space.

The beginning of *Song of Solomon* constitutes an end for Mr. Smith, and thus serves as a helpful point of departure for our exploration of the ecstatic. The novel renders flight an act of becoming—one that involves surrender, relationality, and travel beyond embodied limits of space and time. As Abdur-Rahman illuminates for us, the ecstatic, especially with regard to Black political subjects, hinges upon becoming, a condition of being *not yet there*. She quotes Ashon Crawley’s notion of Black social ecstasy from *Blackpentacoastal Breath* as constituting “the condition of possibility for life is undoneness as ontological priority, an irreducible, unreachable doneness,” (Abdur-Rahman, 353). The idiom of flight, which bookends *Song of Solomon*, privileges a form of ontological and embodied unfinishedness. Mr. Smith’s and Guitar’s last endeavors are not falling, but leaping (*Song of Solomon*, 9),

endowing them with a quality of unending momentum. Morrison never shows where their trajectories end, where they fall, or what *becomes* of them; thus, becoming in the novel constitutes a vector, a directed intensity with no legible endpoint or final form.

Becoming factors similarly into Sula's "experimental life" (*Sula*, 118) and her fondness for the unpredictable. As embodied practice and ontological idiom, becoming involves a disregard for one discernable origin point or destination; Morrison's omission of Milkman's and Mr. Smith's exact trajectories of flight recalls this disregard. That Sula has "no center, no speck around which to grow," reveals the ways in which her being is defined by unfettered possibility, contained and directed by nothing but her imagination (*Sula*, 119). Her lack of "self to count on," of "compulsion to verify herself" or "be consistent with herself" (*Sula*, 119), thus stages Crawley's notion of "ontological undoneness" (Abdur-Rahman, "The Black Ecstatic," 353). If becoming is, indeed, an ecstatic engagement between the self and her surroundings, Sula demonstrates the ways in which it must also be an irresolute form of self-making—one in which unfinishedness constitutes a vital political project. Morrison thus renders the ecstatic a practice of indeterminacy, one that involves an inclination towards self-expansion, travel, and possibility that pays no mind to external metrics of time, space, and value.

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison explores the relational dynamics of becoming through flight, an act of giving oneself over and, as Mr. Smith demonstrates, a thrust forward "into" something else (*Song of Solomon*, 9). Mr. Smith's and Milkman's instances of flight may recall Claudia Rankine's thinking on the poem as handshake, the simultaneity of asserting the "solidity of [one's] presence with the offering of this same presence" (Rankine, 130-131). Rankine's reading of "here" as enacting both self-location and self-

displacement beautifully parallels Milkman's shouting of "Here I am," and then (quietly), "You need it? Here," (*Song of Solomon*, 337). *Here* thus acts doubly, unsettling the individualizing logics of capitalism that might render self-recognition and collectivism opposing political forces. In Rankine's account, *here* "both recognizes and demands recognition" (Rankine, 130-131); Milkman's *here* similarly conflates the offering of his own life with the vibrant assertion (and embodiment) of it.

The classical definition of ecstasy as "stand[ing] outside of oneself" (Abdur-Rahman, 350)¹³ thus reveals itself to have a much broader application in *Song of Solomon*; miming the relationality of Rankine's *here*, his act of flying constitutes a recognition of, and an offering to, another subject outside of oneself. His orientation "toward" (*Song of Solomon*, 337) Guitar renders his practice of the ecstatic a communal process of becoming *with*—or, as Crawley writes: "being beside oneself together with others" (Abdur-Rahman, 353). That Milkman's leap produces a quality of narrative and ethical indeterminacy, not only because Morrison does not depict where he lands or what happens afterwards, but also because "it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother" (*Song of Solomon*, 337). Though Milkman's solitary leap may have suggested otherwise, the line's intentional apathy—"it did not matter which one"—frames Milkman's ecstatic act of giving himself up as being a communal one. Surrender, as an ecstatic, relational act, thus makes Milkman's flight achieves the unthinkable: allowing him to leap without inhaling or "even bending his knees" (*Song of Solomon*, 337), to establish a momentum that would otherwise be physically impossible. Milkman and Guitar

¹³ Abdur-Rahman uses this definition while introducing the translation of the Greek *ekstasis*

thereby help illuminate the relational ethic of flight as allowing travel past embodied understandings of time, space, and possibility.

Surrender and impossibility serve a similarly vital role in the ending of *Jazz* and its narrator's ecstatic capacities. The narrator's love of reciprocity—"talking to you and hearing you answer" (*Jazz*, 229), ecstatic in its transcendence of the novel's textual form, again recalls Crawley's notion of "being beside oneself together with others" (Abdur-Rahman, 353). Indeed, the novel's ending surpasses the limits it sets up; though the narrator claims they cannot "say that aloud" (*Jazz*, 229) they say it anyway: "Say make me, remake me" (*Jazz*, 229). The narrator thus articulates the constraints of the present and proceeds to surpass them. Their exercise of the ecstatic, therefore, occurs through their imagining a potential future and then fulfilling their own longing for it. As Muñoz writes, "Unlike a possibility, a thing that simply might happen, a potentiality is a certain mode of nonbeing that is eminent, a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense" (Muñoz, 9). *Jazz*'s narrator performs a rupture of conceivable limits—and, as the ecstatic often does—redefines what is possible inside and outside the novel's world. They not only render their "saying" eminent; they, in fact, manifest it and ensure that it exists in the present. Like Milkman, the narrator conceives of a freedom that depends on, or is directed by, another subject; the pleasure they take in "hearing you answer" (*Jazz*, 229) reveals the relational ethic within the narrator's surrender to the reader. The narrator's command: "Say make me, remake me" (*Jazz*, 229) may also recall John Donne's sonnet "Batter My Heart" and the connection that Donne's speaker forges between freedom and surrender, the desire to be "ma[de] new" (Donne, 4). The possible evocation of Donne reveals the divine

undertones of the narrator's speech, and the ecstatic capacity within the narrator's devotion to, and love for, the reader.

Though Mr. Smith flies alone, his journey hinges upon a written promise that he makes—and is available to—the public prior to his flight (1). That his departure from Mercy fulfills this “promis[e] to fly” (*Song of Solomon*, 1) thus organizes his flight around, and as, an endeavor to achieve what he had already promised in the past. We might say Mr. Smith acts through the idiom of “always” that features prominently in *Beloved* and *Sula* as a promise and inclination towards futureness, towards that which *has yet to come*. Mr. Smith's preoccupation with record-keeping further reveals itself through the specificity of his letter, the details he includes about the exact date and time of his pending suicide and the advance notice of two days that he provides on his door (*Song of Solomon*, 1). Embedded in both the timing of his insurance claim visits and his death is the idiom of too-soonness. That his clients wonder why he visits to collect their payments “so soon”—and that they are always discussing options to “pay ahead” with him (*Song of Solomon*, 8) position him as a symbol of prematurity. It is no coincidence, then, that too-soonness could describe the time of prolepsis, a state of collapsing terms of the present with terms of the future. In fact, everything about, and around, Mr. Smith seems to signal prolepsis, a premature inclination towards the future. Long before he jumps, his wings “curv[e] forward,” while Ruth drops her rose petals, almost in anticipation of his falling (*Song of Solomon*, 5). Mr. Smith's proleptic declaration, “I loved you all” (*Song of Solomon*, 1) collapses the present with the future. The diction of “on into” (*Song of Solomon*, 9) to describe Mr. Smith's fall suggests that the air has the capacity to carry and contain him. In

his moment of flight, Mr. Smith thus manages to transform the air into a force that can sustain him, if only momentarily.

Mr. Smith's occupation as an insurance agent also instantiates his interest in that which is yet to come. After all, the insurance industry is deeply invested in the profitability of the present under the guise of anticipating the future. Insurance companies earn their revenue through the uncertainty and unthinkability of the future—or, perhaps more accurately, through understanding the future as a force of uncertainty that can, nonetheless, be preemptively accounted for. The American insurance industry's ties to the Transatlantic slave trade and its enduring afterlife also bears mentioning. Companies, such as New York Life and Aetna, sold insurance policies to American enslavers, particularly “those whose laborers engaged in hazardous work in mines, lumber mills, turpentine factories and steamboats in the industrializing sectors of the South.”¹⁴ Mr. Smith's preoccupation with futurity and promises emerges from an industry that optimized the political economy of enslavement.

The hyper-specificity and complexity of his calculations—“He came to their houses twice a month to collect one dollar and sixty-eight cents and write down on a little yellow card both the date and their eight-four cents a week payment” (*Song of Solomon*, 8)—foregrounds the importance of straight, chrononormative time to his occupation. Muñoz's and Freeman's terms help illuminate the insurance industry's political attachments to regimes of temporality that generate—and bind subjects to—socially *useful*, financially profitable accounts of time. The vague diction in “they were always half a month or so

¹⁴ From a 2016 *New York Times* article called “Insurance Policies on Slaves: New York Life's Complicated Past.”

behind” (*Song of Solomon*, 8) adopts a resonance of financialized time that renders Mr. Smith’s clients indebted to time itself. What else might we make of an account of debt that misidentifies the financial for the temporal? As Muñoz and Freeman remind us, such regimes of time foreclose certain futures, strictly defining and thus limiting subjects’ embodied and psychic capacities to see beyond the restrictions of the “here and now” (Muñoz, 22).

Sula offers other instances of defying ending that build upon *Song of Solomon*’s staging of ecstasy, becoming, and afterness. While Milkman and Mr. Smith perform the ecstatic through flight, Sula seems to enact the ecstatic through desire. Muñoz offers a helpful theoretical intervention into the impossible time-work of desire; queer ecstasy, in his account, constitutes a “mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present” (Muñoz, 1). Muñoz’s emphasis on desire as a profound political investment in the future may recall Sula’s resounding question: “Why can’t I have it all?” (*Sula*, 142). Her desire for more *beyond* what she has in the present takes the form of future tense: “There’ll be a little love left over for me,” (*Sula*, 146). Sula situates her forecasting and reaching, as Muñoz prescribes, to see and feel that which has not arrived, in her present knowledge: “And I know just what it will feel like,” (*Sula*, 146). Sula’s desire allows her to imagine and materialize the feeling of fulfilled desire, even though such a fulfillment cannot, and does not, exist in the present. Her subsequent experience of “the wind pressing her dress between her legs” (*Sula*, 146) enacts, and renders possible, an ecstatic practice of “stepping out of” straight, chrononormative, *possible* time (Abdur-Rahman, “Against Prohibitive Time,” 43). Sula’s imaginative desire thus constitutes an extension and reorganization of embodied, temporal limits; her ecstatic experience of

pleasure thus pushes beyond the terms of Nel's challenge: namely, that Sula would run out of love to receive. In this sense, Sula's stepping outside of time, her feeling of future love, and her promise that it "will" arrive constitutes a vision beyond endness.

The scene of Sixo's death marks another site of after-time, one that merges the proleptic and the ecstatic. His exclamation, "Seven-O! Seven-O!" (*Beloved*, 267), anticipates the moment of his death, while also extending his own life. His ability to proleptically anticipate his death emerges from Morrison's framing of the moment as an "interrupt[ion]" (*Beloved*, 267). Given that Seven-O also refers to his unborn child (*Beloved*, 270), Sixo's exclamation manifests the time of *after* that will take after his death, the immensity of possibility and potential that manifests in his and the Thirty-Mile Woman's child. Morrison's diction, "Sixo interrupts his laughter" (*Beloved*, 267) also renders Sixo's outburst an interruption of himself; the self-reflexivity in the diction—and the fact that Sixo can interrupt himself—thus creates a sense of the ecstatic.

As Muñoz writes, "Utopian feelings can and regularly will be disappointed. They are nonetheless indispensable to the act of imaging transformation" (Muñoz, 9). Morrison's endings, whether of her novels or her characters' lives, do not attempt to reverse this disappointment. As Muñoz makes clear, the disappointment or the lack of fruition of certain moments are as important to the political project of the ecstatic as are the instances of transcendence or afterness. What moments of ending in Morrison's novels reveal is the capacity of the ecstatic to envision the future within a "here and now" (Muñoz, 22) that may be unbearable, disastrous, or impossible. In this sense, the ecstatic may emerge in a will to envision alternatives to the present; recalling Sixo's death, sometimes this willingness takes the form of a "stubborn[ness]" (*Beloved*, 267) that refuses to dissipate.

Like Sula and *Jazz*'s narrator, the ecstatic can sometimes also reveal itself in the unfinished project of self-making or a relational dynamic. In transgressing and redefining what is possible, the ecstatic also restructures what endings of novels and of characters' lives can be, transforming embodied, temporal, and spatial constraints into sites of possibility and ongoingness.

CHAPTER 5

The Right to Disappear: Visual Violence, *Azaadi*, and the Ecstatic Kashmiri Body

In 2017, the Jammu & Kashmir Department of Tourism produced a video advertisement called “Kashmir: The Warmest Place on Earth.” The advertisement opens with a serene shot of Dal Lake at sunrise and transitions to a shot of a light-skinned, Indian (presumably Hindu and upper-caste), heterosexual couple who wake up to their first day of vacation in Kashmir. The storyline of the advertisement is this: the couple goes to the city-center of Srinagar, where they find a man who they believe to be their tour guide for the day. This guide, a Kashmiri Muslim man, ‘happily’ shows them around the mountains, bodies of water, and gardens of Kashmir, building them a fire at sunset and rowing their boat for them along the Jhelum River. The Indian Hindu husband then receives a call from the *actual* guide, who wonders why they did not show up for their tour. The advertisement dramatizes the moment of suspicion that follows; the Indian Hindu wife asks, “What happened?” and her husband, gesturing for her to keep quiet, approaches the guide to ask him about his real identity. The video thus suspends the viewer, likely an upper-caste, upper-class Hindu, in the couple’s own paranoia: who, after all, could this Kashmiri man be? And what motives could he be hiding?

The video ends with the Kashmiri man explaining with a smile, in Hindi, “My wife had asked me to get sugar from the city-center. Along the way, I happened to find you friends—so, I thought, *why don’t I show you around my home of Kashmir*.” “Kashmir: The Warmest Place on Earth” thus presents a longstanding archetype of the benevolent Kashmiri, whose hospitality and docile nature render them the perfect host of Indian

tourists (or occupiers). Yet, the film's mounting of both the couple's and the viewer's paranoia stages a "confirmation of what is already suspected of the body" (Puar, 87)—in fact, what might have been suspected as soon as the Kashmiri man entered the storyline. The film's melodramatic staging of this moment, its inversion of the imagined Kashmiri insurgent into the imagined docile subject, is in fact coextensive with the film's inversion of Kashmir as disputed territory into Kashmir as a liveable tourist destination and a site of militarized management and surveillance.

The advertisement deploys a first-person visual account of the couple's boat ride in the river (1:30); the viewer sees nothing but the empty expanse of water, empty stretches of hills—what is, in essence, a Kashmir empty of its people. The advertisement thus produces and thus *makes real* a Kashmir devoid of Kashmiri people. As a Kashmiri woman says in a 2016 anti-occupation video addressed to 'Dear Indians': "You want Kashmir without Kashmiris."¹⁵ This sentiment articulates the Indian state's political investments in evacuating the Kashmiri landscape of its people and rendering Kashmir the "offspring of bitterly divorced parents" (Zia, 777), thus invisibilizing the majority of Kashmiris' desires to agitate for their own sovereignty. Indeed, the question of Kashmir is often framed as a bilateral issue between India and Pakistan, rendering the Kashmiri landscape the grounds upon which each nation-state may confirm their own national imaginaries.

This chapter hopes to focus on the Indian state's biopolitical practices of disappearance, its expunging of what or who can be perceived or remembered. India's occupation of Kashmir, and its suppression of insurgency movements constitutes what

¹⁵ Deepti Misri cites this video in her article "Showing Humanity: Violence and Visuality in Kashmir."

anthropologist Allen Feldman calls a “scopic regime” (Misri, 138), a system of biopolitical control that visually manages what and who can be seen. The Indian military’s enforced disappearances, public mass killings, armed surveillance, physical barriers (barbed wire fences, army barricades), production of altered maps, and maiming tactics constitute a constellation of visual and discursive practices that establish the Indian state’s management of Kashmiri subjects. Using the work of Black Studies and Queer Studies scholars such as Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman, José Esteban Muñoz, Jasbir Puar, Aida Levy-Hussen and Judith Butler, this chapter attempts to examine how enforced disappearances mobilize, yet also exceed, the frameworks of necropolitics and biopolitics. The Indian state engages in ecstatic practices of violence and derealization¹⁶, deploying not the right to kill or even the “will not to let die” (Zia, 775)¹⁷ but rather the right to reduce populations to a state of spectrality and liminality. The public mourning practices of the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) and Altaf Quadri’s photography constitute a field of Kashmiri cultural production that attempts to reappear the disappeared. Disappearance and reappearance are embedded in Kashmir’s political history such that they become vital parts of Kashmiri representational strategies. Mobilizing an aesthetic of re-appearance, these organizers and artists thus cultivate a Kashmiri nationalist beyond¹⁸, a time and space constituted by the anticipation and aspiration of an *azaad* (independent) future—of moreness and potentiality otherwise foreclosed by the violent constraints of the present.

¹⁶ A term from Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life*, pgs 33-34.

¹⁷ Ather Zia uses this phrase from Jasbir Puar’s *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability*

¹⁸ Drawing from Abdur-Rahman’s notion of a “Black queer beyond” (“The Black Ecstatic,” 350)

The Indian state's deployment of biopolitical and necropolitical control hinges on enclosure and exposure, modes of visual and spatial violence that render Kashmir a state of siege. The website of the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons, a grassroots organization founded by relatives of those who have been disappeared by the Indian government, attests to the visual violence of enclosure: "Armed personnel are deployed not only on the borders but in every street and town square, every village and hamlet. Gigantic army camps surrounded by sandbags and barbed wire sprawl across urban and rural landscapes, forest and mountain, giving a *visual reality* to the frequent observation that Kashmir has been transformed into a prison or a city of bunkers" (emphasis added). The image of Kashmir as a land violently constituted through bunkers and barricades, wires and sandbags, may recall Foucault's thinking on enclosed spatiality. Indeed, Indian military presence has quite literally "hemm[ed] in" Kashmir, ensuring that it resembles "a territory that is well policed in terms of its obedience to the sovereign," (Foucault, 29). In this sense, enclosure reorganizes the visual landscape of Kashmir, redefining it through artificial, militarized boundaries.

Though exposure may be diametrically opposed to enclosure, both terms engage visibility as a means of control, surveillance, and population management. In his widely read article "Necropolitics," Achille Mbembe summarizes Michel Foucault's notion of biopolitics as "that domain of life over which power has taken control" (Mbembe, 12). That is to say, biopolitics is a phenomenon in which power *produces* life. We might think about the Latin etymology of *produce* as gesturing specifically to a process of bringing forth and drawing out. Mbembe's formulation of necropolitics as the right to "expose to death" (Mbembe, 12) evokes a similar visual register of control. The exercise of the right to kill

and the exercise of the right to produce (and optimize) life are thus modes of visibilization and invisibilization, processes by which “the seen is rendered unseen” (Misri, 137) and the unseen is rendered seen. Mbembe’s attention to the idiom of exposure is particularly relevant to the Indian state’s optical regime, in which exposure to death constitutes both embodied precarity and visual spectacle. In 1990, India implemented a law called the Armed Special Forces Act (AFSPA), which allows soldiers to “arrest without warrant, any person who has committed a cognizable offence or against whom a reasonable suspicion exists that he has committed or is about to commit a cognizable offence and may use such force as may be necessary to effect the arrest, including the power to shoot to kill” (Zia, 778-779). This law continues to give India unbridled, unprecedented control over Kashmir, enabling soldiers to shoot on sight, enter homes in the middle of the night, commit mass killings, and abduct and hold hostage any individuals that they deem suspicious. In this sense, Kashmiris are always exposed to the threat (or reality) of death.

Yet, Mbembe’s language of exposure also attends to *presentations* of death, the ways in which power renders and visualizes pending death for political subjects living under necropolitical control. The thousands of mass gravesites that populate Kashmir’s landscape—many of which house unmarked graves—form a visual and material record of lives that have been disappeared by the state. A 2011 Human Rights Watch Report¹⁹ found 2,730 bodies dumped into unmarked graves in four of Jammu and Kashmir’s 14 districts—and determined that many of these were individuals that had been abducted by the Indian government. These gravesites thus expose Kashmiri lives to death through symbolizing the

¹⁹ The report can be found here: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/08/24/india-investigate-unmarked-graves-jammu-and-kashmir>

embodied precarity of Kashmiri life, while also constituting a visual archive of this violence. In this sense, Mbembe's notion of sovereign power's right to "expose to death" (Mbembe, 12) performs interesting time-work. Indeed, exposure carries a haptic, physical resonance, as well as symbolic, revelatory one; in constructing both the ever-present condition of death and the looming possibility of it, the graveyards' mode of exposure emerges through its embodiment of death, as well as the visual threat it carries for Kashmiris.

Recent news coverage²⁰ also reports a documented rise in CCTV cameras, drones, and helicopters in Kashmir that aid Indian paramilitary forces in ensuring that Kashmiris abide by curfews and abstain from insurgency. In her work on militarized surveillance practices in Kashmir, Haley Duschinski highlights the system of identity cards and checkpoints that police Kashmiri Muslims' navigation of public and private spaces. Military and paramilitary troops can request to see these identity cards, which display "an individual's name, locality and occupation, and thumbnail picture" (Duschinski, 704) at any point, even in the so-called privacy of Kashmiris' own homes. Visibility and social legibility, therefore, are vital to the Indian state's control of the region and its biopolitical management of Kashmiri subjects. By superimposing symbols of militarized power and *displays* of death onto the landscape of Kashmir, the Indian state engages in a theatrical practice of power—one in which the spectacle of ongoing violence works in conjunction with its embodied, haptic intensities. Feldman calls these political agendas "regimens that prescribe modes of seeing and object visibility and that proscribe or render untenable other

²⁰ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/masked-soldiers-barred-mosques-and-constant-surveillance-inside-kashmir-under-lockdown/>

modes and objects of perception” (Misri, 138). In this sense, the biopolitical and necropolitical forms of control in Kashmir emerge from the Indian state’s rearranging of perception, its control of what can and cannot be seen, and who can be disappeared at any given moment.

Disappearance, as military tactic, unsettles the binaries of life and death that often inform biopolitical and necropolitical regimes. As a method of reorganizing the perceivable, enforced disappearances suspend both those who have been disappeared and their relatives in a state of visual (and embodied) liminality, a space in which one is neither visible nor fully invisible, neither alive nor dead. In her brilliant article, “The Spectacle of a Good Half-Widow, anthropologist Ather Zia explores the impact of enforced disappearances on the wives and mothers of those who have been disappeared. The term “half-widow” and “half-mother” marks the state of “unending mourning” (Zia, 168) that these Kashmiri women must navigate. As Zia describes, one half-widow named Sadaf believed her husband Manzoor “would ‘return as suddenly as he had disappeared.’ Manzoor’s presence hung around Sadaf and her home like a heavy cloak. Grief and loss imbued everything she did” (Zia, 166). Sadaf’s loss exemplifies the ways in which enforced disappearances foreclose the possibility of mourning fully, rendering the loss of one’s relatives profoundly unresolved. Enforced disappearances recall Hannah Arendt’s description of the concentration camps as “stand[ing] outside of life and death” (Mbembe, 12) and Mbembe’s articulation of enslaved life as a form of death-in-life” (Mbembe, 21). Indeed, Arendt and Mbembe give language to experiences of biopolitical and necropolitical control that exist within the threshold of life and death. Subjects under these forms of control are neither permitted to live nor die; the idiom of half-ness that describes widows

and wives of disappeared Kashmiri men thus applies to the men themselves, and their indeterminate presence/absence.

The state of liminality that we might ascribe to Sadaf's mourning mirrors that of Kashmir's current political identity. The Indian military occupation of Kashmir, coupled with Article 370's allowance of partial autonomy for the region beginning in 1950, positioned Kashmir in a state of political ambiguity. Article 370, which as of August 2019 has been abolished by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, allowed Jammu and Kashmir its own constitution, its own flag, and the ability to make its own laws. Yet, the Indian army's constant presence prevents Kashmir's full sovereignty. In this sense, liminality exists as both an legal, historical, and psychosomatic condition for Kashmiris. The Indian state's use of disappearance as a tactic of suppression also resembles Jasbir Puar's thinking on Israeli maiming practices as a form of disabling Palestinian political subjects: "The purportedly humanitarian practice of sparing death by shooting to maim has its biopolitical stakes not through the right to life, or even letting live, but rather through the logic of 'will not to let die'" (Zia, 775). Indian military forces use disappearance in a similar way, as a mode of biopolitical form of population control that suspends its Kashmiri victims in a state of liminality. What Puar calls a "will to not let die" (Zia, 775), therefore, could also be described as India's will to not free Kashmir fully, and to suspend the region and its inhabitants in an indefinite, liminal mode of subjugation, occupation, and surveillance. What is at stake for Kashmiri Muslims under siege is thus a form of biopolitical and necropolitical control that optimizes the time and space constituted by both the uncertainty of disappearance and the political ambiguity of occupation.

We might then ask: what is the time and space of disappearance? In other words, how might the political phenomenon of disappearance constitute a different time and space? As Puar suggests, the chance that the disappeared may reappear at any given moment lends new meaning to war as a “way of exercising the right to kill” (Mbembe, 12); this war, instead, hinges upon the disappeared’s ghostly presence over the Kashmir Valley. Judith Butler calls such state-sanctioned violence “derealization,” a process that renders political subjects “neither alive nor dead, but infinitely spectral” (Misri, 532). The Indian state’s transformation of the Kashmiri body into a ghostly figure involves a practice of the ecstatic, a transgression of the social body and its embodied boundaries. The term ecstatic originates from the classical Greek *ekstasis*, which Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman defines as “be[ing] or stand[ing] outside of oneself, a removal to elsewhere” (Abdur-Rahman, 350). The ecstatic thus constitutes travel past one’s limits, creating another, perhaps spectral account of time and space in *this* time.

Part of how enforced disappearances in Kashmir relate to the notion of the ecstatic is the way in which these disappearances remove you from social time and space. Mbembe’s language of “phantom-like” (Mbembe, 21) to describe the ongoing state of injury that defined plantation life in the United States and Butler’s exploration of the spectrality of derealized subjects both touch upon how certain modes of biopolitical control remove subjects from the world of linear time and perceivable space. Ecstatic time thus functions as a type of rejoinder to Elizabeth Freeman’s notion of chrononormativity, the process through which ““naked flesh is bound into socially meaningful embodiment through temporal regulation”” (Levy-Hussen, 43), and José Esteban Muñoz’s comparable framework of *straight time*, in which “there is no future but the here and now of our

everyday life” (Muñoz, 22). The Indian state deploys the ecstatic as a way to evacuate the Kashmiri Muslim subjects from their homes, their families, and even their own bodies (as there is often no physical trace left of disappeared subjects). The state’s “removal” of Kashmiri bodies “to elsewhere” (Abdur-Rahman, 350) dislocates and transgresses the “here and now” (Muñoz, 22) of our present. Elsewhere, for disappeared Kashmiris, constitutes a condition of invisibility defined by nonnormative, nonlinear time and space. Enforced disappearances thus replace the existing forms of temporal and embodied regulation imposed by occupation with an alternate set of biopolitical regulations. Recalling Feldman’s claim that occupation regulates and manages what can and cannot be perceived (Misri, 138), we may think of the ecstatic as facilitating the spectrality of disappeared subjects, the modes of perception through which they are both here and not here, alive, yet not quite alive.

In response to the state’s constellations of visual control, organizers of the Association of Disappeared Persons establish mourning as a means of reappearing lost loved ones. On the 25th of every month, dozens of members of the APDP gather in Pratap Park in Srinagar, Kashmir. They sit in a semicircle on an expanse of grass, women on one side and men on the other, around a hand-painted canvas of faces laid out in the middle. Each of the participants in the action holds a photo of their sons and husbands, who have been disappeared by the Indian state. The iconic pose of parents—and, specifically, mothers—holding portraits of their sons reinstates and visibilizes a relationship that the state has attempted to dissolve. The Kashmiri photographer Altaf Quadri published a photo of a mother named Mughli Mase, whose son was disappeared on September 1, 1990.

The photo²¹ shows Mase sitting cross-legged, holding a photo of her son in front of her—an iconic pose that many parents in APDP use during their demonstrations. Quadri situates the photo of her son in the foreground, while Mase’s face in the background remains shadowed and almost opaque. That we, as viewers, cannot see the expression on Mase’s face as she performs this political act of mourning reveals the limitations of our optical capacities to comprehend the visual landscape of the photo. In her study of the photo, Deepti Misri claims, “In Qadri’s photographs violence is not directly visible, and yet it creates visibilities” (Misri, 156). We might then ask how the violence of occupation and of disappearance in Kashmir shapes the visuality of the photo, and what visibilities this violence creates.

In *Terrorist Assemblages*, Jasbir Puar distinguishes between optical space and haptic space, writing that the latter “renegotiates the tactile through the optical.” She continues: “‘The eye itself may fulfill this non-optical function,’ such that one can feel touch through vision” (Puar, 107). The opacity of Mase’s face pushes viewers to interrogate forms of perception beyond the visual and to move across the surface of the image. In this sense, our act of visual discernment becomes a haptic, material practice, as we search the shadows of Mase’s face for its texture, folds, and the physical dimensions of her expression. The viewer’s eyes thus function like hands, sifting through the shadows of the photo to negotiate what can and cannot be seen. Puar also cites philosopher Brian Massumi’s claim that affect constitutes “what escapes our attention, [...] what haunts the representational realm rather than merely infusing it with emotive presence” (Puar, 207). Massumi’s use of the word “haunt” reveals the spectral qualities of Mase’s mourning and

²¹ The photo of Mughli Mase can be found at this link: <https://www.atafquadri.com/mughli>

the ways in which its escape from the camera's frame (and the camera's indexical capacity) renders it an affective practice. Massumi frames affect as fugitive and spectral, a force that exists over the threshold of visibility and beyond the optical and archival capacities of both viewer and photographer. Mase's face, shrouded by shadows, thus forms a "creative site of indeterminacy" and "affective confusion" (Puar, 208) that allows for fugitive, ecstatic forms of mourning that cannot be catalogued (or controlled) through visual modes of capture.

Images of Mase at these demonstrations reveal how her figure, positioned behind the portrait of her son, allows her son's visual presence to inhabit a material form. Her and other demonstrators' use of these portraits as ways to reconstruct the existence of their disappeared relatives, therefore, serves as an inventory of loss, a means through which mourning, as public demonstration, calls attention to—and flagrantly denounces—the unending nature of enforced disappearances. Their displays of mourning, in this sense, are not mere performances or embodiments of victimhood—they resurrect and materialize the very memory of their disappeared relatives that the Indian state attempts to erase. And, indeed, APDP's public demonstrations of mourning allow Kashmiri mothers and wives to reaffirm and visibilize their relationship to their disappeared loved ones in reaction to state powers that have attempted to render invisible.

However, Kashmiri women like Mughli Mase are not mere icons of mourning—they are originators of anti-Indian-occupation organizing, vital to the struggle for Kashmiri *azaadi* (freedom) and to a global audience's reckoning with the violence of enforced disappearance. APDP activists' demands for India's withdrawal from Kashmir compound the urgency with which they organize for the right to reunite with their family members.

In a 2009 documentary called *Where Have you Hidden My New Moon Crescent*, directed by Iffat Fatima, Mase is filmed saying, “My God, just once may I look at [my son] and he look at me...and then I [could] close my eyes forever” (23:40)²². Through the lens of Mase’s narrative of loss, Kashmiri *azaadi* (freedom) not only means liberation from Indian occupation but also from the ongoing cycle of disappearances. In drawing attention to the absences of their loved ones through embodied and affective gestures, demonstrators like Mase undermine the scopic regime of enforced disappearances. Members of the APDP thus engage in visual and ideological practices that imagine a different future for Kashmir, one invested in the memorialization and continued search for those who have been violently disappeared.

²² The film can be found at the following link:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZK_J96O6gQ

CODA

On the Opposite of Too-Lateness

This project has sought to explore the ways in which (pro)longing, rerouting, ecstasy, and re-appearance serve as interventions into regimes of time and space that tell us *it is much, much, much too late*. The multitude of works that we have explored in these pages stage refusal of endings, disappearances—of too-lateness and no-longerness. Through these refusals, both literary and political subjects imagine as they memorialize, invent as they remember. We might think back to the comparison of Isaac Julien's queer angel figure and the iconic Kashmiri mother in Qadri's photograph; their near-identical gestures of re-appearance capture an affective and embodied shift, the transformation from a feeling of loss to an assertion of its happening.

Juliens' and Qadri's cameras capture the shifting of affective and embodied orientation, the moment of transition between disappearance and reappearance. As the angel figure and the Kashmiri mother hold out their photographs, as if to say *look*, they draw attention to the alternate visibilities created by disappearance. We see neither Langston Hughes nor the mother's son; instead, we see photographs (or film footage) *of* photographs of them. In this sense, disappearance—through archival and/or militarized violence—provides us with an education on looking; it changes the very nature of how we recognize absence and read through its layers of mediation.

Though much of this project aims to read across geographies, canons, and histories, it can never fully cohere the linkages between the AIDS crisis, the enduring legacy of the Transatlantic slave trade, and the occupation of Kashmir. The convergences between these

three political happenings require perhaps a lifetime of further reading and contextualization. Yet, in trying to think through their shared idioms and embodied gestures, perhaps we are one step closer to seeing that which is meant to be unseen: the imperial poetics of disappearance. I take after Woubshet in admitting this project's inherent incompleteness; compiling an inventory of loss is a task that, itself, has no end. Thinking of Morrison's invocation of "60 million and more," we might ask: what does it mean to devise a politics and poetics of mourning that lingers on the "and more?" What do we make of endlessness as a description of loss' immensity *and also* infinite possibility? We might return to Morrison's "much, much, much"—perhaps there is a way to reside in this muchness, in this prolonging of ending that itself transforms into something more inhabitable. As poet Ross Gay reminds us, "No matter the pull toward brink [...] there is a time for everything."²³ We need only to find it.

²³ From Ross Gay's poem, "Sorrow Is Not My Name"

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