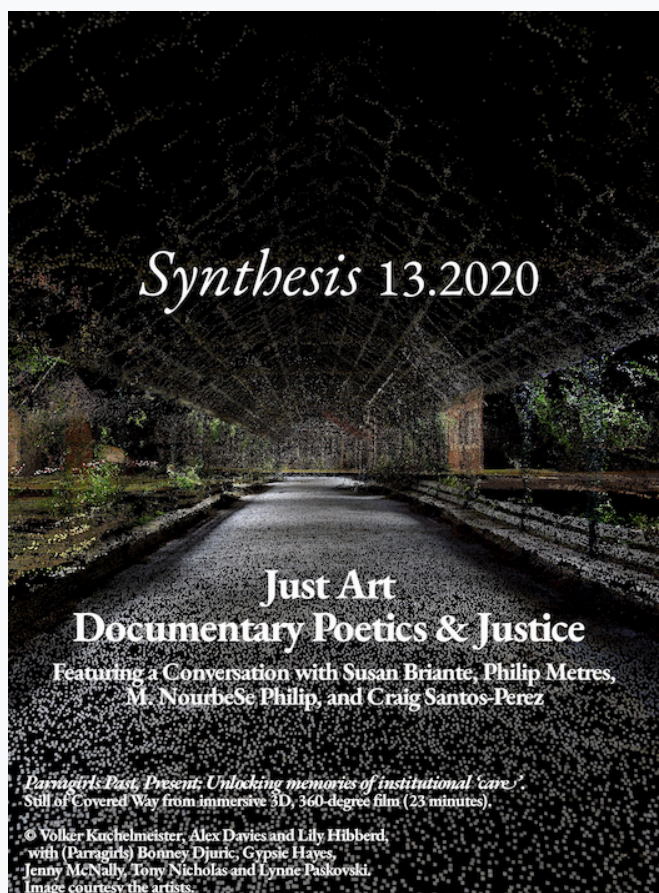


Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

No 13 (2020)

Just art. Documentary Poetics and Justice



Poetics/Documents/Justice A conversation featuring Susan Briante, Philip Metres, M. NourbeSe Philip, and Craig Santos-Perez

Philip Metres, M. NourbeSe Philip, Susan Briante, Craig Santos-Perez

doi: [10.12681/syn.27564](https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.27564)

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Poetics/Documents/Justice
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In their call for papers, *Synthesis* writes:

in their form and content, these different currents of documentary aesthetics all accord a privileged place to the judicial system, interacting with its regime of proof, the frameworks of the enquiry and the trial, and its mission to administer justice.... However, though such works structurally undermine claims to aesthetic autonomy and voluntarily confine themselves to the historical particular, they circulate in extra-judicial spheres and invite forms of judgement that differ from those administrated by the legal system. What motivates this recourse to art, and what effects might this aesthetic supplement seek to engender? Do such works act to shore up the judicial system in place? Do they seek rather to complement it or palliate its shortcomings? Or do they sometimes turn the tables and put the law itself on trial? To what ends? What, if any, alternative conceptions of the just do they generate? And what, if any, changes do such works aspire to effect on the course of the history they engage with?

Re-reading these questions again, I woke up this morning (May 29th?) and read more about the murder of George Floyd and the rebellions in protest against the police in Minneapolis and elsewhere. I wondered at my own silence on social media. My first thought was, shouldn't I have immediately taken to Twitter and registered my outrage? My second thought was, what would another post on Twitter do for George Floyd, for justice, for reparations? What I wrote instead was, "If I were elected President of the United States, on day one in office, I would call

for two Truth, Reparations, and Reconciliation commissions (TRRC): on the U.S. responsibility to the indigenous peoples of the Americas, and on the U.S. responsibility to African-Americans.” (I added the extra R, reparations, after reflecting on the failure of the South African TRC to address the economic dimension of colonialism and apartheid.)

The gesture itself is as empty as any other virtue signalling (I will, of course, never be president), but I began thinking again about truth commissions. Truth commissions are transitional justice mechanisms for societies attempting to confront the past, reestablish the rule of law and governance, and move into the future. The problem in the U.S. is that these problems are ongoing and systemic, and to address the past alone fails to account for the past’s persistence in the present. A TRRC on slavery would be one thing, but what about Jim Crow? What about mass incarceration? What about voter suppression? So our political and economic systems hauntingly perpetuate inequities shared with slavery’s hundreds of years.

Then I started thinking about the peacebuilding and conflict transformation process in Northern Ireland—how, despite a radically successful twenty-plus year peace process (which has included an astonishing reform of policing, powerful economic investment, and shared governance), the parties have never agreed to a truth process, dealing with what they call ‘the legacy of the past.’ With the exception of the U.K.’s Saville Inquiry on Bloody Sunday (itself a model), governments have stayed out of the truth trouble. But what has happened are smaller initiatives and endeavors, by grassroots organisations, cultural and educational institutions, and the arts, that have amounted to something like a truth process. What has not happened on the level of law and government still gets told. It’s not lost in the erasure of History. Of course, it doesn’t carry the weight of official, state-sponsored speech, as when the Prime Minister David Cameron apologised to the families of the killed during Bloody Sunday, of course. I would much prefer that. But to get the Saville Inquiry at all took the work of dozens of activists (often victims and their families), thousands of hours of their own gathering of testimonies, and constant political pressure—for many years—before Tony Blair would call for a reopening of the U.K. government’s official understanding of what happened on Bloody Sunday, published in the terrible Widgery Report, a hack job that absolved the British Army for the murders.

What connects our various projects as poets is that they are doing the work of truth commissions—not only by gathering testimonies that haven’t been aired widely, but also by examining, working with, and critiquing the political, legal, economic, and cultural systems that engineer oppression and injustice. That’s why I’m so grateful to have us together to talk about our recent poetry projects—which are more than books of poems, but cultural interventions with historical and political implications. I’m not interested particularly or ultimately in *documentary poetry* as an aesthetic genre, but, as I write elsewhere,

to transform and be transformed by the radical possibilities of creating spaces for poems to happen, by widening the idea of authorship beyond the academy, finding poetry where it always existed: in the mouths of those who have been shut up and shut down, from the pens of those whose lives have been written out of history and must make their own.¹

And not only for poems to happen, I want to say now, but also for spaces and histories and futures to be reclaimed.

Susan Briante: I’m interested in the documentary project (I have a degree in journalism), the materiality of documents and the archive itself. As someone who lives in southern Arizona and who has witnessed the immigration crisis created by our government, the relationship between the state and the document becomes evident in a myriad of ways: What information is included in or omitted from the documents created by the state? Who possesses the document deemed necessary, legible, or acceptable by the state? What kinds of documents are not ‘legible’ or ‘acceptable’? What stories do they tell? The answers to these questions can change lives as well as the narratives created around those lives. And these are questions that any of us who work with legal documents have to keep in mind.

I started writing *Defacing the Monument* (Noemi Press, Aug 2020), as an attempt to document some of what I witnessed of the immigration crisis. (I live in Tucson just 72 miles from the US-Mexico border). But looking at the court calendar for an Operation Streamline hearing, a process by which migrants are prosecuted in groups of up to 75 at a time for the crime of illegal entry, I realised how fraught the documents and the documentary project can be. The Operation Streamline calendar provided so little information about the migrants themselves, the conditions that lead them to immigrate, the involvement of the United States in the reasons for their migration, the brutality they often faced on their journey or at the hands of Border Patrol, my own complicity as a citizen. Absence haunted

the document and the court proceedings that turned these migrants into criminals. So the book became an interrogation of the documentary project itself, an attempt to discern the limits of that project as well as to chronicle and suggest possibilities for alternative methods to approach documentary work.

For example, in the book, I consider the documents, as well as the knowledges, that exist beyond the legal system, that remain beyond the official records or histories of empire. These documents and the information (gossip, dream, folk tale, remedy, oral history, etc.) that remain outside the archive are as important and often more important than what appears within the archives of the state. In fact, they often subvert the power and knowledge of the state.

As I write this, we enter our third week of uprisings sparked by the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis Police. Floyd is one of the latest in too long a list of black men and women killed by police in the United States, whose murders we've seen because of cell phone videos shared by witnesses. And as protests have spread across the United States calling for police accountability and abolition, continued examples of police brutality captured on video circulate. The documentary work done by such videos is invaluable. But we should not need a cell phone video to believe the decades of testimony from black men and women. Who gets to tell the stories that are archived? Whose stories are believed? These are also vital questions for the documentarian.

Craig Santos Perez: I currently live in Hawai'i, and the waves of viral images and videos of police brutality and civil protest have reached our shores and have reverberated across the Pacific. I have tried to document the ongoing solidarity and anti-racist movements in the Pacific Islands and the diaspora in a blog post titled, "Black Lives Matter in the Pacific."² As an activist writer and public scholar, I believe it is important to document this profound time for my Pacific Islander community to learn from and remember.

This documentary impulse is also present in my ongoing, serial book project: *from unincorporated territory*, which I have been working on since 2006 and now includes four volumes. The title refers to the colonial, political status of my home, the Pacific Island of Guåhan (Guam), which has been a territory of the United States since 1898. Beyond depriving my people of self-determination and sovereignty, the US military also occupied 30 percent of the island's landmass, having displaced us from our ancestral lands while also contaminating the land with military waste.

I consider my work to be at the intersection of documentary, indigenous, and decolonial poetics. Similar to others, I find poetry a powerful space to document injustice, especially colonial injustice. I also believe that poetry has the power to expose, critique, and even subvert the documents of empire, whether those be colonial law, history, or political documents. I often work with collage to unsettle documents in my work. Lastly, I think poetry is a profound space to archive indigenous documents that may have been buried or erased. These decolonial documents could be official archives or they can be more informal, such as oral stories, memories, family genealogies, and more. At least for me, poetry has become an important space to document (verb) and to more deeply understand documents (noun).

Philip Metres: Craig, how has your approach in *from unincorporated territory*—a massive, multi-decade project, truly a life work—changed over time? How do you balance the confrontation of history and the imagination of a recovered future? Do you imagine an end point to the project? And, relatedly, how do you imagine this work as related to the political project of justice and liberation?

Craig Santos Perez: My general approach has not changed much in the sense that each book centres indigenous Pacific culture, history, and stories. The poems have remained documentary, avant-garde, and decolonial. With each new book, I have tried to experiment with new forms from earlier books. For example, my first two books explore a kind of lyric, abstract expressionism, whereas in books three and four I worked more with fragmented, narrative prose poems. Since the series is autobiographical, the books have captured changes in my life. Two of my grandparents who I write about in my first book have since passed away, so I have eulogy poems for them in the forthcoming volume. Another grandparent that I wrote about in my second book has since been diagnosed with dementia, so I have been writing about her memory loss in subsequent books. I also got married and had two children, so those life changes are major themes in my fourth book.

In my culture, and many Pacific cultures, we view time as a spiral so that the past, present, and future are all entwined. My fourth book, [lukao], explores this more deeply in terms of turning to history to help us guide us into the future, especially as we confront climate change. To be more specific, I believe that

indigenous ecological knowledge has a lot to teach us about how to live sustainably on the planet.

I will continue to write this series until my homeland and people are free and independent, so that may be my whole life. This is related to how I imagine the work as a project of justice and liberation. As a decolonial writer, it is my responsibility to continue to recover my people's histories, to articulate a liberatory politics, and to imagine a sovereign future.

Philip Metres: Susan, in *Defacing the Monument*, you advocate for a poetics of hauntology (as in NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*), a poetics of entanglement (as in James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*)—rather than the sort of static liberalism of representation and inclusion. Could you talk a bit about the ethos of these approaches, as well as address the question of the project of justice? How does this provide a path to justice?

Susan Briante: The idea of “hauntology” comes from Derrida's reference to the persistence of elements of the past. But I am also thinking of Avery Gordon's book, *Ghostly Matters*, in which she writes about finding “shapes” defined by absence or “the paradox of tracking through time and across all those forces that which makes its mark by being there and not there at the same time.”³ In my reading, that process of “tracking” allows Philip to tell a story untold in her beautiful, essential, and innovative work *Zong!* That tracking becomes an act of conjuring the names that have been forgotten and channeling the voices that are absent from the legal document *Gregson v. Gilbert*. It's important to note the care with which Philip resurrects this narrative. She works to create the conditions necessary to listen through the silence and discern the absence left in the wake of the massacre of enslaved Africans on the *Zong*: she visits a “traditional shrine close to one of the slave ports in Ghana”⁴ to meet and speak with elders and the priest of the shrine; she visits the port of Liverpool from which the *Zong* set sail. Part of that work involves research, part of that work involves asking permission from the living. That is what makes *Zong!* so different from the kind of ventriloquism that some writers resort to when working with documentary evidence.

Entanglement, for me, represents an extension of the necessary ‘research’ in that it involves an investigation of the histories, legacies, processes, systems and conditions which produce the events about which we write. But beyond archival research and the searching for what has been excluded from the archive, beyond the contextual research that helps us to understand the systems and

conditions about which we write)—we need to do the research on ourselves to map our relations and entanglements with the people and events that become the subject of our writing. In his 1975 chapbook *Investigative Poetry*, the poet Ed Sanders outlines an expansive methodology for the documentary or investigative poet that includes such tools as data grids, case files, investigative glyphs, mortality lists and garbage grids. The latter refers to lists of a subject’s moral failings or the injustices attributable to certain actors. (He describes making a garbage grid for Kissinger for example.) But then Sanders proposes something very important: “One useful method, if you find yourself preparing garbage grids, and you want to MAINTAIN ACCURACY, is to prepare some garbage grids on YOURSELF...that justice pulse along your grids of others.” As writers, it’s imperative that we note how we might be complicit with the very systems we critique. We need to be willing to understand our place within oppressive systems because ultimately understanding our relation allows us to learn how to fight for change.

Both of these models offer something more than what you very aptly call “the static liberalism of representation and inclusion.” “Representation and inclusion” have all sorts of institutional connotations for me in relation to failed attempts to counter white supremacy. Or perhaps they are not failed attempts but rather attempts that do exactly what they were supposed to do, which has nothing to do with countering white supremacy. I am thinking of the universities where I have studied or worked, of the departments that hired faculty of colour without making any changes in practices, policies or attitudes and then wondered why none of these faculty stayed.

I want to be careful when thinking about documentary poetics and justice, or writing and justice, in general. I think it has been too easy for too long for too many writers—especially white writers—to rely on documentary forms as their only method to engage with injustice. It’s not enough to represent injustice in our writing. In fact, simple representation of violence can produce its own kind of violence. We are at a moment now in which there are a million ways to do the work to counter injustice as teachers, students, listeners, organisers, protestors, donors, volunteers, etc. Our writing does not have to be our only activism.

Philip Metres: When I read the work of fellow poets like Susan Briante, Craig Santos Perez, M. NourbeSe Philip, and many others, I’m in awe at the variety of poetic approaches and the tender tenacity, the ways in which they hold and

explore and also interrogate and lament the depredations of the powerful, and the traces they leave in the archives. That old cliché about history being told by the victors, in this information and digital age, is less true, but not entirely untrue either.

Reflecting on my practice and poetry in *Sand Opera* (2015) and *Shrapnel Maps* (2020), I see that I'm not interested merely in plundering archives of declassified government documents, for interrogation or deconstruction. I'm interested in undoing erasure, often about particular people that I know or whose lives have become proximate to mine. My friendship with Nahida Halaby Gordon, learning her story, inviting her to present at my Israeli and Palestinian literatures course over the years, meant that I was responsible. I was also a witness. Sometimes it's the reverse order—research begins the journey, and relationship clarifies it. Nahida, a Palestinian refugee from 1948, became the lens through which I understood the unique place of Jaffa in Palestine, and also the hints of what's been called Plan Dalet—the Zionist plan to remove Palestinians from the land. The Haganah leaflet that Nahida's father had in his papers burned in my mind for months. It seemed to be a door into understanding why Palestinian Arabs fled their homes in 1948. They have long argued that they were expelled by force and by fear. Israelis and those who support the Jewish state argue that they left of their own accord. The Haganah leaflet indicated a level of coordination that suggests otherwise—gathering the men in the centre of the city, asking for the Jaffa municipal archives to be secured for purposes of further land claims, etc. That Jaffa archive has 'disappeared.' Archives—at least as material repositories—are never complete, and are often curated and withheld by the powerful.

Another anecdote. The first place the Israeli Defense Force headed, upon invading Beirut in 1982, was to the PLO Research Center, in order to abscond with their archive. In the words of Thomas Friedman,

There were no guns at the PLO Research Center, no ammunition, and no fighters. But there was evidently something more dangerous—books about Palestine, old records and land deeds belonging to Palestinian families, photographs about Arab life in Palestine, historical archives about the Arab community in Palestine, and, most important, maps—maps of pre-1948 Palestine with every Arab village on it before the state of Israel came into being and erased many of them. (Friedman, 159)

So perhaps poetry, particularly poetry with the range and capacity for including masses of material evidence, can be a sort of counter-archive—part of what could

be summoned in a truth process in the future, as well as a marker for the present. As Briante and Perez both argue in their own way, the informal and human archives of stories, artifacts, songs, and other informal material create another history. The term ‘documentary poetics’ seems too small a term for what we’re trying to do, fixating on a formal procedure—working with documents—rather than on a poetic-political vision of what’s possible. Documentary poetry seems then to fall into an elegiac relationship with time and its materials. We need elegy, we need grief, but not being frozen in grief. What can the future look like?

When I say that I’m trying to situate *Shrapnel Maps* as a dream of a new past, I mean that neither the past nor the future are fixed, and in this apocalyptic age, we need to go further back to find a way out of the nightmare of the present-future. It’s about witnessing the palimpsest, not selecting a single history, but the many histories of that place, of that being-in-place. As the Palestinian poet Ghassan Zaqtan notes, “if you want to belong to this place, you have to belong to all of its history and respect 10,000 years of civilization.”⁵ And in an age of climate change, we should go even farther than respecting civilisation to respecting the persistence of creatures situated in ecosystems.

M. NourbeSe Philip: Notes towards Sealing Forensic Landscapes

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When I first visited the continent of Africa, invited as a guest of the Pan African conference, I took with me a small machine, a metal seal embosser that lawyers use to emboss their seal on affidavits after swearing document. I had stopped practising law but had kept mine. I carried that machine with me because I wanted to prove that something had happened. That my ancestors had been kidnapped and sold away from this continent I was about to visit, a place which had lived so large in the minds and hearts of the people of the cari basin. What document was I going to seal? Its non-existence was irrelevant. There was an urge to make the (un)memory matter—literally; to document and verify that something had happened and the affidavit seal would do that.

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As a law student I experienced a profound psychic disturbance as we were being coached and trained in the centrality of the law and the need, as future lawyers, to uphold it always. How could I? Why should I? When this very hallowed system once enshrined in its codes that I was a thing. Not a being who was always. Being. Human. How could anyone respect a system that generated such a belief? Against

being being. Could I be judge of that system. Find it, despite the trumpeted reliance on justice and precedent, severely lacking. It was that fundamental distrust, even as I acknowledge the universality of law—be it customary or traditional, or laws imposed through colonial systems—that underwrote my challenging the legal document, *Gregson v. Gilbert*.

(Question to myself: Are there any societies without laws?)

(Observation: The universe itself is governed by laws of physics that over time we have been discovering. The law of gravity pins us to the earth) Engaging with law is essential to being the being that is Is. Being human.

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We in the Americas live in forensic landscapes⁶—arenas where great crimes have been perpetrated, but which have never been acknowledged as crimes. Theft of the land from the Indigenous would constitute the original crime; theft and enslavement of African peoples would constitute the second and twinned crime. Could we argue—I want to argue—that since the commission of the crime, the perpetrators have been attempting through a variety of means, to erase and destroy the evidence of the crime—the continued survival of the very people who were trafficked—Africans. From discrimination of various sorts resulting in poverty, incarceration and in general shortened lifespans up to and including actual murder and lynching in the case of the US, the law has spawned a network of ways in which to destroy the evidence. Remember that even Lincoln had not intended that liberated African Americans would remain in the country. Indeed, the refusal to see what has happened as a crime—a crime against humanity—results in yet another layer of erasure of acknowledgment of the crime. Perhaps this refusal to acknowledge these founding crimes haunts American life and culture (I'm speaking here particularly of the US); perhaps this explains the country's cultural and societal obsession with crime—law and order—in its myriad forms, evidenced by the plethora of crime shows the public consumes.

The US is not unique in being founded in crime or wrongful action: after killing his twin brother Remus, Romulus founds Rome, which would later become the centre of a world empire. The Old Testament recounts that Jacob deceived his twin brother Esau, received his father's blessing and became the progenitor of the twelve tribes of Israel. Twinning, empire and crime—motifs which haunt the forensic landscape so many call Home.

!v

the logic of law vs the logic of the heart

Perhaps as a poet working in a forensic landscape where the laws function to erase and destroy evidence, where evidence of crime is continually discounted, documenting then assumes a different and perhaps greater significance. I am thinking of 'documenting' here in a sense different from the way we usually think of it—as using the archive or preexisting documents. I'm thinking of the poet as documentarian, documenting the Silence of the archive, because that Silence is where we, from whom so much has been taken, to whom so much harm has been done, reside. This Silence is akin to the virtual, digital world, which appears suspended in time but which has a mattered, matted, material aspect—the undersea cables, the mining projects that exploit people, the sweat shops employing low wage workers all creating this algorithmic landscape. That too is a forensic landscape of sorts. Special tools are necessary to read the Silence of the archive, and these tools, to quote Lorde, cannot be the master's. How do we write poetry within forensic landscapes—does it change the way we think about what we're doing? Do we become advocates, as I felt I had become when writing **Zong!**, on behalf of all those silenced voices on board the Zong? "Suppose the law/ a lie." Do those ex-aquaed voices become judge and jury? What's the verdict? I think it important to understand that the work we're doing at present is being done within forensic landscapes—we are the living, breathing evidence of the crime; we also inhabit the scene of the crime, simultaneously as we document for the purposes of evidence, for the purposes of the Ancestors, simultaneously as we sift the evidence for truth. In pursuit of another system of justice.

To be (dis)continued.

Facebook post dated May 30, 2020

Several weeks ago I wrote about the need to stoke our anger and nurture it for a time in the future, post pandemic, when we would need to draw on it to ensure that politicians did not claw back positive changes, or to force them to make necessary improvements. Think of the shambolic way in which long term care homes have been managed leading to the death of far too many of our older generation. Little did I expect that my anger would explode during the pandemic, as I heard myself wishing for retribution and vengeance in the wake of George Floyd's murder. Audre Lorde's essay, "The Uses of Anger," directed primarily to Black women, but relevant to all who care to listen to her wisdom helped to ground

those feelings. It is distressing but also remarkable how applicable her words continue to be. Excerpts from that essay follow:

(A)nger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification, for it is in the painful process of this translation that we identify who are our allies with whom we have grave differences, and who are our genuine enemies....(8)

Anger is loaded with information and energy....We operate in the teeth of a system for whom racism and sexism are primary, established, and necessary props of profit....(8)

Mainstream communication...wants racism to be accepted as an immutable given in the fabric of existence, like evening time or the common cold....(8)

We cannot allow our fear of anger to deflect us nor to seduce us into anything less than the hard work of excavating honesty...because, rest assured, our opponents are quite serious about their hatred of us and of what we are trying to do here....(8)

This hatred and our anger are very different. Hatred is the fury of those who do not share our goals, and its object is death and destruction. Anger is the grief of distortions between peers, and its object is change....(8)

Anger is an appropriate reaction to racist attitudes, as is fury when the actions arising from those attitudes do not change..(9)

For it is not the anger of Black women which is dripping down over this globe like a diseased liquid. It is not my anger that launches rockets, spends over sixty thousand dollars a second on missiles and other agents of war and death, pushes opera singers off rooftops, slaughters children in cities, stockpiles nerve gas and chemical bombs, sodomizes our daughters and our earth. It is not the anger of Black women which corrodes into blind, dehumanizing power, bent upon the annihilation of us all unless we meet it with what we have, our power to examine and to redefine the terms upon which we will live and work; our power to envision and to reconstruct, anger by painful anger, stone upon heavy stone, a future of pollinating difference and the earth to support our choices. (10)

This morning I listened to Sweet Honey in the Rock singing “Ella’s Song” (in memory of the civil rights leader and activist Ella Baker): “Those who believe in justice cannot rest...” and all I could do was cover my face and weep, for so much that I find inexpressible. I’m particularly grieved by the fact that we’ve all been made unwilling accomplices in becoming voyeurs to the murder and lynching of Black people, even as we are grateful that through digital technology we now have the evidence of what Black and African descended folX have always known. Can we, perhaps, console ourselves that we are witnesses, not voyeurs, in a system that has always fed on the trauma and death of Black bodies? I don’t know, but what I do know is that Black folX, supported by white allies, dragged the US, kicking screaming and murdering, to a better form of democracy, imperfect as it remains. Same with South Africa—not to mention the improvements we’ve been

instrumental in making to Canadian society in areas such as policing and human rights. Oh, but how we long to rest, how we long to rest... And breathe.

Facebook post dated June 19, 2020

I want to thank all who have received my posts over the last several weeks in generosity. I am not very adept at social media, but FB has provided me a space to manage the range of emotions I have had, beginning with the pandemic and morphing into the uprising in the aftermath of the lynching of George Floyd. It wouldn't be FB, however, if it hasn't also contributed to my own disturbance, but on balance it has helped to post. Am not sure why I write this—now. I've come to a place of rockstone silence that is more times than not filled with rage as I witness the mea culpas of companies and people acknowledging that they should have done otherwise regarding Black and African-descended folX. Anna Wintour of *Vogue* comes to mind here, as well as the awful b&w images of white celebrities 'confessing their racial sins.'

Why rage when the expected response should be joy at the revelation of what Black folX have always known and lived with—exclusion and rejection, from the subtle to the aggressive, from the emotional to the rational? Because those who were and are doing the exclusion, be it the individual or the individual on behalf of the system, knew and know what they were/are doing (witness the current Peel Board of Ed. and Parliament excluding Jagmeet Singh) and their current, often tepid, acknowledgement owes everything to the uprising and the fear and consternation it has generated. And yes, I do believe the burning and looting has had an impact. As it did in '68. Unfortunately the language of the system we live in and with is violence and that is the one language it best understands, MLK and non-violent resistance notwithstanding. I also know that systems change the better to remain the same, so I remain skeptical.

Earlier this week I saw myself as a landmine on which someone had just stepped and we were both going to explode when whoever it was lifted their foot; a grenade with a loose pin ready to explode at any moment. I did not want to see another Black man crying on t.v. or social media (pace(peace) John Boyega): I wanted them to take up arms. Alongside women. I wanted neither understanding nor pity—I wanted—the I standing in for the collectivity—to be feared and respected. This rage is mediated by an anguished grief as I read, or am told by friends, about experiences of racism, some going back many years. As I think of my own

experiences with racism. We, humans, all carry wounds but I'm reminded of Thomas Merton who wrote:

There are things the Negro knows that the white man can never know. Things which belong to the pure, unique, spiritual destiny of America, and which have been denied to the white man, will be denied to him forever because of his brutality to the Negro and to the Indian. So, too, there are things the Jew alone can know, things closed forever to the gentile, even to the best of Christians. (Merton 108)

I would add that the “pure, unique, spiritual destiny” has everything to do with who we, Black and African-descended people are. The evidence is there in all the beauty we have wrought out of the evil directed at us and given to the world. “They (Black people) know this evil” (107) Merton wrote. “They have seen it, kept silent about it, borne it for generations” (107). But we have been speaking out about it, working to change it, marching, rioting and looting—I claim it all, will not eschew any aspect of the struggle—yet it has to take a Black man being lynched in public for the great awakening to happen? (Aided, no doubt, by all the various spin-offs from COVID-19.) And by struggle I mean the worldwide struggle on the part of Black, African and African-descended people against white supremacy and its systems for equal rights and respect. Yet the murders by police continue and Billie sighs and begins to sing softly about “strange fruit... black bodies swingin' (again) in the Southern breeze.” To the white man who said “it takes time,” this is what Fannie Lou Hamer replied: “For three hundred and more years they have had “time,” and now it is time for them to listen.” And act, I would add.

The experiences and emotions described above have been akin to removing a bandage from a wound, only to find that the wound is septic, suppurating, has developed gangrene and the rotten, rotting substance has to be cut out, excised, removed somehow.

Today is Juneteenth and I extend my best wishes for the safety and wellness to the African American tribe/family of the Afrospora as I turn once more to Fannie Lou Hamer whose words are as relevant today as they were decades ago when she uttered them: “Nobody’s free until everybody’s free.” This week saw how the bloody struggle for civil and human rights for African Americans continues to redound to the benefit of others, in this case LGBTQ Americans. To repeat a statement I’ve made in an earlier posting—as imperfect a democracy as America is, it was Black folX and allies who brought it kicking, screaming and murdering closer to the ideals of what a true democracy should be. As also happened in South Africa, long heralded as a democracy even as it held millions of its Black citizens hostage in a brutal apartheid system. “Nobody’s free until everybody’s free” and once again I see Black folX, with some allies, straining and pulling the entire world to a higher and better system of free.

Happy Juneteenth!
May 2020-July 2020

¹ <https://kenyonreview.org/kr-online-issue/2018-marapr/selections/philip-metres-656342/>. Accessed 26 May 2021.

² <https://craigsantosperez.wordpress.com/2020/06/05/black-lives-matter-in-the-pacific-2020/>. Accessed 10 June 2020.

³ Gordon, Avery, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, U of Minnesota P 2008. 6.

⁴ Philip, NourbeSe, *Zong!* Wesleyan UP, 2008. 202.

⁵ Ghassan Zaqtan, « The Dead are Everywhere », interview with Ben Ehrenreich, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, October 22, 2013, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-dead-are-everywhere/>. Web. 7 June 2021.

⁶ The idea of forensic landscapes was sparked by reading about the work of Forensic Architecture, particularly the events surrounding the Ayotzinapa Case: A Cartography of Violence.

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