

Worlding Outwith, Devising and Surviving
Visitor Account on *Poets Don't Lie* -
by Gregg Bordowitz,
Rachel O'Reilly and Fred Moten

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Nta wutinya ijoro atinya icyo balihuliye mo

No one fears the night; one fears what can come out of the dark
—A Rwandan Proverb

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In the evening hours of the last Sunday of November of 2014, at the moment when the Autumn days were receding into colder nights, a gathering took place in Amsterdam. Outstanding vegan food was served, poetry resounded, music was played, the light shone on images while also some readings reverberated. This was the occasion of *Poets Don't Lie: Appropriation and the Proper Power of the Voice*, an evening organised in the context of If I Can't Dance's *Performance Days*. The evening was introduced by curator Vivian Ziherl in terms of a three-hour session held as a moderated symposium. The poets addressing the audience were activist, artist and poet Gregg Bordowitz, editor, critic, poet and curator Rachel O'Reilly and Fred Moten, student and philosopher of the black radical tradition. The tone of the proceedings took on more and more commemorative hues, and the addressees of the ensuing enunciations may have been all together different from the present audiences.

The context of this writing is a commissioned report, the intention of which is to relay on to you elements encountered during the above mentioned evening. Alternative to an audio-visual documentation, this writing attempts to make sense

of the events of which it is reporting, and it does so by mobilising elements internal to the subject position of the writer, as well as devices from further afield. As such, let us assume that, here, the writer is an active recording device and that the following paragraphs are components which invite and implicate us into the process of decoding and transmitting the putative recording. Arranged in dispersed and hopefully modest fragments, these paragraphs address recognition as a contentious but helpful category to think through a critical practice of a discursive kind, such as this moment in which *Poets Don't Lie* took place. In starting, I invoke the words of a friend, artist Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa, as she tries to envision “how [a] public commemoration can be structured in such a way as to respect the need to establish collective identity through remembrance of the past, but while allowing that act of remembering to be realistically complex, optimistic, dialogic and plural.”

1

“Putting forward a plan or suggestion, a formal or written one, for consideration or discussion regarding a major new high-speed operating system, a polyamorous marriage if you will, functioning in one continuous present across many time zones necessitates this primary question - how can we all give voice to, own, the words authored by others - poems, texts, songs, idioms, and whole genres - although the compositions being considered are generated from very specific, self-avowed subject positions that do not describe our own? Can we still lay claim? Should we regulate the migration of cultural forms? Can we? If we can, is it desirable?”

2

Artist Magnus Bårtås reminds us that *theoria* “is the Greek word for talking about something witnessed. If, during ancient times, someone experienced an extraordinary event, like the Olympics or a religious ritual, a *theoria* was performed when they returned home. *Theoria* consisted of a journey, a witnessing, and of the social situation when the person shared her experiences. In ancient times philosophers talked in terms of “ritualised visuality” that received a political significance where a person lived.”

3

The Dutch word *aanwezigen* transfers an intriguing meaning of presence. The prefix *aan-* indicates a possessive state and a vectoriality, let us say a sense of direction towards the self, perhaps also a certain notion of switching oneself on. The verb *wezen* translates as being – as we may deduct from verbal forms of *were*, *was*, *waren*. As such, a relative kind of presence is conjured, emergent and suggestive of an impulse, of an invocation. Presence here appears as a relation of performative gestures capable of activating elusive entities that reside inside as well as outside of us.

This sense of an ability of turning *on* our senses is nuanced from an understanding of a passive or inert forms of presence. In English, presence is made of the prefix *pre-*, before and *esse*, to be, as in essence the meaning of the latter may refer to being at hand, in sight; available, immediate; prompt, instant; contemporary. A presence may also bespeak of attendance, exposure, immediacy and emergency. It bespeaks of beholding, of witnessing.

4

Artist Lina Selander's film *Lenin's Lamp Glows in the Peasant's Hut* (2011) has been analysed by philosopher and critic Kim West through the enigmatic and astute device set in motion by the relationship between the camera and the sarcophagus. In search for an understanding of this relationship, West points the reader to film critic André Bazin. According to the latter, "at the origin of painting and sculpture there lies a mummy complex. The religion of ancient Egypt, aimed against death, saw survival as depending on the continued existence of the corporeal body. Thus, by providing a defence against the passage of time it satisfied a basic psychological need in man, for death is but the victory of time. To preserve, artificially, his bodily appearance is to snatch it from the flow of time, to stow it away neatly, so to speak, in the hold of life. It was natural, therefore, to keep up appearances in the face of the reality of death by preserving flesh and bone."

However, West subsequently draws attention to the etymological meaning of sarcophagus. In effect, a sarcophagus turns out to signify a stone that devours the flesh. In this instance, the sarcophagus is the antithesis of the camera. The latter is a dark room from which light emerges subsequent to which an image may be developed, and, as it were, an extinguished life may be resurrected. This image is in stark opposition to the "annihilating container" characterised by the etymological use of sarcophagus.

Possibly then, *Poets Don't Lie* as an event attempted to carve out a delicate space in which a "cameral interiority" could be attained. In particular, Moten's insistence to find an unavailable image of Michael Brown could be taken as a propositional strategy to be mobilised in the struggle to survive our own murder, since, possibly, our own murder extends to the seizure of our capacity to represent ourselves. This unavailable image, according to Moten, is opposed to the overly circulated and loudly mediated, sarcophagical depiction of Michael Brown as a lonely individual isolated and severed from any solidary ties; from love, community and kinship. Instead, according to Moten, the occluded image, the image to seek, "bespeaks of an erotic sociality", "derived from a maternal ecology". Seeking and developing this image equals or at least involves breaking apart, rupturing the laws of any necropolitical regime "that make such syntax possible"; and "to introduce a new semantic field/fold more appropriate" to our shifting needs. If so, what can we learn from this moment?

5

"[...] The ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die. Hence, to kill or to allow to live constitute the limits of sovereignty, its fundamental attributes. To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power.

One could summarise in the above terms what Michel Foucault meant by biopower: that domain of life over which power has taken control. But under what practical conditions is the right to kill, to allow to live, or to expose to death exercised? Who is the subject of this right? What does the implementation of such a right tell us about the person who is thus put to death and about the relation of enmity that sets that person against his or her murderer? Is the notion of biopower sufficient to account for the contemporary ways in which the political, under the

guise of war, of resistance, or of the fight against terror, makes the murder of the enemy its primary and absolute objective? War, after all, is as much a means of achieving sovereignty as a way of exercising the right to kill. Imagining politics as a form of war, we must ask: What place is given to life, death, and the human body (in particular the wounded or slain body)? How are they inscribed in the order of power?"

6

Consequently, "memory is a social product, reflecting the agenda and social location of those who invoke it. Drawing on Primo Levi, Lemarchand reminds us that the 'memory of the offence', no matter how inaccurate or constructed, 'is always selective' and hence fundamental for the creation of a 'convenient reality.'

If such are the conditions of life and death, what political motives are at the bottom of collective mourning ceremonies and how one part of the population is victimised while the other part is criminalised? Likewise, Vidal notes that the annual memorial 'ceremonies organised by the regime reveal an inevitable relation of power' as they hijack the commemorations for political ends by collectivising individual mourning and by imposing a political meaning on it. While recognising that 'individual mourning is politicised in that the government only officially recognises it during mourning week.' "

7

How can we commemorate those subjects that ruling regimes declare as non-existent, or, at best, as the enemy? How can we attend to the legacy of those who are not recognised as mutilated, violated, murdered? In what ways does mourning constitute a political act? Is public mourning an imperative rite in the process of social, cultural, economical and political recognition? Can we think of a mourning of a sanctioned subject that does not expunge the accountability and the responsibilities? How can we practice an ethics of recognition while refraining from anaesthetising, reproducing, replicating, reinforcing or appropriating each other's suffering?

As critical theorist Nancy Fraser writes, how can we "[...] see ourselves as presented with a new intellectual and practical task: that of developing a critical theory of recognition, one which identifies and defends only those versions of the cultural politics of difference that can be coherently combined with the social politics of equality[?]" Is it the call to such a task that was at the heart of *Poets Don't Lie*?

8

What are the forms of critiques that emerge from this oscillating conjuncture of commemorations? In finding a consensus of the meaning of critique here, let us follow Marina Garcés who, writing on *What Are We Capable Of?*, proposes a definition "that summarises the main aspects of a critical tradition in quite a transversal manner: 'Critique is a kind of discourse that has practical and liberatory effects on what we can see, what we can be, and what we can do.'" How can encounters be staged with and for these multiple audiences, visible and invisible,

past and future, while, at the same time, we shy away from precipitating the moment into a mystifying atmosphere? How can the commemorative event be construed in such a manner as to nurture an operative suspension in order to complexify our suffering? The narrative of suffering is a complex issue, the unfolding of which has the overwhelming capacity to silence the friend, the listener, the interlocutor, the audience. In the midst of accounts of suffering and victimhood, it is hard to offer or receive critique, it is intricate to produce discursive models. How can this unfolding of the narratives of suffering take place without compressing the encounter into an “un-nuanced wholesale” against which Nancy Fraser speaks? In what ways are such gatherings forms of ceremonies that go against the grain of the state’s monopolisation of the ceremony?

9

Ten years before, on the last Monday of 2004, another gathering of interest took place, this time at The Slought Foundation in Philadelphia. Titled *The Politics of Mourning*, this was a conversation with, or rather, an improvised dialogue between Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Eduardo Cadava and Jean-Michel Rabaté about geopolitics, mourning, and the work of philosopher Jacques Derrida. How to mourn Jacques Derrida? This phrase formed the guidance of the conversation. In the course of the ensuing dialogue, Eduardo Cadava reminded the listener that to mourn Derrida, who wrote extensively on mourning, “would involve, among other things, both to remain faithful and unfaithful to his work”. According to Cadava, the ways in which we can remain faithful to our befallen friends’ work is, paradoxically, to take the work elsewhere and to mobilise it in different contexts. For Cadava, the ‘activity of reading, interpreting, moving this text in another direction’ belongs to what Cadava would call mourning. Mourning here is redefined as “something like reading Derrida’s texts historically, within different contexts and trying to move them in different directions”.

10

“If you think about the beginning of Aporias”, Spivak narrates, “Derrida says something there which is quite obviously true, so I will repeat: that all cultures are cultures of death”. It so happens that in Kinyarwanda, “waramutse?”, the salutation equivalent to “good morning” translates as “did you survive?”

How to survive our own murder? How to mourn our own death? Writing on the subject of *mo’nin*’ within the aesthetics of the black radical tradition, Fred Moten quotes Elizabeth Alexander who writes about Emmett Till, a young black boy who was shot in the head for having whistled at a white woman. At the moment of his obsequies, Till’s mom, Mamie Till Bradley, decided to hold an open casket funeral. This was, according to Mamie Till Bradley, to enable the entire world to bear witness to the atrocity that a white farmer had inflicted to her son. If I may summarise, Fred Moten notes that, in the gesture of Mamie Till Bradley, in her intervention of an open casket, there is a sense of not so much defeating death but of surviving death, of performing in death.

If memory isn’t failing me, I am recalling a certain moment in Amsterdam in which artist and theorist Jean Matthee addresses Fred Moten with a remark on Moten’s use of the words wake, morning and mourning in describing the epigraphic

song that Moten played at the outset of his contribution. In response, Moten compares Julie Andrews' rendition of *My Favorite Things* with John Coltrane's takes of the same song. Here, Moten points to Coltrane's 'crowding of the same notes'. Moten reads this crowding, this multiple inhabiting of one same note, as a compelling response and a commentary on the singularly disturbed historical moments of civic disturbances in the United States. According to Moten, these moments compelled radical responses, using the means available to each of the artists and practitioners. More than one message had to be birthed, inserted and contained within the little given space. Perhaps this is what crowding the measure alludes to: to live multiple lives at once, fulfilling the duty for living more than one life. Can we say that we have the task to live our lives and the lives of those who were denied lives? In this manner, the others will live through us, and us will live through others. Not for revenge, but to live beyond death, by allowing others to live, by giving life to others, and by receiving life through others...

11

Speaking during the earlier sessions of his *How To Live Together* seminar lectures at the College de France in 1977, Roland Barthes narrates that the height of desolation in symbolic terms of humanity is the death without a sepulchre; by which Barthes means a death without an end, without an ending, without the performative sets of conventions that characterise a mourning, without the ability of the survivors to perform the *rituals*, the ones of which Antigone speaks of.

In a way, we have a duty of the custom to seek the unavailable image. "In Sophocles, Antigone questions Creon's 'proclamation' (k erúxas), the 'law' (nómos) that prohibits her from burying her brother, Polynices, who has been declared a traitor and punished by being denied the honour of a proper burial. For Antigone, Creon's law (nómos) seeks to 'override the gods, / the great unwritten, unshakeable traditions [nómima]'. Although, as we know, nómos, which can be translated as custom, is typically treated as consistent with law, Antigone's speech demands that we not simply conflate law and custom, that we not exclaim, all too quickly, that, here, at the navel of Western thought, law is actually at one with custom, united in the sphere of what Hegel refers to as 'the human law' (das menschliche Gesetz): 'the known law, and the prevailing custom' (das be-kannte Gesetz und die vorhandene Sitte). Set apart from law (nómos) in Antigone's speech, the word for 'traditions' is nómima: customs, usages. In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel, to whom modern communitarian political theory owes the determination of law, the family, and the state as moments of the customary—or, as it is usually translated, the 'ethical order' or the 'ethical life' (Sittlichkeit)—does not oppose law and custom (Gesetz und... Sitte)".

Grief may indeed reveal something about ourselves. During the conversation at the Slought Foundation spoken about above, Eduardo Cadava narrates that "when we experience loss, when we mourn something or somebody that we have lost then we reveal in that way that we have been touched by somebody else". As such, "one of the things that grief tells us is that [...] we are related to others. There is a way in which, in advance, we are related to others, we are bound to others, we are tied to others, and this relationality is something that both makes us who we are – we are the ones who are related to others – but also, dispossesses us in some way, since, it's precisely because of our relation to others that we are never

simply just ourselves”. On a synonymous tone, curator Binna Choi follows Maurice Blanchot’s understanding of catastrophe as an event that is conducive of a state of “subjectivity without any subject”, a state in which the catastrophic is capable of “destroying the property regime”. This state of subjectivity without a subject connotes with Fred Moten’s invitation for the Amsterdam evening to fall together, to inhabit the common fallenness, the wordlessness of blackness, its homelessness, its selflessness, its irreducible queerness, its resistance; provided that this falling is the refusal of samenesses of the reductive silencing of the state upon its fragile constituents.

Indeed, if we follow Fred Moten, moments of gatherings such as *Poets Don’t Speak* are invitations to fall together, to continue a common fallenness, to heighten the importance of a pause. The same invitation is found in O’Reilly’s presentation that investigates the gas imaginary on the Australian frontier. For O’Reilly, the divestment of corporate and personal divestment signifies an effort of learning how to give up and to denaturalise the actions, manners and possessions that are irrevocably detrimental to our lives and ecologies.

It is imperative then to question how this reduced self operates within or against the unyielding mechanisms of the capitalist machine. As Binna Choi continues in her exploration of the same subject, the capitalist machine cannot be stopped by catastrophe, it internalises the process of destruction. In fact it may set up the framework for the targeted destruction of lives, including the owning of the images of the dead and their remains. It is therefore not enough, if at all possible, to limit the fight against “the spectre of capitalism – massive, intangible, and intractable – but to fight the specific condition in which we operate, wherever we witness or experience oppression. Certainly, the latter fight will be channelled into the former.”

12

Inside, Mourning in the Presence of the Corpse, a work by artist Walid Sadek’s. As the announcement of his exhibition reads, the work grapples with “a poetics for a social experience governed by the conditions of protracted civil-war. It builds on a meditation [...] on a social system in strife unwilling to agree on the meaning of death. To mourn in the presence of the corpse is an attempt to turn the obstacle that is the object of after-death into the pivotal material for a livable sociality that shares a commonality with the dead, resisting various sinister forms of erasing the complexity of history in the name of reconstruction projects.” Here, Sadek’s work, like the intervention of Till’s mother, “puts forward a pensive space that is potentially aside the binary of outside and inside.”

This carving out of a space to speak, to mourn, this refusal to die, this survival of our own death is an imperative to build a future, using the means at the hand of each of us.

13

The Rwandan philosopher Isaïe Nzeyimana speaks of a double occurrence of both shame and guilt that is produced by the instance of violence. Nzeyimana notes that as a victim and survivor, the act of violence which scars the person is coupled with a sense of shame and guilt. The guilt emanates from the principle of reversibility, from the knowledge that, a human, any human including oneself, is capable of this.

The shame comes from having been exposed and witnessed such a humiliating act. Naturally, it is likely that neither of the protagonists, the victim and the oppressors, may concede to the sharing of this negative common. On the part of the perpetrator, the guilt comes from the memory of the act of violence, whereas the shame is resuscitated by the sight of a face of the survivor. Following the magnetic words of postcolonial theorist Leela Gandhi, it is not inconceivable to devise an ethics of suffering in which solidarities can be formed, “nauseatingly enough”, to quote Gandhi, between victims and oppressors. However, still the question remains as to what strategies to adopt in order to convince the perpetrators that they are also, to a certain measure, affected?

14

In conclusion, as Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa wrote to me in correspondence, in the face of the systematic “unlawful killing of men of colour by law enforcement officials and vigilantes, the near total refusal of the US courts to hold the perpetrators to account, the crippling political indifference” compels to question if “such a certain ethics of suffering has not already been in existence for centuries among communities of colour battling for their survival within white supremacist regimes. As people of colour living in white supremacist societies, we expend a lot of time and energy educating, comforting, reassuring, (healing?) and winning over white people, many of whom see any social or economic redistribution that brings justice to people of colour as their loss and consequently as a threat, many of whom are resistant to acknowledging their own guilt and complicity (historical, contemporary, individual, collective), many of whom are resistant to in any way feeling bad. In a space of falling that Moten speaks of, in the strategy of divestment that Rachel O’Reilly proposes, where does retribution happen? Where does restitution take place?

15

Snejanka Mihaylova’s work titled *A Song* concluded the day. Here, the propriety of the voice was put into practice. Through a series of readings, songs and canticles that summon *The Gospel of Thomas*, Mihaylova invocation alluded to a politics of resistance composed through a religious vocabulary discarded by the religious authorities of the tradition from which the gospel in question speaks.

At this instance in Amsterdam, it is possible to speak of Mihaylova’s invocations as epiphanic, as a work that speaks in tongues. In alignment with the preceding poets who do not lie, this mode of mobilising our speech through the voices uttered by others, even if this utterance happened in antiquities of millennia ago, builds up a fruitful ecology that disarms the isolating grip of captivity. The charged multiplicity of aligned voices points also to the thematic of synonimities, to different sameness, of connections between the subjects affected by the violence against which such voices may speak. The sensible and sensitive vocalities enable to say the unsayable, to speak beyond death, and to overcome the silencing imposed upon us or self inflicted, to survive our own murder.

16

It is probable that this correspondence reads more as a questionnaire than a report.

If that is the case, let us suppose that a question can be a searchlight that could be useful in the process of devising the unavailable imaginaries, in the wake of our loss. If such questions raise the political and ethical stakes of “mourning what remains of lost histories as well as histories of loss”, the questions may “establish an active and open relationship with history. This practice—what [Walter] Benjamin calls “historical materialism”—is a creative process, animating history for future significations as well as alternate empathies”.

This visitor report by Christian Nyampeta was written at the invitation of If I Can't Dance, and follows the panel session *Poets Don't Lie*, including presentations by Gregg Bordowitz, Rachel O'Reilly and Fred Moten, with a discussion led by Vivian Ziherl, that took place during the Performance Days festival, 27 November - 3 December 2014, Amsterdam.