

BLACK BODIES BLACK FIELD(S): 20TH CENTURY AND CONTEMPORARY
POETICS OF THE BLACK BODY IN AFRICAN AMERICAN POETRY AND
VISUAL CULTURE

by

RONALDO V. WILSON

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<u>November 2, 2008</u>	<u>Distinguished Professor Meena Alexander</u>
Date	Chair of Examining Committee
<u>December 1, 2008</u>	<u>Professor Steven Kruger</u>
Date	Executive Officer

Distinguished Professor Meena Alexander

Professor Michele Wallace

Distinguished Professor Wayne Koestenbaum
Supervision Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

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Ronaldo V. Wilson

Adviser: Distinguished Professor Meena Alexander

This dissertation is a contribution to the growing field of black poetics, exploring the obliterated black body and its juncture with poetry and visual art. It examines the black body's construction through a conceptual field that reveals both its violent fragmentation and its difficult repair, leading to a larger exploration of the poetics of the black body in 20th century and contemporary African American Poetry and Visual Culture, primarily, through the work of the poet Gwendolyn Brooks and the artist Ellen Gallagher.

Chapter one, *A Bronzeville Mother's Vision: The Visual Poetics of Gwendolyn Brooks and Emmett Till*, situates Brooks' poems, "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon" and "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till," against the famous photograph of the fourteen-year-old lynching victim Emmett Till. Ellen Gallagher's early paintings, "Host" and "Blubber," provide the spatial frames crucial in this reading.

Chapter two, *Theater-In-Seizing the Black Body: Mourning, Ownership and Display*, centers on a postcard of an unnamed black man lynched in an abandon plantation field, prompting this question: *Can poetry serve as a space where these violent fields can be articulated?* Focusing on Brooks' lynching poem, "Ballad of Pearl May Lee," and Gallagher's painted-sculpture, *Preserve*, I explore such necessary conceptual forms in the face of the black body's violation.

Chapter three, *The Violated Body: Narrative Arc(s) of Possibility*, analyzes Hilton Als' reading of lynching photographs in *Without Sanctuary*. I pair Als' analysis with my own of Amadou Diallo, situating several writers' responses to the black body's violent public spectacle, to include Brooks' autobiographies, as well as work by poets Elizabeth Alexander and June Jordan, and theorists, Kimberly Benston and Fred Moten.

Chapter four, *Carrying Hate in Front of You and Harmony Behind: On Process and the Inscrutable Black Body*, considers *how* the black body's narrative might be retrieved through various texts captured in process. I explore a manuscript version of Gwendolyn Brooks' "the children of the poor" through Ellen Gallagher's notion of the "drawn and the printed," while examining the work of contemporary poets, Claudia Rankine, Lucille Clifton, and Dawn Lundy Martin.

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Black Bodies Black Field(s): 20th Century and Contemporary Poetics of the Black Body in African American Poetry and Visual Culture

This dissertation begins with a phone call, received in a small room, atop a house at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown almost ten years ago. *Some of us were talking about the reading that you gave the other night, and I'd like to talk to you about it.*

Your work is gratuitously violent is what the fiction writer told me later, over tea, sitting at the big, square table where I wrote every morning. I tried to explain to him that violence was pervasive in the works that I was reading, and the poems emerged from that stream. I pointed to a shelf of books, and pulled down a few, Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*.

I clarified that I was trying to find a language in my poems that traversed my meditations on violence, sometimes from headlines like "Cops say 81-year-old Ruby Jean Johnson was raped and then slain by a crack addict last year in her Harlem Apartment," the flash of light in her glasses in the photograph in the *Daily News*, cutting across some recent material I was reading on Roland Barthes' in his *Pleasure of the Text*. I recall trying to describe how a poem might contain, interpret such events, *outside of language*.

He was not listening. I wanted him to go away, but I also wanted to address him, or the spectacle that stood in front of us, with a clarity that was slipping away from me as I decompressed between the pressure of the poems I shared, those to be written, and the language I wanted to find to explain why this *gratuitous violence* was necessary in my writing. I took my tea cup back. I kicked him out of my house when he stopped me, saying *I shouldn't write of such things*.

What I did not have then, but I have now is a spatial frame in which to capture this exchange. What I realize, is that phone call, his visit, and writing those poems led me to the central question of this dissertation project. How might the inner structure of the poem serve as a medium through which to address the role of the violated black body's radical fragmentation, and the difficulty in trying to find a language that might be revealed in recuperating its pieces?

Perhaps the spatial frame is not a frame at all, but rather a broken field fractured within a frame, the explosive site I was to find in Gwendolyn Brooks' poem, "Boy Breaking Glass," whose central lines read:

I shall create! If not a note, a hole,
If not an overture, a desecration.

I would later discover in Brooks' first autobiography, *Report from Part One*, that her poem was written as a commission in response to the question of "how ghetto blacks, overwhelmed by inequity and power, manage to live." I was first struck in these lines by how Brooks' poem turns this answer through the voice of the poem's speaker. He "creates" in the absence of a "note," a "hole" – and where an "overture" may not sound, he finds potential in the fragmented, the broken apart, "a desecration" as a point of departure.

During that same fellowship year at the Fine Arts Work Center, I encountered the art of Ellen Gallagher, who visited that winter and gave a slide talk of her work. I was taken by the abstract minimalist fields that she used to contain what she described as the "black inscrutable," her own visual lexicon of fragmented black-face and 19th century

minstrel images, meticulously layered and painted into penmanship paper. What struck me was how Gallagher presented a sea of broken body parts, laboriously organized into the intricate patterns of her abstract paintings as a way of revisiting the history of the black body's social and psychic representations.

Discovering Gallagher's art work, and listening to her describe it, helped to give me a new way to understand the spatial arrangements of the violated black body. It brought me back to Gwendolyn Brooks' poetry, with a keen eye on how the black body manifests as a field of violation both within her work and beyond.

What constitutes this field—what fragments and pieces exist between the black body's *desecration* and its *inscrutability*? I am interested in Brooks' finished poems as much as in her approach to writing about the historically desecrated black body. Similarly, I engage with Gallagher's finished paintings as much as with how she works with the inscrutable black body as material.

Through their works and artistic processes, Brooks and Gallagher reveal that which exists between poetry and visual art, linking the torn apart with the difficult to capture. This project serves as a space through which to reveal this highly fraught zone, a field where a poetics of the black body resides. Contributing to the growing discussion of black poetics, this dissertation explores the violation of the black body and its recuperation through Brooks', Gallagher's, and a number of others' works in the following chapters outlined below.

Chapter one, *A Bronzeville Mother's Vision: The Visual Poetics of Gwendolyn Brooks and Emmett Till*, situates Brooks' poems "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon" and "The Last Quatrain of

the Ballad of Emmett Till” against and within the graphic, famous photograph of the fourteen-year-old lynching victim Emmett Till’s bloated corpse. Examining the photograph of Till’s body, I address its violent spectacle within the context of the visual arena of Brooks’ poems. Situating Brooks’ poems next to Till, I rearticulate his photograph within a close reading of its central characters. Using the theorist Jonathon Crary’s work to open up the idea that Brooks’ poems help to reveal “new subjectivities,” through her “field of attentive practices,” I explore how the author focuses on the body as an abstract landscape through her works. Ellen Gallagher’s early paintings “Host” and “Blubber” help to provide the spatial frames crucial in this reading. Next to these works, Brooks’ poems, I argue, transform Till’s body into a field that extends beyond poem and picture.

In chapter two, *Theater-In-Seizing the Black Body: Mourning, Ownership and Display*, I start with a postcard of an unnamed black man, dead and roped to a tree in an abandoned plantation field from the *Without Sanctuary* exhibit catalogue. I explore what it means to meditate on this image, leading to an analysis of the violated black body through Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*, Dora Apel’s *Lynching Photographs*, and Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life*. Utilizing Michel Foucault’s writing on extravagant torture in *Discipline & Punish* as a template through which to read the plights of the unnamed black man and several other lynching victims, I attempt to answer this question: *Can poetry serve as a space where these violent fields can be articulated?* Focusing on Brooks’ poem the “Ballad of Pearl May Lee,” and centering on the inner structure of the poem as a way to explore the photograph’s details, I turn to Gallagher’s “painted

sculpture,” *Preserve* to explore how conceptual forms such as those explored by Brooks are necessary in the face of the black body’s violation.

Chapter three, *The Violated Body: Narrative Arc(s) of Possibility*, begins with an analysis of Hilton Als’ reading of the lynching photographs in his catalogue essay in *Without Sanctuary*. I pair his readings with my own of slain Amadou Diallo, the Haitian immigrant killed by NYC police in 1999, whose court autopsy images floating in cyberspace operate as a metaphor of the black body’s violation in the public imagination. I situate a number of writers’ responses to the black body’s public spectacle, to include autobiographical and archival material by Gwendolyn Brooks and critical writings and essays by Elizabeth Alexander, June Jordan, and James Baldwin. To this end, I propose a theoretical frame for looking at the black body as an aesthetic through the work of theorists Kimberly Benston and Fred Moten to explore the landscape as an ever-expanding collective site, negotiated in the face of multiple and complicated narratives of violence.

Chapter four, *Carrying Hate in Front of You and Harmony Behind: On Process and the Inscrutable Black Body*, is an exploration of *how* the black body’s narrative might be retrieved through various texts that reveal this process. I look primarily in this chapter at a sonnet from Gwendolyn Brooks’ cycle “the children of the poor” and a manuscript version of the poem. Here, I explore the role of process between Ellen Gallagher’s notion of the “drawn and the printed,” centering my work on specific examples in Brooks poetry, unpublished manuscripts and letters, next to Gallagher’s process as she describes it through essays and interviews. I use my analysis of their projects to explore the work of Claudia Rankine and Lucille Clifton, as they write about a

modern day lynching victim, James Byrd, who was dragged to his death in Jasper, Texas in 1998, leaving a trail of blood and body parts stretching for two miles. I close with the work of Dawn Lundy Martin, who understands “formlessness” as a primary site, a mode that reveals the process of the black body, caught in a constant state of becoming, rendered as she puts it, “inchoate,” that which is unfinished, what is “unknown” as the black body’s radical formation.

Chapter One: A Bronzeville Mother's Vision: The Visual Poetics of Gwendolyn Brooks and Emmett Till

From the first it had been like a
Ballad. It had the beat inevitable. It had the Blood.

From "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon"

She kisses her killed boy.
 And she is sorry.
Chaos in windy grays
 through a red prairie.

From "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till"

In Gwendolyn Brooks' poem "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon" and "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till," the poet revisits the subject matter of the famous lynching and subsequent trial of Emmett Till. In the summer of 1955, a fourteen-year-old black boy, Emmett Till was tortured and killed, by several accounts, for "wolf-whistling" at Carol Bryant, a white woman and wife of the owner of a convenience store in Money, Mississippi.¹ One possible narrative is that Till, on vacation from Chicago visiting his extended family in Mississippi, was abducted from his home three days after the alleged encounter between him and Caroline Bryant by Bryant's husband Roy Bryant and his half brother, J.W. Milam. Several accounts say that there were at least five people involved in his abduction and murder. Till was reported to have been viciously beaten, tied by barbed wire to a cotton gin fan and shot in the head; some accounts point out that Till had a drill

¹ Christopher Metress, *The Lynching of Emmett Till: A Documentary Narrative* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2002) 2-3.

bit lodged into his head when his bloated and desecrated body was found by the fishermen who pulled it out of the Tallahatchie River.²

His mother, Mamie Till Bradley, had her son's body returned home to Chicago and wanted to make sure that his body was in plain and obvious view, so as she put it, "everyone [could] see what they did to my boy."³ In fact, Till's open casket was viewed by over 50,000 spectators by the first Friday night of his funeral in Chicago, and the image of his corpse ran in numerous magazines and newspapers, including the *Chicago Defender* and *Jet* magazine in 1955. During his three-day funeral, it is estimated that over 600,000 people would come to view his body.⁴ Many argue that this image of Till was a primary spark of the modern civil rights movement⁵:



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² Ibid. 6-7.

³ Ibid. 29.

⁴ Elizabeth Alexander, "Can You Be Black and Look at This?: Reading the Rodney King Video(S)," *The Black Interior* (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2004) 189.

⁵ Christopher Metress, *The Lynching of Emmett Till: A Documentary Narrative* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2002) 2-3. Metress points out that, as David Halberstam, who covered the Mississippi beat as a young correspondent recalled, "The murder of Emmet Till and the trial of the two men accused of murdering him became the first great media event of the civil rights movement."

⁶ Emmett Till laying in a casket, 1955, Photo. David Jackson, Chicago Defender, 1955.

Brooks' two companion poems are arguably written from numerous vantage points, but center primarily around Caroline Bryant and Mamie Till Bradley, respectively, offering two distinct frameworks through which one might explore this event against this famously gruesome and public display. For my project, I am interested in examining the aesthetic space between these two linked poems against Till's image as a way of making a larger argument about the violated black body in a greater discourse of violence and spatiality.

In other words, by situating Till's image next to Gwendolyn Brooks' two companion poems, I hope to organize a poetic frame around and through the violation of Emmett Till by examining the visual narrative possibilities that extend between the image and the poems. To this end, I am interested in not only the social arrangement of Till's body – that this triggered a communal response to the crime and ultimately its display – I also hope to interpret how Brooks' poems provide a lens into an internal landscape within the events surrounding Till's death, revealing as much the scene's destructive violence, as its potential as a site of reparation. Brooks' companion poems, I will argue, in fact, help to create a necessary psychic terrain after the violent event, an alternative visual field, one that operates complexly and in the face of Till's murder and his body's public exhibition. By examining the poems, themselves, as a visual field, one that expands within the same trajectory as the famous image of Till's body in the casket, I hope to reveal them as part of a greater theater of the black body that I am exploring throughout this chapter and the greater dissertation project.

Jonathan Crary's work in visual studies is helpful in my examination of these connections, particularly in thinking about how Brooks' poetic eye casts its unique

perspective upon Till's lynching and his body's display. In *Suspensions of Perception*, Crary offers several modes through which to think about visual art in relation to cultural spectacle. Of particular note, he theorizes about what he calls the artist's *field of attentive practices*, where he emphasizes how subject matter manifests from the artist's internal landscape to its exterior manifestations. He details this process in his writings about 19th century works by the painters Manet, Seurat, and Cézanne. Crary places their works and the artists' practices within a fluid and dynamic context, one he describes as follows:

The field of attentive practices offers a single heterogeneous surface on which discursive objects, material practices, and representational artifacts do not occupy qualitatively different strata but are equally involved in the production of effects of power and new types of subjectivities. Thus I am not interested in recovering a primary or "authentic" meaning that is somehow immanent to these works; rather, by examining them I hope to construct some of the field of their *exterior*, to multiply the links to this exterior, "to remain attentive to the plural" of these paintings, where "everything signifies ceaselessly and several times"⁷

What strikes me as important in thinking about Brooks' work in this context is how Crary discusses these artists' relationships to their work as it manifests in the exterior world, beyond the "authentic" meanings immanent to these works." The more direct argument I am attempting to make by considering Crary's observations next to Brooks' poetry is that as Brooks interprets Emmett Till's murder, I would argue that she reveals a complex and infinitely plural field of representation, operating both within and beyond his violent death and its graphic presentation in the photograph. What is the range of the plural landscape of this photograph, and what to make of its display? Though this photograph is not visual "art," I am attempting to read the space between Brooks' poem and the photograph as a visual field, a performance, one that Mamie Till Bradley was

⁷ Jonathon Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1999) 7-9.

engaged in when she decided to show her son's body, so that "that everyone could see."⁸ This gesture lends itself to this question: How can I read the production of Brooks' poem that stems from the narrative of Till's graphic display? Brooks' poems about Till's lynching make meaning, offering a new way of seeing Till's body and the traumatic image and narrative that is left behind. How she confronts and interprets Till's narrative makes clear a landscape that reveals her poetic discourse, one which begs another central question: How does she reveal, through her poems, new subjectivities, and ways through which to reconstruct Till's public and visceral demise?

In order to interrogate Brooks' "new subjectivities," within her poetic frame, it might be useful to consider Crary further, where in writing about the visual artists that he explores, he points out that "each of them engaged in a singular confrontation with the disruptions, vacancies, and rifts within a perceptual field; each of them made unprecedented discoveries about the indeterminacy of an attentive perception but also how its instabilities could be the basis for a reinvention of perceptual experience and of representational practices."⁹

At the center of his writing, for me, is that this attentive perception, and in fact attention itself, is highly fraught, because of the instability of what may come into view, as the artist observes. Crary is interested in how Western modernity since the nineteenth century has demanded that individuals define and shape themselves in terms of a capacity for "paying attention," that is, for a disengagement from a broader field of attraction, whether visual or auditory, for the sake of isolating or focusing on a reduced number of

⁸ Christopher Metress, The Lynching of Emmett Till: A Documentary Narrative (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2002) 29.

⁹ Ibid.

stimuli.”¹⁰ What are the ways that Brooks pays attention to Emmett Till? How, through her poems, does she attempt to remap “perceptual experience” and “representational practices” through Emmett Till and the narratives that surround him? What implications does this pose for thinking about how his body as a public spectacle refracts into the greater public imaginary, to include those of the 600,000 that may have seen his corpse during his funeral procession, and the many millions more who later saw his famous photograph?

I begin this chapter with the first two lines of Brooks’ longer poem and the last four lines of the quatrain as a way of framing these questions. Till’s murder and display as well as its role and immersion in the public imagination as a site of violence is re-articulated and re-situated in Brooks’ poem as, perhaps, a means of creating a wider context where his demise might be further revealed. Let me continue by situating Brooks’ companion poems. In an interview Brooks says about the works:

I wrote about the Emmett Till murder because it got to me. I was appalled like every civilized being was appalled. I was especially touched because my son was fourteen at the time, and I couldn’t help but think that it could have been him down there if I’d sent him to Mississippi. That was a very personal expression. I tried to imagine how the young woman, the one who was whistled at felt after the murder and after the trial, after her sight of the boy’s mother. What it was like to live with a man who had spilled blood. I imagined that she would have certain cringing feelings when he touched her – at least I know I would.”¹¹

In Brooks’ “very personal expression,” she offers – I am borrowing again from Crary here – a perceptual field where she articulates the event through her feelings, how

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Gloria Wade Gayles, “Gwendolyn Brooks: Roy Newquist/ 1967,” Conversations with Gwendolyn Brooks (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2003 c. 1967) 35-36.

she was “touched” as she thought about her own son. This field becomes further complicated where she imagines what Caroline Bryant might have felt “after the murder and after the trial, after her sight of the boy’s mother.” In her assessment of what Bryant may have been thinking, she posits this primary scene – one bound by sight – in her poem.

Most strikingly, Brooks enters the poem through the observation, “What it was like to live with a man who had spilled blood?” Echoing the opening lines of the poem, “...It had the beat Inevitable...it had the blood...” Brooks, here, is interested in the “cringing feelings” at the center, the heart of the poem’s production. In what comes after, the poet enters the space of feeling, where Roy Bryant *touches* Caroline Bryant. In this space, Brooks creates a new visual field, re-inventing, shaping the poem around the instabilities that shift between the husband and wife. This tension reverberates through Brooks’ *feeling* what it could have been like to live with a man who spilled blood. She places herself within the landscape of desire, a tactile field, and out of this, the poem unwinds. In it, what set of attentive practices does Brooks help to articulate as she renders this poem within this terrain of embodied possibilities?

That she was reminded of the vulnerability of her own son, as well as what it must have been like for Bryant to see Emmett Till’s mother is perhaps most related to how she *feels* her way into the subject matter of the poem, as if her own body is the vehicle for her to explore another mother’s vulnerability. In fact, through her body, Brooks is able to consider the various players within the theater of the events surrounding Emmett Till’s demise. With this, how might examining the relationships between the figures within “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns

Bacon,” reveal “a production of effects of power and new types of subjectivities,” which operates throughout?¹² What are the connections between how Brooks envisions herself and the figures through the poem?

The poem’s title is, in itself, a dramatically layered reframing of the event. In it, the reader is located and charged to think about the relationship between the two mothers, both caught in a kind of suspended animation, one waiting, the other in the middle of cooking for her children. For Till’s mother, the Bronzeville Woman, she is loitering, waiting to find out not only what happened to her son, but also much later the result of the trial. For Caroline Bryant, the mother of three boys of her own, Brooks points the reader to Bryant as The Mississippi Mother, in the kitchen, curiously, in the midst of burning bacon. As she waits, is Bryant wrestling through the reality of what it means to have been the catalyst of Till’s death? Or is she burning the bacon with some passion to see it fry and crumble to such blackened pieces that will be charred out of her imagination? As Bryant is suspended looking at the bacon, how is Brooks modulating time and space between the texture and space of the image that comes into view?

In this space, one of waiting and perhaps an inconsolable burning, Brooks announces a poem, the start of an imagined ballad. The following, the poem’s opening lines are crucial, because they not only announce the critical discourse of the poem – a poem imagined within a poem – they also manage to announce the experience of the personae as she imagines the way she might have constructed a poem to capture the horror of the event. Brooks begins the poem:

¹² Jonathon Crary, Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1999) 7-9.

From the first it had been like a
Ballad. It had the beat inevitable. It had the blood.
A wildness cut up, and tied in little bunches,
Like the four-line stanzas of the ballads she had never quite
understood—the ballads they had set her to, in school.¹³

These lines confront the reader through the poet's understanding of the body as if it is bound within the score of the ballad, Brooks' beat "inevitable," forming between blood and ballad, body and flesh. As an embodied field, the poem depicts the theater of a larger black poetics within its carefully constructed narrative.

As Brooks imagines the central figure of the poem in Caroline Bryant, writing a poem, she lays out a connective thread within it, a line tying Brooks' own interpretation of Till's demise to the act of her poetic figure's attempts to recreate the narrative. Here, Brooks imagines a space where Caroline Bryant might have started to construct what happened in the framework of her ballad, *after the murder and after the trial, after her sight of the boy's mother*.

Why is the form of the ballad so particular for Brooks? How does the Ballad encapsulate the visual? In one way, it offers a psychic landscape, where the poem's form is suspended through the question of its sound, ultimately, and perhaps only to be revealed in its blood. The opening lines add to the urgency of the event Brooks suggests in the title, an urgency which moves from the question of form to the sound of the poem's structure – its beat – to the embodiment of its tragic end, a beginning in blood.

Announcing itself within the context of the ballad, the poem prepares the reader for a narrative of mourning, offering a space for the tragic event to be sung, a place of healing

¹³ Gwendolyn Brooks, "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon," *Blacks* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1994) 333. First published in *The Bean Eaters* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1960).

through song. In fact, the space that Brooks compels us towards exists somewhere between mourning and creation. As her work is a poem within a poem, how does it exist as a kind of song within a song, the poem's sonic and embodied articulation of one event within the framework of another? In another way, by announcing the poem as a ballad, Brooks announces a narrative voice, sung for an audience. If the poet's song, through the ballad, is a way that the reader hears the song and understands the plight of Emmett Till – how do we not hear the “beat” of the poem next to the severe “beating” and annihilation of his body?

Yet in its sonic shape and form, the song is captured, contained within a tightly drawn frame. As such, Emmett Till's violated body, through the imagined ballad, appears as an embedded metaphor within the poem, framing the close quarters of Till's own body through the text. Where the poem had “a wildness cut up, and [is] tied in little bunches,” Brooks' point of view through the poem oscillates through an enclosed field of the sonic and the visual. In these lines, I imagine Brooks to be presenting Till as poetic landscape, as though his body is trapped in and haunts the poem, layered into where his body rests, captive and captivating, within the casket. Perhaps it is in these tight and bloated quarters, where the poet must begin to construct in order to explore what happened after Till's violent torture and display. Brooks, throughout the poem, gives the reader an embodied landscape that plays out into a larger poetic theater. She creates a dynamic space where her verse is set into motion through Till's implied body, moving the poet through the poem – Till embedded and captured within, as his figure expands as a constant after-image.

In fact, Brooks assigns Emmett Till his own embodied visual landscape. This landscape is made up of Till's body, and manifests through the poem. In the third stanza, where the poet constructs her narrative, she realizes that "there was something about the matter of the Dark Villain." And later, as she confronts the reality that the villain was a child, the process of the poem's construction is disrupted: "The fun was disturbed, then all but nullified/When the Dark Villain was a blackish child/of fourteen." And again, later in the poem, where the speaker of the poem imagines the boy's death, she writes of "The Gradual dulling of those negro eyes." In each of these places, Till's body is staggered into view as a series of embodied abstractions that are hinged by both the construction of the poem and the theater of the body as it is violently articulated into view. Whether "matter," "a blackish child," or frighteningly displayed as the "gradual dulling" of "negro eyes," Brooks layers Till's image into the viewer's imagination through an accreting visual field, one that comes to the viewer through the imagination of the poet within the poem. These layered abstractions are crucial to the poem as well as to a larger frame that Brooks presents: Till as a spectacle, within the poem, operates as a visual spectacle of possibility outside of it, matter that expands against the frame in which it is contained.

One image is embedded within another, so that the after-image of Till that Brooks sets forth in the opening lines of "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi, Meanwhile a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon" not only implies Till's body, but offers a radical landscape of the black body shaped from the perspective of the speaker and poet within the poem. In "The Last Quatrain for the Ballad of Emmet Till," Brooks expands

the landscape of the poem through Mamie Till Bradley as the poet imagines this mother contemplating her son's death.

The poem begins with the epigram, "AFTER THE MURDER,/AFTER THE BURIAL," in a bold declaration of what Brooks discusses in her interview, her desire to capture the moment after the events surrounding Till's murder. It might be useful, here, to examine the brief "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till," in its entirety:

Emmett's mother is a pretty-faced thing;
 the tint of pulled taffy.
She sits in a red room.
 drinking black coffee.
She kisses her killed boy.
 And she is sorry.
Chaos in windy grays
 through a red prairie.¹⁴

This poem gives way to the face of Emmett Till's mother, who is dramatically described as, "a pretty-faced thing,/ the tint of pulled taffy/ she sits in a red room/ drinking black coffee." The tint of pulled taffy acts as a visual echo against the texture and tone in photograph, a twinned surface where the visual texture of Bradley, "a pretty faced thing," is set in violent relation to Till's bloated face in the casket. Against the closed-in flesh-like landscape, both bodies expand through the shared visual field of the "red room" and "black coffee." Here, Brooks presents a landscape of color, liquid, and skin, all giving the reader a tactile visual field through which to experience this display of horror and sorrow. Through this field, the poem centers itself around the black body as a fluid landscape, as viscerally dense as it is expansive.

¹⁴ Gwendolyn Brooks, "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till," *Blacks* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1994) 340. First published in *The Bean Eaters* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960).

I would like, here, to consider Roland Barthes, in *Pleasure of the Text*, where he asks: “How can a text, which consists of language, be outside of languages?” In order to do so, he argues that such a text must “destroy utterly, *to the point of contradiction*, its own discursive category, its sociolinguistic reference its (“genre”). It is a matter of effecting by transmutation (and no longer only by transformation), a new philosophic state of the *language-substance*; this extraordinary state, this incandescent metal, outside origin and outside communication, then *becomes* language”¹⁵

By starting the poem with the epigram, *After the Murder*, and *After the Burial*, Brooks announces the realm of the poem, which exists outside of the time and space of the event itself. In placing the poems outside of this realm, or at least out of any kind of direct narrative, Brooks presents a transmuted form in which the poem resides. Perhaps Brooks must create – through a visual landscape – a language through the poem that maps the perceptual field of Till’s murder, one complementary to the visual narratives in which his body is assigned. This landscape – one that exists outside origin and outside communication – offers the unique language/landscape that Brooks presents in her poems.

In its four closing lines, Brooks extends what might be understood as a “language substance” through Till’s mother’s actions, where the fluid theater of violence extends through her poetic universe:

*She kisses her killed boy.
And she is sorry.
Chaos in windy grays
through a red prairie.*¹⁶

¹⁵ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975) 79.

¹⁶ Gwendolyn Brooks, “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till,” *Blacks* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1994) 340. First published in *The Bean Eaters* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960).

Brooks gives the reader a vision in the poem that circulates through the realm of Bradley's perceptual and conceptual experience. These lines help to form, enclose, and encapsulate a relationship between the experience of the poem and what remains left behind in the field of vision, a fissure where the reader falls through the reality of Till's death through a landscape of poetic, conceptual possibility, his body extending across a vast, visual field. How do we begin to interpret this space, or begin to understand its possibility, pleasure, elasticity, its mourning within this narrative landscape? How does this landscape encapsulate the realm of the black body?

Brooks writes about the ways that Till remembers her son with a succinct finality where she writes: "She kisses her killed boy./ And she is sorry." At this point, does the reader of these lines imagine Till's mother kissing her dead son's bloated face? What does it mean to put these figures in such close approximation with one another, the living hinged with the dead?

Mamie Till Bradley, it is reported, realized through her son's death that the violence inflicted upon Till was common, that the relative safety that boys like Till had in places like Chicago as late as the 1950's was no indication of how violence could occur in other parts of the United States, particularly in the South. This was a reality that Till's mother confronted in her life as it struck home and heart in her own son's murder.¹⁷ So when the mother kisses her killed boy, the final two lines of the poem are paramount, because they help point to the relationship between the mother's sorrow and what expands beyond it, a deep and limitless loss that extends beyond her own personal

¹⁷ Christopher Metress, The Lynching of Emmett Till: A Documentary Narrative (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2002).

mourning into an abstract field, a field tied to a language that exists, perhaps, outside of language, residing within the visual. By the poem's end, Brooks paints a field of color:

*Chaos in windy grays
through a red prairie.*

How is this field – the windy and grey space of memory, and the endless red-prairie – tied to this great well of loss? Is Brooks, here, articulating a language of loss that can only be meted out in poetic space; and how, in this windy gray and red prairie, might we read the language-substance that is able to contain the volatile image of Till's bloated corpse? For me, drawing these lines together is crucial. They point to the relationship between a poetic landscape of inwardness, against, inside of and around Till's famous image that circulated in so many newspapers. At the same time, within this visual echo, both lines come together, joined not by language but, again, by language substance.

In Brooks' *red prairie*, a kind of bloody, embodied prayer, how are we to accept and extend Till's body beyond this image and through this landscape? Perhaps what the reader is left to see and experience in the poetic landscape of the body is a kind of red and endless field in which Brooks reveals its own shifting terrain. This terrain gives to the reader a poetic theater, one taken from a public imaginary and rendered into the poem as a painterly field. The ballad, then, becomes as much a visual plain as a sonic one, and through this landscape, Till's photographic display is endlessly articulated, as part of the visual field explicitly rendered within the poem.

An examination of Irit Rogoff's writing on geography and the body's landscape helps to provide a more complex way of thinking about the conflation between Till's bloated corpse and the landscape that Brooks both enters and attempts to refashion in her

poems. Rogoff describes visual culture, through a feminist-deconstructivist lens: “If feminist deconstructive writing has long held the place of writing as the endless displacement of meaning, then visual culture provides the articulation of the endless displacement of meaning in the field of vision.”¹⁸

In one way, thinking about Brooks’ poetic landscape, next to the bloated and desecrated image of Till in an open casket, presents and helps the reader to re-articulate a poetic landscape, a geography, within and against a larger visual field. Rogoff describes one theoretical realm of such a visual field as follows:

It is an understanding that the field is made up of at least three different components. First, there are the images that come into being and are claimed by various, and often contested, histories. Second, there are the viewing apparatuses that we have at our disposal that are guided by cultural models such as narrative or technology. Third, there are the subjectivities of identification or desire or abjection from which we view and by which we inform our view.¹⁹

Till’s body, in its torture and killing, in its loss and display, in its embodied poetics, becomes a field which demands an articulation of the relationships between its historical formation and its poetic possibility. The visual display of Till’s body, whether viewed by those at his funeral, in the newspapers and magazines, or across Brooks’ poems, are figured within a complex framework of contested histories. One of the things that Christopher Metress points out in his project, what he calls his “narrative documentary” of Emmett Till, is that there are multiple stories that constitute how a larger audience interpreted Till’s narrative. In fact, his text compiles hundreds of accounts of Till’s narrative, from his disappearance, his murder, through the trial, the Bryant and Milam’s post-trial confession and beyond. His research invokes a landscape

¹⁸ Irit Rogoff, *Terra Inferna: Geography’s Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2000) 38.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 32.

where what becomes visible is Till's trial in a greater theater, one in which Brooks' poems reflect, refract and bring back into view Jonathon Crary's notion of a perceptual field, again, where he writes that, "everything signifies ceaselessly and several times." It is within this stream where we might consider the range and scope of Brooks' work, a place where the poem opens up to a larger, accreting space that both contains and transcends Till's body.

For my concerns, the multiple ways and modes that Till's image is articulated is dependent upon a number of viewing apparatuses, from magazines to newspapers, to include Brooks' poems. It is important to note that the geography of Till's body is predicated upon the relationship between the image of his body within the technologies of its display, his image reiterated in the framework of both a larger public imagination *and* through the inner and public terrain of Brooks' poems. Given that I am trying to privilege Brooks' poems as a key framework, how might the viewer/reader continue to see or configure Till's body within Brooks' specific, expansive, poetic landscape?

What I hope to explore, further, is a means through which to read between both poems as a vehicle where I might consider the site of the black body. Till's body is an ever-expanding field, a terrain within itself, a reiterative site that must be read through multiple and equally fluid contexts that exist somewhere between the ballad within the first poem and the widening, abstract field of the second. Each of the poems operates across the other, breaking through the landscape of the body, the flesh that exists between the two landscapes.

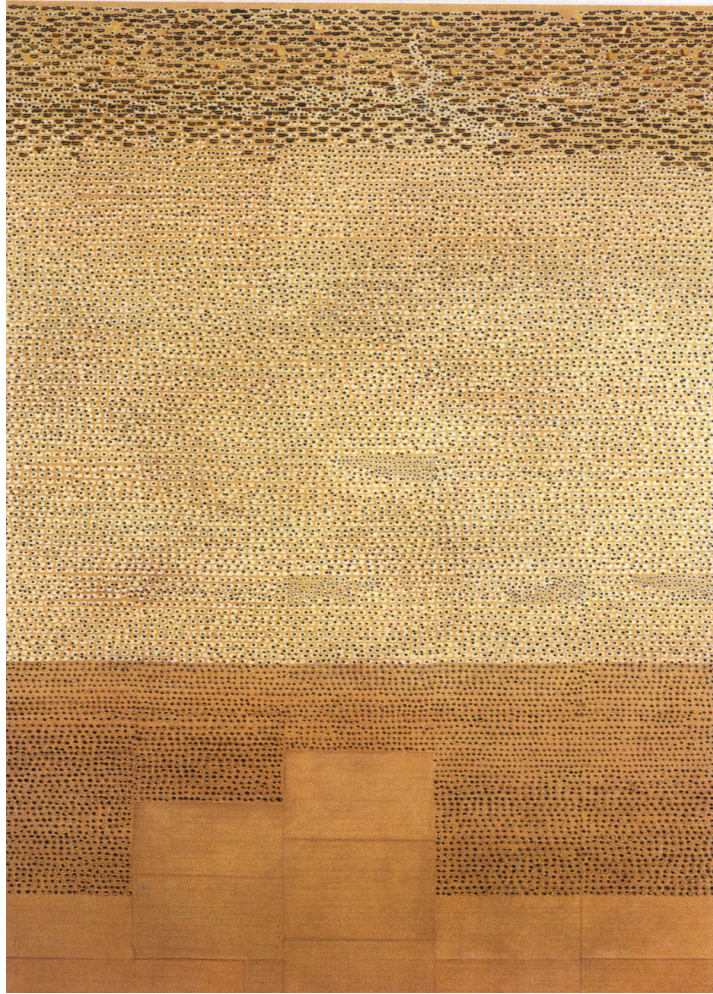
To read between these two poems is to offer a visual genealogy of the black body and its surrounding poetics. What are the limits of this poetic landscape, and how might

one begin to think of bringing the figures in the poem in concert with the image of Till's body? How do we continue to bring the narratives of his body through a reading that might contain it while expanding it through the larger, conceptual fields of the poem and beyond? Till's body, I would argue, is a figure that could quite possibly be at the center of Rogoff's field of identification, the abject focal point through which the viewer (or in Brooks' case, the reader) might see and expand her point of view.

One way of centering this frame might be found in thinking about a similarly expanding visual poetics in the art work and theory of the contemporary visual artist Ellen Gallagher. Gallagher's works offer a unique set of heuristics through which to discuss the fragmented black body, and might be instructive in attempting to theorize Emmett Till's body both within Brooks' poem and beyond. Gallagher's art, and the theoretical frameworks she presents in her work, offer a way to read the black body across a spatial system through which to confront a larger narrative of the black body's fragmentation.

In many of her early paintings, Gallagher uses a number of racially charged super-signs, abstracted body parts, fat lips, bugged-out eye balls, and swooshing hair symbols, that she repeats as they appear obsessively, through the large abstract and minimalist

terrain of her works.



“Host” 1996²⁰

Gallagher became most famously known for large paintings – “Host” is 69 x 50 inches – where she layered sections of penmanship paper into Agnes-Martin-like grids, over which she painted racially charged iconographic and embodied symbols that were recognizable according to more than one critic, upon close inspection, as representations of the eyes and lips of African Americans as we know them from movies, photographs and comic strips.

²⁰ Ellen Gallagher, “Host,” Oil, pencil, and paper on canvas 69x50 inches, 1996. Collection of the Seattle Art Museum, Washington. Ellen Gallagher: Catalogue for the Exhibition October 17—December 31 2001 (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2001) 61.



“Host” 1996 (Detail) ²¹

Evident in this detail of “Host” is that Gallagher’s rendering of the black body reveals a visual landscape, a complex field, where she not only addresses these “recognizable” modes of representation in her work – those perhaps at play within the various technologies suggested in Rogoff’s work – but she uses them to create a whole, yet abstracted body, a body in pieces, refashioned and reorganized in her work’s own distinct conceptual space. In the middle of the disembodied black lips and eyeballs, blonde floating heads swim, their tongues out, licking, their blue eyes scanning the surface of Gallagher’s embodied field. She helps to make up the disembodied black subject into what Gagosian gallery describes as part of “a poetic myth of the black oblique.”²²

In this notion of a Gallagher’s mythology of the black oblique, I would like to think about situating Brooks’ poetic figures and their configurations throughout “A

²¹ Ibid. 60.

²² Gagosian Gallery, Press Release for ExeLento September 14—October 23 2004
<<http://www.gagosian.com/exhibitions/24th-street-2004-09-ellen-gallagher/>>.

Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon” and “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till.” In one sense, what Brooks achieves is in keeping with Gallagher’s work. Brooks – across these poems – situates the figures of her work through an embodied terrain.

In an interview where she is asked about the role of her examination of stereotype in her art, Gallagher says that “People get overwhelmed by the super signs of race. And I’m never trying to avoid those signs. I say this is the given and that’s where I build from – it’s the idea that dark matter is expansive not reductive”²³ Like Gallagher, Brooks articulates the black figure through a conceptual framework, one that allows for dark matter – the black body, its narratives, its histories – to expand. It might also be important to consider that Mamie Till Bradley, in her decision to display her son’s bloated corpse, was also aware of the ramifications of allowing the image of Till’s body to be read as a public spectacle, one that would expand in the larger public imagination.

Consider this, from the center of “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon”:

...But there was a something about the matter of the
Dark Villain.
He should have been older, perhaps.
The hacking down of a villain was more fun to think about
When his menace possessed undisputed breadth, undisputed
Height,²⁴

As Brooks captures Bryant thinking of the Villain in her poem, she reproduces a racialized history of the white damsel in distress in the body of her character, setting up

²³ Jessica Morgan, “Interview,” *Ellen Gallagher: Catalogue for the Exhibition October 17—December 31 2001* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2001) 26.

²⁴ Gwendolyn Brooks, “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon,” *Blacks* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1994) 334. First published in *The Bean Eaters* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960).

the Dark Villain (Read Emmett Till as Monstrous, Black) as the agent of her demise (Read Caroline Bryant as Vulnerable, Weak and White). Till is not of undisputed height or breadth, his body is not marked as such, because, in the end, at his end, he was quite the opposite: a fourteen-year-old murdered boy. However, his body, within the poem, is tied as much to the landscape as it is to Brooks' construction of Till as a figure of despair. How does the author manage to think about the relationship of the criminal and monstrous to Emmett Till's imagined and real body? How might we read through this narrative beyond its allegory and think about its relationship through the question of both its complicated representation, metaphorical and actual annihilation, as well as its scale?

In order to address these questions, one may need to understand that what Brooks does so skillfully is to weave together the fragments of the pieces through a framework that hinges upon these assertions: when his body is undisputed, the whole of him operating as a kind of frame for the ever expanding, undisputed breadth and height, this boy becomes a figurative space, something that opens up as a field within Brooks' universe. In the poem, the imagined and real Dark Villain's body *is* hacked down. It is precisely that violent act where his body is released into the poem, offering a space where one might reconsider Till's actual body. It opens up like a field, its pieces breaking apart through Brooks' poetic terrain. As the poet works through the landscape within the poems, she also expands the framework through which her figures operate.

Gallagher's work, in its expanse of matter, offers another way of thinking about this question of scale. She often provides conceptual spaces, where narrative possibility exists through her manipulation of embodied symbols that expand into fields outside of the very grids in which she houses them. In an interview about her art, she remarks:

I am thinking about the spatial relationships between bodies. The content in the work is not sequential but spatial. So often black bodies have been materially and physically constricted and I think that I am less interested in locating “being” inside the body – in order to make the point that being doesn’t *only* exist inside the body. Like most Americans I am obsessed with captivity, but this is not a slave narrative. It’s *after* the explosion. The fracture has already happened.²⁵

In Gallagher’s work, the artist is interested in a kind of after-economy of the explosion. In many ways, she re-organizes the chaos after the event. Brooks and Gallagher share this technique, both of them working against confinement, the captivity of the black body, both making a visual field which responds to this through the creation of a larger, expanding visual landscape. It might be helpful to illustrate this through the following:

²⁵ Jessica Morgan, “Interview,” Ellen Gallagher: Catalogue for the Exhibition October 17—December 31 2001 (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2001) 26.

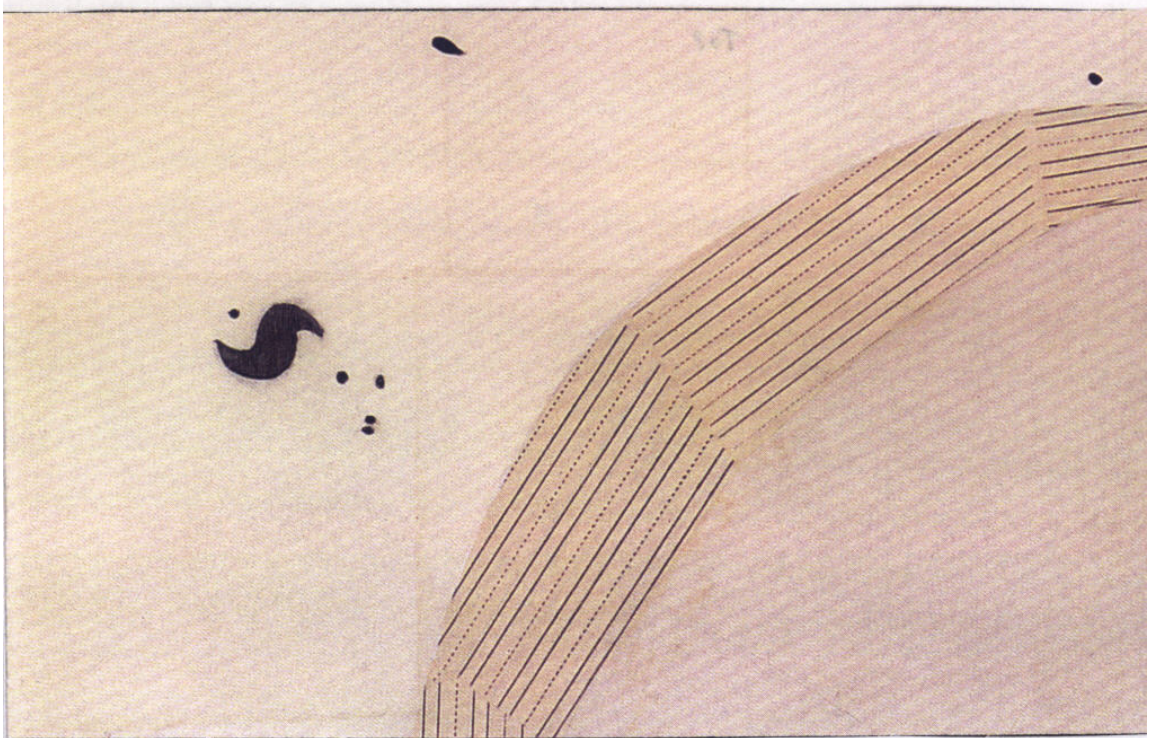


“Blubber” 2001 (Large Detail Section)²⁶

“Blubber,” a very large work, 120 x 192 inches, reveals some of the symbols, which migrated from “Host.” Gallagher’s use of the hair swooshes and lined paper which

²⁶ Ellen Gallagher, “Blubber,” Ink, pencil and paper on linen 120x 192 inches, 2000 Courtesy of the Gagosian Gallery, New York. Ellen Gallagher: Catalogue for the Exhibition March 10- April 14, 2001 (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2001) 20.

served as the underpainting in “Host,” expand here into a less dense field, where the lined paper is cut and shaped into delicate shavings of their former selves, morphed into half and quarter moons. The blond hair symbols have been stripped from the faces, like wigs, rendered black and left to float freely throughout the airy-pink surface of the painting.



“Blubber” 2001 (Detail) ²⁷

Like Brooks, Gallagher offers a narrative trajectory that attempts to capture the difficult, if not impossible, fragments of the violated black body, ultimately articulating it through a conceptual narrative. By looking at the landscape that Till’s body encompasses in Brooks’ work, one might be able to re-see Gallagher’s embodied painting, *Blubber*, as a similarly fraught visual landscape. Gallagher’s visual surfaces, the pieces and abstract

²⁷ Ibid. 21.

parts, the blond wig conscripts, turned to exploding black matter, allow for a fluid language substance, to borrow from Barthes again, to make visible the black body as an expanding field and site.

How does one interpret the circulation of Till's image, his body, through a poetics that extends through Brooks' poems? How do we read the sequence of images that are articulated through such an explosive field? What Brooks does in presenting two poems between one another is offer a radical fracture between the event and Till's violent end. The language that we are asked to follow through the poem situates itself within a similar narrative that builds around the embodied fragments and pieces in Gallagher's works. Gallagher says of her work that she is interested in articulating a space between and within highly rendered frameworks; in fact she points out that, "In terms of the space that I'm making, I think that if I were an installation artist no one would question the amount of space my work takes up but because it is framed, painting is quite unlike the ephemerality of installation. The frame is very important to me – it's one of my attractions to print making – you work against constriction."²⁸

How does Brooks similarly conceive of and tell a story within a frame more akin to an art installation than a poem? What are the limits of her frame and how does she negotiate constriction?

²⁸ Jessica Morgan, "Interview," Ellen Gallagher: Catalogue for the Exhibition October 17—December 31 2001 (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2001) 22.



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Surely, Brooks was well acquainted with this image; perhaps she was a part of the 50,000 who viewed Till's body in Chicago, took note of the bloated and disfigured face, the still, seemingly living straggle of his hair, his body big beyond any shape of his fourteen years. The neat tuxedo surrounds his body, the crisp white shoulders, the black jacket emerging within the constraints of the coffin. What Brooks does, through her poems, is imagine and articulate a space, where she sorts out the chaos of Till's demise through a visual field of her own making, one I read through a landscape of blood, a visceral abstraction, slowed and rearticulated in her work. Brooks moves us out of this terrain through the black body and tightens her poetic frame around what happens *after the explosion*. And like Gallagher, Brooks understands that *the fracture has already happened*, and through its pieces, she presents a visual theater of the black body's poetic formation.

What did Roy Bryant, Jay Milam and the others hope to contain, capture, and hack, murder, main and kill, if not an ever-expanding field of undisputed breadth, and

²⁹ Emmett Till laying in a casket, 1955, Photo. David Jackson, *Chicago Defender*, 1955.

height, some looming and monstrous black body that Brooks attempts to articulate within the complicated layers of her poetic voice, a voice resounding, where she says, “I tried to imagine how the young woman, the one who was whistled at felt after the murder and after the trial, after her sight of the boy’s mother. What it was like to live with a man who had spilled blood.”³⁰

Consider this section from the stanza, a crucial one, in which the author attempts to capture Caroline Bryant, sitting at her dinner table, setting her children, the dinner and herself up for the meal just before her husband arrives home. Brooks paints Bryant in the middle of this domestic scene:

She made the babies sit in their places in the table.
Then, before calling Him, she hurried
To the mirror with her comb and lipstick. It was necessary
To be more beautiful than ever
The beautiful wife
For sometimes she fancied he looked at her as though
Measuring her. As if he considered, Had she been worth It?
Had she been worth the blood, the cramped cries, the little
stuttering bravado,
The gradual dulling of those Negro eyes,
The sudden overwhelming *little-boyness* in that barn.
Whatever she might feel or half feel, the lipstick necessity
was something apart. He must never conclude
That she had not been worth it.³¹

Here, Brooks is not exactly concerned with the question of murder but rather the value of the murder in the speaker’s imagination, particularly whether or not Till’s death was worth the beauty and honor of Caroline Bryant. Even though Bryant and Milam

³⁰ Gloria Wade Gayles, “Gwendolyn Brooks: Roy Newquist/ 1967,” Conversations with Gwendolyn Brooks (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2003 c. 1967) 35-36.

³¹ Gwendolyn Brooks, “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon,” Blacks (Chicago: Third World Press, 1994) 335-336. First published in The Bean Eaters. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960).

were acquitted of the murder, they confessed to torturing and murdering Till after the trial.³² How is Emmett Till's violent death layered within these lines?

As Brooks imagines Bryant settling down her children, the poet captures Bryant making sure that she is beautiful. Brooks paints the personae in the poem imagining her husband, "measuring" her, considering whether or not her beauty was worth Till's murder. It was also widely discussed in the various newspaper accounts that Bryant was pretty, in fact, a former beauty queen.³³ The question of her beauty and honor – something to be protected and saved – oscillates within the South and extends through the American imaginary. In its most straightforward and simple terms, an early critic of Brooks, Harry Shaw, writes that it "is an important poem, for it epitomizes and dramatizes the fantastic unreality that prevails in the white man's concept of and the dealings with the black man. The significant role of the pretext of protecting the white woman from black inhumanity makes the poem's theme central in dealing with the relation of whites to blacks."³⁴ Shaw, here, attempts to set forth in his argument that Brooks' poem fits within a larger sociological framework that encompasses these power relations. For me what resounds in his analysis is Shaw's notion of Till as a stand in for "black inhumanity," an idea that Brooks, herself, opens up in a carefully measured manner throughout her poem.

Perhaps the tantamount question comes at the end of "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon," in what Caroline Bryant thinks as she imagines what her husband Roy Bryant thinks as he looks at her, the

³² Christopher Metress, The Lynching of Emmett Till: A Documentary Narrative (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2002) 2-3.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Harry B. Shaw, Gwendolyn Brooks (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980) 57.

“beautiful wife”: “Had she been worth It?” For me, the question of Till’s brutal murder, the value of his death against Bryant’s beautiful life is important, particularly insofar as it represents a landscape of torture, one that the viewer might place against the horrific image of his body in the coffin. Brooks paints what “It” becomes in a litany of violence: the blood, the cramped cries, the little/ stuttering bravado,/The gradual dulling of those Negro eyes,/ The sudden overwhelming *little-boyness* in that barn. The words themselves mark a space where the black boy is both activated and animated, his conceptualized figure turning into a metaphorical field, his body expanding into a complicated landscape, the *little-boyness* in that barn.

In the middle of this domestic scene between Caroline Bryant and Emmett Till, Brooks reconfigures Till’s violated body within the space of the poem and the structure of the barn as a twinned, spatial entity that echoes against the image of Till’s bloated body in the coffin. At the same time, the reader sees Bryant making up her body, reconstructing its prettiness through mirror, comb and lipstick – *a body that was worth it* – we imagine Till’s body caught in the barn and, ultimately, displayed in the coffin.

What Brooks creates – I would argue – are two complicated bodies bound by one another, two fields circulating together through small, spastic yet expanding spaces. Out of this, Brooks’ projections of Bryant’s feelings are articulated by the stanza’s end: “Whatever she might feel or half feel, the lipstick necessity/ was something apart. He must never conclude/ That she had not been worth it.” One way of thinking about the relationship between Caroline Bryant and Emmett Till has to do with how Brooks uses Caroline Bryant to conceptualize them as necessary doubles. Within this notion that Shaw’s “pretext [was] protecting the white woman from black inhumanity” rests the

reality that Bryant triggered her husband and the events that led to Emmett Till's death. Brooks articulates this through Bryant's poetic personae, who wishes to articulate Till's centrality as an extended metaphor within her imagined ballad. Brooks brings them both into her poetic landscape by making them exist in constant relation to one another. Here, Brooks attempts to capture what Caroline Bryant, herself, understands about the construction, the composition of this relationship:

The one thing in the world that she did know and knew
With terrifying clarity was that her composition
Had disintegrated. That although the pattern had prevailed.

The breaks were everywhere. That she could think
Of no thread capable of the necessary sew-work.³⁵

The reader witnesses the complexity of Brooks' charge as she deals with the subject matter, the murder of a black boy, and the desire of a white woman who, in the poem, tries to reconcile the complex layers of her own agency within an embodied text, however fragile. What Brooks creates is the spatial field of the artist, one which opens up into a larger, shifting landscape of the body. What is striking for me is the way that Brooks layers the experience through the poem, its composition, *disintegrating*.

Composition and disintegration – how does Brooks' poem fit between these two conceptual possibilities? The reader is charged to think about the relationship between what it means to open up a spatial field and what occurs in the poem as it exists within these extremes, the particularized and “particleized” the “*composition* of that which had *disintegrated*” and the “*matter* of the Dark Villain.” Composition, disintegration, matter:

³⁵ Gwendolyn Brooks, “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon,” *Blacks* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1994) 335. First published in *The Bean Eaters* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960).

these particles shape into a form made of fragments that flow between Brooks two figures, but how, in the end, will Caroline Bryant keep the pieces together? I would like to reiterate, where Brooks writes:

*The breaks were everywhere. That she could think
Of no thread capable of the necessary sew-work.*

The poet reveals a field of fragments, pieces that cannot be sewn together, because there is no thread to bind what must remain; instead, they drift as sites of indeterminate oscillations of fragments, shards, and pieces. However, Brooks brings these figures together within a conceptual whole, figures bound within a framework of a poetic body across two poems, suspended within the poetic line.

It might be helpful at this juncture to turn again to Ellen Gallagher, whose visual frames offer a way to consider this body's composition. Thyrza Goodeve discusses Gertrude Stein's modernist sensibility as she describes the "painterly-poetics" of Ellen Gallagher's works. She points out that, in an interview, Gallagher says, "I am interested in both a painting's immediate appearance and what it can manifest slowly. And maybe that is what links me to a modernist sensibility. I am interested in the way materials manifest meaning."³⁶ From *Host to Blubber*, Gallagher's images move from offering a traceable narrative that, at first, contains a number of readable figures, blonde wigs, lips, and eyes, and then expands to what are largely abstracted images, less determined shapes in which these bodies are formed. In the earlier narratives, Gallagher asserts a transparent narrative but in *Blubber*, the narrative is exploded, the fracture breaking into a field of pieces. For me, Brooks' initial coupling of Till and Bryant functions as a kind of

³⁶ Thyrza Goodeve, "Curtain Rises," Ellen Gallagher (London: Anthony d' Offay Gallery, 2002) 3.

accreting, fragmented matter, her materials marking a site of decomposition and seemingly impossible re-creation that is Brooks' attempts to organize the experience of seeing Till (and perhaps Till tied to Bryant) as a figure that operates as a collectivizing poetic field. Perhaps this accreting manifestation of Till's body through Bryant's is borne through the realm of trauma, and what remains are the collected fragments of despair.

Next to Gallagher's work, Brooks offers a similarly complex spatiality, her poems arguably moving from a more concrete terrain to abstraction. Considering this movement, I would like to explore this question: how does Brooks mark and rearrange her poetic field, the fragments fractured and then organized through her poems? I would assert that in Brooks' two poems, she embraces Till's traumatic history, and the larger one that this entails, by assimilating this history through representational to radically abstract forms of representation. But the question remains: How does her work rearrange the space between the trauma and recovery of his image and the narratives that surround it? To consider this question, it might be helpful to look to the trauma theorist Cathy Caruth, who explains that "Modern neurobiologists have in fact suggested that the unerring "engraving" on the mind, the "etching into the brain" of an event in trauma may be associated with its elision of its normal encoding in memory." She writes specifically about the important connection "between the *elision* of memory and the *precision* of recall" that manifests for the traumatized victim. Caruth discusses the work of Pierre Janet, pointing out that he "proposed that traumatic recall remains insistent and unchanged to the precise extent that it has never, from the beginning, been fully integrated into understanding."³⁷

³⁷ Cathy Caruth, Trauma: Explorations in Memory (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) 153.

What is this inexact exactness, this memory not quite fully integrated into the mind? Perhaps the poem is the zone where these fragments come together, however evolved – in these seemingly contradictory modes – for the viewer. What are the ways that Emmett Till fits within Brooks’ field of memory and poetic recall? And how does this poet present a new history complex enough to contain Till’s image, its understanding and history?

Within these contradictions, it might be useful to think of Caruth’s discussion of how the traumatic images return as “flashbacks,” containing, “a history that literally has no place, neither in the past, in which its precise images and enactments are not fully understood. In its repeated imposition as both image and amnesia, the trauma thus seems to evoke the difficult truth of a history that is constituted by the very incomprehensibility of its occurrence.”³⁸

Brooks weaves a poem around the horror of Till’s display and the narrative that accompanies it, confronting Till’s memory and the narratives that surround him through her poetic lens, bringing into view as much the difficult truth as its incomprehensibility. The space between the elision of memory and the precision of recall, the realm between image and amnesia, operates between each other as a kind of open wound, rich for poetic inquiry. In her research, Caruth writes about the need for the traumatized subject to assimilate trauma as fragmented material, much of which seems unassailable except for the distance collapsed through poetic narrative. She conceptualizes this experience:

Traumatic memories are the unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences, which need to be integrated with existing mental schemes, and be transformed

³⁸ Ibid.

into narrative language. It appears that, in order for this to occur successfully, the traumatized person has to return to the memory often in order to complete it.³⁹

In order to consider this passage fully, I think it might be useful to think about the narratives that surround Till's display, the sites of memory that function as what I imagine as the underbelly of Brooks' poems. That Till's image in the casket is a site of trauma is certainly clear, but how do we map the multiple narratives that bring his *body* into view? Not only must we consider the impact of the image on Brooks and the larger community of people who internalized the image of his bloated corpse, we may also think about the ways that his demise is subject to multiple narratives that surround his death. It was not solely the murder, but the trial which stimulated discussions around the event. If the events during the trial illuminate the poem, how do they play out in Brooks' work? How might the author's interpretation of the players in her poem be set in a kind of counter-narrative to how Bryant's family landscape is revealed in the greater media? Here is a report of the family in the courtroom according to the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 20 September 1955:

The four handsome sons of Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam squirmed, squealed, climbed, ran, cried, laughed, chewed gum, ate candy, drank liquids and played cowboy in the courtroom Monday as their fathers went on trial for murder....Once Bill Milam picked up a toy pistol and fired an imaginary shot at Roy Bryant Jr. Bill, the oldest child present, clambered over the rail and stamped down the aisle making little boy noises. He ran his hand along the courtroom railing pickets, apparently deriving great satisfaction from the machine-gun clack-clack he produced. The 2-year-olds whimpered and wriggled. Bryant spoke sharply to them and cautioned them to be still. A spectator passed the boys chewing gum. Mrs. Bryant rocked from side to side in attempts to calm her

³⁹ Bessel A. Van Der Kolk and Onno Van Der Hart, "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and The Engraving of Trauma," *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* Ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) 153.

youngest. Bill Milam by then had climbed to the top of the rail where he stood precariously and shouted a greeting to his cousins.⁴⁰

These children are suspended, in this article, captured, out of control. This court scene is as much a part of the narratives surrounding Till as is the murder itself. They offer possible narrative scraps that help Brooks bring the situation into view. Brooks, in her poem, maps the essence of the rambunctious children. The poet attempts to create a space where the children are articulated into the fabric of the story, offering another way of seeing them. For the poet, the children's behavior is crucial and serves as a vehicle that operates at the heart of the poem. Here she captures their interactions with one another in the domestic, familial scene that she imagines when she writes:

“What I want,” the older boy said,” is ‘lasses on my
jam.” Whereupon the younger baby
Picked up the molasses pitcher and threw
The molasses in his brothers face. Instantly
The Fine Prince leaned across the table and slapped
The small and smiling criminal.

She did not speak. When the Hand
Came down and away, and she could look at her child,
At her baby child,
She could think only of blood.
Surely her baby's cheek
Had disappeared, and in its place, surely,
Hung a heaviness, and a lengthening red, a red that had no end.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Christopher Metress, *The Lynching of Emmett Till: A Documentary Narrative* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2002) 51.

⁴¹ Gwendolyn Brooks, “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon,” *Blacks* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1994) 337. First published in *The Bean Eaters* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960).

Brooks presents a framework, where the children articulate an unspoken violence, one that the Father enacts as the murderer. As the “younger baby” throws molasses in his brother’s face, the Fine Prince slaps the child right after. This sequence of acts, as similar and violent as the clack-clacking of machine fire, the “little boy noises” – his railing against the pickets – cuts through the courtroom, revealing an emotionally and physically charged landscape that, together, may only approximate and address the living surface of how to remember this event.

In an attempt to reconsider what may have “happened,” Brooks recounts what might have surfaced in Caroline Bryant’s imagination and in the Bryant family’s home during the trial. Brooks finds a way to expand the matter of the experience through the poem. Where the woman in the poem does not speak, there is blood, a lengthening red. What manifests, instead of her child’s cheek, is the memory of Till’s body, his blood. Blood is more than the sign of death; its elements intensify the blurring of the experience. Brooks works through the space between elision and precision, revealing a narrative landscape to read *after*, or against Emmett Till’s bloated body, a no place existing beyond fragmentation and matter, but a place, united in a flood of blood. Offering a record of his body through the landscape of his imagined and recapitulated experience, what culminates in Brooks’ poem is her attempt to recast the experience through the expanse of the red field: *It had the beat inevitable. It had the blood.*

These lines offer a figurative space, where the body gives way to metaphor. After the slapped face, the pouting and slapped mouth, there “hung a heaviness, and a lengthening red, a red that had no end.” Brooks saturates the landscape with a relentless and endless cycle of red, presenting a way of seeing the terrifying. For Brooks, the

woman in the poem meditates on the assailant and the victim, both of whom are bound by this growing abstract field of red. Whether through metaphor or landscape, what matters is the relationship between the main figure in the poem and the substance that Brooks uses to link them together: *She looked at her shoulders, still/ Gripped in the claim of his hands. She tried, but could not/ resist the idea/ That a red ooze was seeping, spreading darkly, thickly,/ slowly,/ Over her white shoulders, her own shoulders,/ And over all of Earth and Mars.*

These lines create the experience of abstraction as a primary mode. In this way, the poem reconfigures itself through the body, binding it to matter that is shaped as an expanding universe within the poem. What is contained is also expelled, the field of color giving way to an endless red.

The end of the poem is perhaps most poignant in its articulation of this complicated landscape. Through the poem's "lengthening red," Brooks brings the body back through her own aesthetic space. These lines map this return, leaving the marks of how and what Till's body promises through the image of the landscape and the spectacle as it maps itself through its fragmentation. Does Till's bloated body become the space that expands endlessly through the poem? Does he become the red ooze? Does his body oscillate through the red prairie? In the end, Brooks presents a landscape that tests the notion of what might constitute the field of the body, whether blood, a red prairie, the distance spread through Mars, a landscape of abstraction and space, lengthening, manifesting.

Chapter Two: Theater-In-Seizing the Black Body: Mourning, Ownership and Display



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This image from one of the many lynching postcards from the *Without Sanctuary* exhibit catalogue has remained with me since the inception of this project. As I examine and re-read this photograph, I return to the twist of this man's neck, his death stare still looking outward, mouth agape, stunned, the angle of his head turned so he seems to see through his sockets, eyes long gone, mutilated and blasted in. A black shadow and beard cutting across his face, the darkness sheets his cheek and chin. His tongue I imagine silent and thick in his mouth. His head crooks out, posed outward as his body slumps, tied and kneeling in submission at the tree trunk.

What are the poetics of my looking again and again at his body, trying to find the language to not only capture what I see but also to return to this image as a way of getting at why it has remained so important to me through the writing of this project? How does

⁴² James Allen, "Lynching, Pre-1915, southern United States" (Plate 78). *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe: Twin Palm Publishers, 2000) 140.

looking closely at this body help to map out a larger poetics of the black body that extends from his own, roped to the tree, and caught in the middle of this field, suspended in a postcard? My hope is that by negotiating these view-points, I will be able to articulate a space that might clarify a way to read through this image.

At the end of the first chapter of this project, I examine the expanding red space that extends in “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon,” Gwendolyn Brooks’ famous poem which captures the events surrounding the lynching murder of Emmett Till. This space exists most clearly where Brooks’ poetic voice engages in the poem as its speaker describes the vantage point of Caroline Bryant, the white woman whom Emmett Till allegedly “wolf whistled,” sparking the young boy’s eventual torture and murder. Brooks captures Bryant’s realization of the event, in the overwhelming color and substance that is left behind in the following lines: *She tried, but could not/ resist the idea/ That a red ooze was seeping, spreading darkly, thickly,/ slowly,/ Over her white shoulders, her own shoulders,/ And over all of Earth and Mars.*⁴³

From Brooks’ imagining the red coming from Bryant’s mind, this site materializes as a substance, the “red ooze” slowly moving within the poem as though blood not bound by skin, “seeping” from the body then outside of it, over her shoulders, and out into the atmosphere. For me, this expanding red matter, the substance spreading out from within the body, then into a planetary field, begs an important question, especially next to the detail of the postcard: how to mark the transition between an

⁴³ Gwendolyn Brooks, “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon,” *Blacks* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1994) 338. First published in *The Bean Eaters* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960).

analysis of this poem and the photograph which opens this chapter, the red moving from one site to another?

Perhaps what connects this *seeping* red in the poem to the photograph is the blood lost, the marked absence of such red in the sepia wash of the photograph. Further, if this is a project on the black body, and I am attempting here to mark how its various inscriptions might be read across what constitutes its metaphoric and figurative fields, then just as the poem's red can and cannot be contained in any recognizable center whether as blood or other "substance," so too, this body cannot be analyzed from one vantage point, or contained in any single point of view. What I will attempt here is to offer a variety of vantage points through which to consider the expanding matter captured in the photograph; perhaps, in doing so, I can look beyond the sepia wash, back into the body, blood and center of the image, tracing a greater reading around what becomes more visible in this examination.

The photograph, in the *Without Sanctuary Lynching Photography in America* exhibition catalogue, is described in the appendix as follows:

*Corpse of a black male slumped to his knees, tied to a trunk of pine tree by leather strap around neck. Bicycle with coat neatly folded leans against fence post. Covered back with two well dressed white men in background. Pre 1915, Southern United States.*⁴⁴

In addition to these details, a small yet powerful and unsettling narrative appears below its description:

The victim was shot through the eyes, ears, mouth and torso. He was shot in the groin, at very close range, as he attempted to protect his genitals with his bound

⁴⁴ James Allen, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe: Twin Palm Publishers, 2000) 196.

*hands. Palmetto scrub, lack of mature trees and stumps, and the growth of Spanish moss suggest a coastal region, possibly an abandoned plantation.*⁴⁵

What were the shooters trying to erase? Who did they leave behind in Palmetto scrub and moss? – I imagine his body left there in that field, a ready and constant show, ripe for perusal and finally captured, eventually, for trade as a postcard. What examining the postcard articulates is how this human being, though unnamed and caught, functions as a luminous self left behind, still in motion, mobile in what his body reveals. Though tortured and dead, the spectacle of his display resonates for me as a living text, one that shifts to reveal a larger, embodied and multi-dimensional site. It offers a point of view through which one might not only see the horror, crime and trauma of the lynching, but it also provides a way to re-evaluate his death-spectacle within a larger aesthetics of violation, ultimately manifesting as a template through which to recuperate the black body in this landscape.

In thinking about the black body *within* this field of violation and the black body *as* a field of violation, how might we review images such as this so that a conversation around them becomes a part of the frame of a larger inquiry on black poetics which includes confronting and engaging with the structures of violence enacted upon the black body? In other words, how might this image be seen as not only a site of torture and horror, but also as part of a larger frame of instances which need to be marked and explored to reveal a complicated field that begins to appear in one context, but often expands into a larger frame – a narrative that widens, revealing multiple stories when one looks again, and then again, at what and who is left behind?

⁴⁵ Ibid.

In one sense, I am trying to read this image by way of not quite looking at its centralizing narrative, what for me is the haunting image of the man, tortured left alone dead and on display in the plantation field. In another, I am attempting to trace the space between the subject and the viewer, the man in the center of the field of vision against the fluid and constantly expanding point of view of who may be looking.

Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* is quite helpful in approaching the photographic image. Specifically, his work helps to widen a field of vision where I rethink the center-point of the image to consider what happens at the periphery. In his analysis of the photograph, “Koen Wessing: Nicaragua. 1979,” Barthes writes about the conflation of key elements within this photo:



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In his examination of the photograph, he writes,

A photograph made me pause. Nothing very extraordinary: the (photographic) banality of a rebellion in Nicaragua: a ruined street, two helmeted soldiers on patrol; behind them, two nuns. Did this photograph please me? Interest me?

⁴⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc., 1981) 22.

Intrigue me? Not even. Simply, it existed (for me). I understood at once that its existence (“its adventure”) derived from the co-presence of two discontinuous elements, heterogeneous in that they did not belong to the same world (no need to proceed to the point of contrast): the soldiers and the nuns.⁴⁷

What strikes me about Barthes’ reading of this image is his encounter with the image as an adventure, as he wades through these questions: “Did this photograph please me? Interest me? Intrigue me? Not even. Simply, it existed (for me).” Of course, this understanding of the image within this sequence of questions is important because it offers a way to engage with the photograph from varying viewpoints – particularly the one that *exists* between *discontinuous elements* – in order to provide a space for engagement.

The questions that evolve from looking at the lynching postcard are, for me, somewhat different. How did the postcard photograph move me, drawing me closer and closer into a kind of suspended looking? And what, in the end, am I paying attention to as I look again at this image; what do I continue to remember about it, and how do I place it into context of my own reading of the photograph as an *adventure*, one that allows me to trace the multiple layers of what comes into view, element by element?

What I must read is not simply the image that centers the frame, the man tied to the tree, his death spectacle. If I am hoping to consider this image beyond the one that presents itself directly to the viewer, then Barthes’ understanding of the discontinuous elements within a larger landscape might be a useful vantage point from which to continue. Just as the nuns serve as a point of departure, intervention and inquiry for Barthes’ reading of Wessing’s photograph, the two well-dressed men in the back of the photograph juxtaposed against the man roped to the tree in the foreground serve as a “co-

⁴⁷Ibid. 23.

presence of discontinuous” elements which come together in the postcard and my own frame of analysis.⁴⁸

By thinking about what Barthes is after, I am hoping to consider the presence of what he calls a “duality,” extending this idea through a larger context that exists both within and beyond the murdered figure at the center of the image. Though the pictures vary in content, my hope is that I might be able read through the lynching photograph by approaching it as Barthes approaches Wessing’s photograph. It might be important here to note that though the “banality of a rebellion in Nicaragua,” allows Barthes an aesthetic distance from the image. This also marks a shift in how he is able to read elements of the photograph from a distance that reveals an alternative narrative structure, one bound by “discontinuous vantage points,” unique to his analysis. Framed in this way, Barthes exposes a multitude of vantage points in his examinations.

Where, then, are the multiple vantage points within the postcard image, and how can I discuss the context of the image’s import in a greater context beyond what might first appear to be its most compelling center? What is helpful to my understanding of the image may be found in Barthes’ introduction of two crucial terms, his notion of the *studium* and the *punctum*. In describing the *studium*, he points out that:

The *studium* is that very wide field of unconcerned desire, of various interests, of inconsequential taste: *I like / I don’t like*. The *studium* is of the order of liking, not of loving; it mobilizes a half desire, a demi-volition; it is the same sort of slippery, irresponsible interest one takes in people, the entertainments, the books, the clothes one finds “all right.” To recognize the *studium* is inevitably to encounter the photographer’s intentions, to enter into harmony with them, to prove or disapprove of them, but always to understand them, to argue them within myself,

⁴⁸ Ibid.

for culture (from which the studium derives) is a contract arrived at between creators and consumers.⁴⁹

Barthes' introduction of the studium is helpful because it helps to locate how the postcards might have been understood in the world where they circulated. They belong to and engender a specific narrative. Bought, sent through the mail, the lynching photographs were set forth within a contractual frame that mediated a relationship between the creator and the consumer. The point of sale, or the point of the narrative, most simply put, was the black body on display. I would argue that beyond that, what was in circulation between the viewer and the audience may have been something to Barthes' notion of the studium. The postcards marked a contract between what was captured in the image, and what the audience encountered, and expected. As Dora Apel points out in her essay, "Lynching Photographs and Public Shaming":

[P]hotographs were taken, either by spectators with personal Kodaks or by professional photographers who turned their product into souvenir postcards, a huge industry by the early twentieth century that helped disseminate, heighten, and legitimate the rhetorical power of the white supremacist narrative that held blacks to be different in kind from and inferior to whites.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Ibid. 27.

⁵⁰ Dora Apel, "Lynching Photographs and the Politics of Public Shaming," Lynching Photographs ed. Dora Apel and Shawn Michelle Smith. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) 44.



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In a narrative which attempts to reveal difference, the men could not be further apart in this image: the living pair behind the dead lynching victim cruise by him on a clear afternoon. Did the white men in the carriage realize that he was there? Were they turning the bend in order to return to the body, or were they leaving from freshly viewing it? How might one begin to read through this negotiation between what is placed on view by the creator for the imagined consumer? Could this image have been seen as banal, one of the many lynching postcards that reified the difference between blacks and whites, despite or because of their gruesome violence? To again consider Wessing's photo, what exists between the nuns and the soldiers is what oscillates between the men cruising by in the carriage and the one dying in the center of the photograph. This narrative may shift as one looks beyond it – banal or shocking – as one looks at the details.

As I refocus on the lynching postcards, how do I read the stains streaking down his pants? What about the open shirt, as open as his gouged-out eyes, open, for me, as the field behind him? It is critical to think about the relationship between the focal points

⁵¹ James Allen, "Lynching, Pre-1915, southern United States" (Plate 78). Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America (Santa Fe: Twin Palm Publishers, 2000) 140.

within the frame, the moss, the men in the carriage, the rope, the fact that there are a litany of symbols that make the image resound in a wider context, to include the palmetto grasses, the trees in the background cutting into the low sky.

In seeking out a constant co-presence of discontinuous elements in the image, my point of view and frame of inquiry expands. It might be helpful to consider where Barthes offers the corollary term to the *studium*, the *punctum*, an “element” he describes that ultimately “disturb[s] the *studium*.” He illustrates this in the following:

William Klein has photographed children of Little Italy in New York (1954); all very touching and amusing, but what I stubbornly see are one child’s bad teeth. Kertesz, in 1926, took young Tzara’s portrait (with a monocle); but what I notice, by that additional vision which is in a sense the gift, the grace of the *punctum*, is Tzara’s hand resting on the door frame: a large hand whose nails are anything but clean....However lightning-like it may be, the *punctum* has more or less potentiality, a power of expansion...⁵²

His understanding of the photograph as constituting a number of disparate parts that expands the way one might read the photograph is quite useful. For in these disparate parts, one begins to bring together a picture, a visual poetics that extends into the question: what does the photograph help to organize and capture if one looks at the details?

Barthes’ notion of the *punctum*, those fragments and pieces that expand and disturb is exactly the apparatus that one might need to consider in order to extend what makes up the contract between the viewer and the victim. For me, the focus on the

⁵² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc., 1981) 45.

punctum, or the many possibilities where it may surface, in its various and expanding details, helps to complicate what one encounters.

As I examine the postcard, again, the question for me also becomes more exact: What emptiness were the shooters trying to fill, fulfill? And if we cannot see into the eyes that are riddled with bullets while we can barely make out the two well-dressed men in the background, then how are we to mourn what we encounter in the man's horrific display?

The manner in which the spectacle is captured must be considered as we look at how the image is presented to the viewer after the man's death. As Smith points out, "Though rare and terrifying before-and-after lynching photographs do exist, and a few images even document the process of murder, most lynching photographs are postmortem images. Most are taken after the victims have died, but while their bodies are still hanging."⁵³ Many of the postcards, like the one of the man tied to the tree, typify this spectacle, and for me, what remains is not only the body on display, but also the difficult question of how to mourn those left behind.

Judith Butler in *Precarious Life* describes how torture committed in the contemporary moment – her frame of reference is an exploration of torture and violence against Iraqi citizens in Iraq and in the Abu Ghraib military prison – helps to articulate a means of understanding mourning. She writes that:

If violence is done against those who are unreal, then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated. But they have a strange way of remaining animated and so must be negated again (and again). They cannot be mourned because they were already lost, or rather, never "were," and they must be killed, since they seem to live on,

⁵³ Shawn Michelle Smith, "The Evidence of Lynching," *Lynching Photographs* ed. Dora Apel and Shawn Michelle Smith. (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2007) 12.

*stubbornly, in this state of deadness. Violence renews itself in the face of the apparent inexhaustibility of its object. The derealization of the “Other” means that it is neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral.*⁵⁴

What Judith Butler points out is crucial, especially in light of the violence that is enacted on the living, and the extent to which this violence must be continually reified “again and again” in the face of the constantly negated subject’s survival. What were the shooters trying to erase as they shot into what they might have seen as, simply, a void? Were they rendering inhuman what and who is, in the end, human?

As they filled the body, again and again, with bullets, they were engaged in a radical kind of erasure and a systematic and intricate torture which hoped to erase the *derealized* through the repetition of violence. That is, as one tortures the body through the repetitive violence, one renders the whole body impossible to capture as whole, human, a subject to be mourned – instead, what is left is caught, and pictured in the midst of violence, a spectral figure left behind.

Leon Litwack, in one of the forwarding essays of *Without Sanctuary*, helps to outline a stinging record of the black body’s extravagant violation through a number of historical accounts of specific lynchings. He reveals records showing how the black body is tortured, reminding the reader that the story of a lynching “is more than the simple fact of a black man or woman hanged by the neck.”⁵⁵ Detailing one such execution of Luther Holberts and his unnamed wife, Litwack recounts a reporter from the *Vicksburg Evening Post*:

⁵⁴ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2003) 33-34.

⁵⁵ James Allen, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe: Twin Palm Publishers, 2000) 14.

The blacks were forced to hold out their hands, one finger at a time was chopped off. The fingers were distributed as souvenirs. The ears of the murderers were cut off. Holberts was beaten severely, his skull was fractured and one of his eyes, knocked out with a stick, hung by a shred from the socket...The most excruciating form of punishment consisted in the use of a large corkscrew in the hands of the mob. This instrument was bored into the flesh of the man and woman, in the arms, legs and body, and then pulled out, the spirals tearing out big pieces of raw, quivering flesh, every time it was withdrawn.⁵⁶

What to make of this extravagant torture? How to take in the details of the body's pieces, its fragments? This ritual, where Holberts and his wife were murdered and decimated in front of an audience, for me, reveals a vivid picture, a complicated photographic landscape. On the surface, this lynching operates in a dynamic field of violence, one where the body parts, ears, corkscrewed flesh, eyes falling out of the head rupture and punctuate the level of torture enacted on the black body. It reveals a narrative of torture, one told in the newspaper, one that reifies the contract that reveals the difference between black and white bodies.

In *Discipline & Punish*, Michel Foucault describes scenes of violence enacted in late 17th century Europe that are similarly extravagant. Foucault writes that the guiding principle in the torture he examined was the element and manifestation of agony in what he calls a "gradation of pain." He elaborates that it extends:

...from decapitation (which reduces all pain to a single gesture, performed in a single moment – the zero degree of torture), through hanging, the stake and the wheel (all of which prolong the agony), to quartering, which carries pain almost to infinity; death-torture is the art of maintaining life in pain subdividing it into a "thousand deaths", by achieving before life ceases 'the most exquisite agonies.'⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Ibid. 15.

⁵⁷ Michel Foucault, "Spectacle of the Scaffold," *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House, 1979) 34.

What is most evident and visible in this carnival of torture is how the ritual of violence reveals the agonized body. In fact, perhaps the contract between the creator and the consumer of the postcard is one bound by agony. Yet in the reports of Holberts' and his wife's punishment, what seems to be missing is the explicit representation of the victim's pain, their *agony*. Yet clearly their torture and murder must have been as bloody and painful as it was horrific.

However reported, Holberts' and his wife's bodies are taken apart, fragmented, divided and sub-divided into piece after piece. As one confronts Holberts' narratives through the written text, it is important to see how the repetition of violence is represented by the fragments that echo what is described by Butler as necessary in the violated body's constant negation. As he and his wife are broken apart, fragmented through the narrative, then so, too, are the pieces made visible to the reader of the *Vicksburgh Evening Post*. As their bodies are presented to the reader, the question for me becomes: how could does one pause to consider their humanity throughout their violent obliteration? What is enacted – with or without explicit depiction of their agony – is the “thousand deaths” their bodies suffer.

If as Foucault points out, “In the excesses of torture, a whole economy of power is invested,” how then do we consider the interchange of power circulating through the spectacle of black bodies that are tortured? How do we learn to read through Holberts' and his wife's bodies – and more particularly, how do we understand the excess of what remains behind? Foucault points out that one important rationale behind the torture was that it provided specific roles in which this violence is played out. He writes:

The atrocity that haunted the public execution played, therefore, a double role: it was the principal of the communication between the crime and the punishment, it

was also the exacerbation of the punishment in relation to the crime. It provided the spectacle with both truth and power; it was the culmination of the ritual of the investigation and the ceremony in which the sovereign triumphed. And it joined both together in the torture of the body.⁵⁸

Did Holberts' and his wife's execution carry the same or similar portent? Did their tortured bodies communicate the "exacerbation of the punishment in relation to the crime"? Where Foucault details the agony in the tortured bodies, the intensity of violence echoes the ritualized torture that Holberts and his wife faced. Foucault writes:

.... it was a horrible sight to see; he severed the sinews near the two heels, and then opened up the belly from which he drew the heart, liver, spleen and lungs, which he then stuck on an iron hook, and cut and dissected into pieces, which he then stuck on the other hooks as he cut them, as one does with an animal.... the infinitesimal destruction of the body is linked here with spectacle; each piece is placed on display.⁵⁹

This intricate narrative of torture reveals a language that defines the role of the powerful and the defeated. How do we read this language of pieces that are cut out and re-arranged to tell a lesson? How to make sense of a language articulating a body left on hooks, similar in display, but vastly different in context? In other words, what do we make of such a display that does not attempt to explore the role of criminality as much as it hopes to reveal the extravagant ritual of torture, the "infinitesimal destruction of the body"?

Like the man tied to the tree and filled with bullets, Holberts' body and his wife's are also desecrated, the mob cutting, beating and pulling them apart. As they bored into their bodies, and corkscrewed out their flesh, what was this mob trying to take from

⁵⁸ Ibid. 56.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 51.

them? Did the quivering and still living black flesh offer an answer to what they sought? The gruesome account of Holberts and his wife reveals a visceral and aesthetic site, a space and framework of the black body's violation. Arm, Eye, Bone, Flesh, Skull: are these the sites where the body is activated, made into a field of both destruction, and reconstruction, the pieces mapping out the human made sub-human, the violated black body, pulled apart, and refigured into a complicated field, whose desecrated pieces mark its violent poetics?

Foucault reminds us that the parameters of 17th century torture revolved around the quest for sovereignty and truth. He reveals that in the end, torture, in fact, glorified the criminal, often idealizing him as a Saint, and points out that: "If the condemned man was shown to be repentant, accepting the verdict, asking both God and man for forgiveness for his crimes, it was as if he had come through some process of purification: he died in his own way like a Saint."⁶⁰ In thinking about Holberts, his wife, or the man tied to the tree stump in the plantation field, where is the occasion for their confession, or their release into sainthood?

In one sense, the ritual of their punishment hinges on how their bodies are displayed, disseminated and distributed across the crowd. Rather than indicating sovereignty or guilt, truth or even power, the black body's pain, its extravagance of torture was often set to show its inferiority, its uselessness, its expendability. The larger question may be how to reconsider this display of the violated black body as it surfaces in the greater public and private imagination. Can poetry serve as a medium through which these violent fields may be rearticulated? For me, poetry stands as a primary vehicle, offering multiple visual spaces where questions of the black body's violent

⁶⁰ Ibid. 67.

representations are elevated to the level of sainthood; that is they might be remembered and sanctified beyond their graphic torture.

Gwendolyn Brooks' poem, "The Ballad of Pearl May Lee," centers around two characters, Sammy, a black man who is lynched for having an affair with a white woman, and Pearl May Lee, his wife, who survives as his widow. Jacqueline Goldsby, who explores this poem in *A Spectacular Secret*, writes that:

Surely, black women widowed by lynch mobs must have felt such rage somewhere, sometime, in which case Pearl's fictional experience does not lie irrevocably outside the realm of the possible. On the contrary, the poem points toward the historical through the force of its literary form.⁶¹

Goldsby explores "The Ballad of Pearl May Lee" in the greater context of lynching and its violence. She describes what she calls a "cultural logic" of lynching, exploring it within "broader, national cultural developments." What I find useful about her work is just this, that she challenges the way that lynchings might be read, and uses Brooks' poems to explore them across alternative narratives through some central questions. She writes:

...lynching has settled into narrative molds that are hard to break apart so that we might ask other kinds of interpretive questions. "It's a southern phenomenon." "The Klan did it." "Poor white trash did it." "The rape myth is a lie." "Lynching maintained white supremacy." "The murderers aimed to keep black people subordinate, in their place." The best way to enlarge on this array of accounts while interrogating their claims and conclusions, is, I think, to involve the reader in other narratives sufficiently long to prompt one to rethink *what* is known about lynching and to reconsider *how* one knows it.⁶²

⁶¹ Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006) 4.

⁶² *Ibid.* 8.

Goldsby offers an alternative epistemological frame to explore the way we understand lynching narratives. In her examination of “Ballad of Pearl May Lee,” she engages with the prosody of the poem, focusing primarily on the relationship between Pearl May Lee and Sammy. She explains that Brooks “us[es] the elements of poetic form to redress the pain of Sammy’s betrayal... Pearl May Lee seeks a sarcasm beyond mere bitterness, one that sounds disdainful itself because Sammy’s choice to risk his life implies her inability to satisfy his needs as a lover.”⁶³ Goldsby’s focus on the dynamics of the relationship, her work touching on what she sees as “Sammy’s betrayal,” or the implication of Pearl May’s inability to satisfy Sammy points to the range in which Brooks uses the poem as a vehicle to detail an intimate interior space in the face of lynching’s violence. Here she is looking out of the window at the mob scene. Pearl May says:

Then off they take you, off to jail, A hundred hooting after.
And you should have heard one at my house
I cut my lungs with my laughter
Laughter,
Laughter, I cut my lungs with laughter.⁶⁴

As Goldsby points out, in contextualizing this stanza, “‘The Ballad of Pearl May Lee’ begins with this plunge into danger: over the course of the poem, the speaker’s lover Sammy is arrested then kidnapped from jail, “wrapped...around a cottonwood tree” (1. 83), and burned to death by the “hundred hooting” white men that constitute the lynch

⁶³ Ibid. 2.

⁶⁴ Gwendolyn Brooks, “Ballad of Pearl May Lee,” *Blacks* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1994) 60. First published in *A Street in Bronzeville* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945).

mob. Sammy's crime? Rape – a charge made after what the poem's speaker, Pearl May Lee, believes was her lover's consensual tryst with a white woman.”⁶⁵

In the “hundred hooting after,” I think Brooks is working with an understanding of the force and range of the repetitive violence which faces Sammy. To borrow again from Judith Butler, the hundreds after him would immediately negate him through violence, as though he never were, in the face of his “animations,” his daring to have what Goldsby calls his “consensual tryst with a white woman,” which would have been more than enough to warrant the mob's ceaseless attack. What I am attempting to point out is that the very question of Sammy's desire is enough, that its manifestation is what Brooks captures, and re-animates and recasts through the speaker's voice, her repetitive laughter, cutting through her lungs and echoing with those hundreds, hooting towards Sammy's demise.

As in the case of Sam Hose and Holberts and his wife, and like the unnamed man in the middle of the plantation field, the machinery of violence weighs on Sammy. Brooks' poetic negotiation of this weight might be found where Judith Butler describes how “violence renews itself in the face of the apparent inexhaustibility of the object.”⁶⁶ For it is precisely in this poetic space where Brooks reveals the escalating violence through the lynch mob as it conflates with the growing emotional interior of Sammy desire.

What we may know about this narrative, what will eventually lead to the death of Sammy, for Brooks, opens up into a complicated poetic universe which contains the

⁶⁵ Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006) 1.

⁶⁶ Judith Butler, *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2003) 33-34.

constant threat and manifestation of exterior violence (the hundred hooting after) as well as the interior universe of Sammy's desire, his tryst however animated, helping to reveal and illuminate an inner world of violence. Brooks, through an intricate visual landscape, captures not only the emotional interior, but the body's interior, as well as rooms, prison bars, the home and other spaces where the reader may enter.

As Pearl May looks out of the window, the mob is at it, hooting, while Pearl May's laughter cuts through the poem out to the reader. This is particularly significant because sound, whether from Pearl May Lee or an anonymous one or more of the hundred, emerges from the interior out to the reader. The hooting that comes "at" the house and the laughter "cut" from the lungs echoes back and forth through the interior chambers of the poem. The sounds of the poem release to reveal an important interior zone. In fact, upon close listening, the reader realizes there are multiple voices within the poem.

Pearl May Lee captures another layer of this intimate space as she reminds Sammy of his crime, chiding, "In the back of your Buick you drank your fill./ Then she roused you out of your dream." Like the sound of laughter or the cutting, Brooks gives us another interior landscape, this time taking the reader inside of the Buick, where Sammy "drank his fill."⁶⁷ The car's interior mirrors the inner landscape of Sammy's dream as well as the satisfaction that he is roused from into reality.

In a sense, these spaces where the reader enters into the poem are private, quiet, far from the site of public spectacle. Brooks shows the reader this interior landscape by releasing them through the voice, the body and the intimate spaces, which are part of the

⁶⁷ Gwendolyn Brooks, "Ballad of Pearl May Lee," *Blacks* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1994) 60. First published in *A Street in Bronzeville* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945).

terrain of violence that she unveils for the reader. She continues to mine this place in the next stanza when she writes, “You raped me, nigger,” she softly said./ (The shame was spreading through.)/ “You raped me, nigger, and what the hell/ Do you think I’m going to do?”⁶⁸ For me, these lines are crucial because they show how Brooks contains the emotional, again through a complex manipulation of sonic registers. As Pearl May Lee says, “You raped me,” she delivers the accusation “softly,” and at the same time “shame” gently spreads through the scene, emerging from within the bodies at the same rate as it flows within the parenthetical container Brooks sets her line within. The poet gives the reader a landscape which includes and closes in and around what, in the narrative, we might expect not to be entirely visible. At the same time, these private spaces, imagined from Brooks and enacted through Pearl May Lee, release into a larger sphere. Brooks raises the volume of her speaker’s voice, as the white woman, no longer speaking softly, promises to address the entire town:

“I’ll tell every white man in this town.

I’ll tell them of my sorrow.
You get my body tonight, nigger boy.
I’ll get your body tonight, nigger boy.
I’ll get your body tomorrow.
Tomorrow
Tomorrow⁶⁹

What strikes me about Brooks’ exploration of this narrative is how she understands and reveals the emotional details, the intimate exchange between the figures in the poem. Pearl, Sam, the white woman and the lynch mob operate within a

⁶⁸ Ibid. 62.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

complicated realm of desire. As the white woman promises to tell “every white man in this town” her sorrow, what follows is Sammy’s murder. Brooks traces his lynching from the heart of the white woman’s sorrow through these complicated lines: “You get my body tonight, nigger boy/ I’ll get your body tonight, nigger boy./ I’ll get your body tomorrow.” Although consensual, the exchange is also bound by difference and disdain: she “get[s] Sam’s “nigger boy” body, that night and he get[s] her body that night, too, but only in exchange for his death. The macabre contract that exists between the white woman and Sammy culminates in the white woman’s public “confession” that leads to his torture and murder, his body suspended in the lines, “tomorrow, tomorrow,” his death manifesting as a lasting after-image that projects into the future.

What to make of such a projection? And how does the image of Sammy’s “gotten” body projected into the future at the end of the poem highlight how violence is articulated through Brooks’ imagined narrative? Just as Barthes reframes the studium’s transparent narrative by looking into the details that manifest as the punctum of the image, Brooks disrupts the larger narrative of lynching by focusing on the complex interior layers that expand within the poem’s internal framework.

Brooks’ unveiling of these layers becomes even more complex in the third stanza of the poem, where she captures another figure, the Sheriff, looking into a jail cell at Sam. Brooks writes: “The sheriff, he peeped in through the bars,/And (the red old thing) he told you,/ “You son of a bitch, you’re going to hell!”/ “cause you wanted white arms to enfold you,/ Enfold you,/ Enfold you.”⁷⁰ Brooks presents another series of enclosures: the first is the cell which the author places around Sammy; the second, the poet places around the sheriff, capturing the “red old thing” within another parenthetical.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 60.

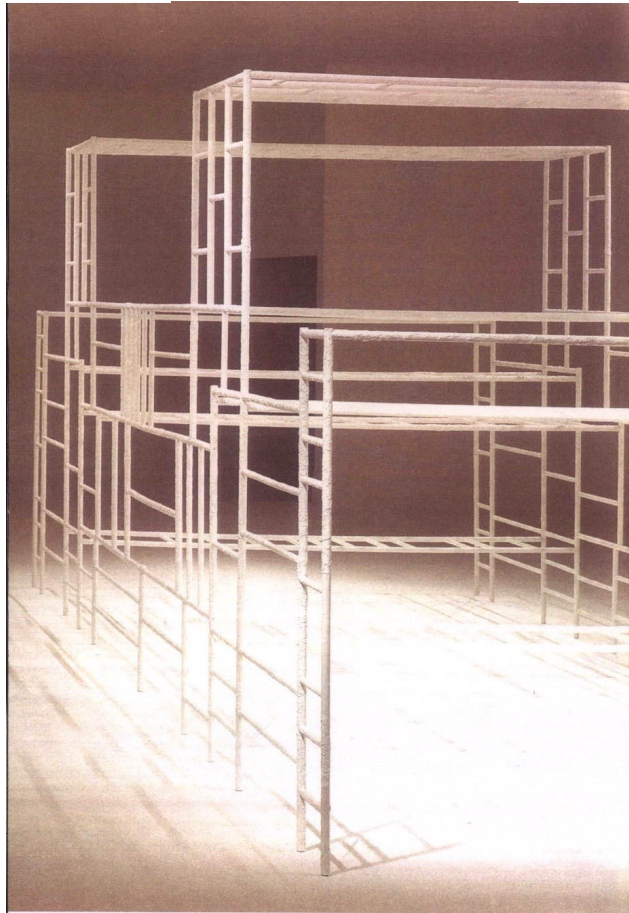
Brooks then uses a double epithet, imagining the Sheriff's wishing Sammy ("son of a bitch," another layering) into the depths of hell. The Sheriff continues to berate Sammy's for his crime, his desire to be held within the arms of the white woman, while Pearl May Lee resounds this need in triple repetition, telling Sammy that he had to have these arms "enfold you,/Enfold you,/Enfold you./," sealing further his doom from within the cell bars.

By the end of the poem, Brooks leaves the reader with a set of interior details that connect Pearl May to Sammy, once more, as Pearl May reveals to Sammy and the reader at the end of the poem, "... You paid with your hide and my heart, Sammy boy,/for your taste of pink and white honey,/ Honey/ Honey./".⁷¹ It is as though Brooks, by conflating the two body parts Pearl's *heart* with Sammy's *hide*, creates a separate entity, a body across two figures that intersect in space, coalescing around taste, color and texture. The last two words of the stanza, for a moment, suspend the reader in a sticky field, an almost translucent substance, where once again, Brooks allows color to seep from the poem outward.

Brooks revealing the poem's inner structure, unveils a multilayered interior landscape that consists of a variety of conceptual structures. In exploring these structures, what I am attempting to theorize is how the poet, in the face of understanding the violence of Sammy's lynching, and the complicated relationship between his *hide* and Pearl May's *heart*, manipulates point of view, scale, and space in order to mediate the violence that she encounters in her subject.

⁷¹ Ibid. 63.

What I would argue is that Brooks' intricate re-conceptualization of the lynching narrative through the "Ballad of Pearl May Lee" is akin to the work of Ellen Gallagher in her recent work, "Preserve."



"Preserve" 2001 Detail (Approx 1/2 Section)⁷²

Gallagher's massive "painted sculpture" (10 x 12 x 32 feet) is described by Ken Johnson in *Art in Review* as:

⁷² Ellen Gallagher, "Preserve," Rubber and enamel of wood with metal screws. 10x12x32 feet, 2001. Courtesy of the artist and Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London., 2001. Des Moines Art Center, [Ellen Gallagher: Preserve](#) (Des Moines: Des Moines Art Center, 2001) 65-66.

an expansive, all-white structure of straight wooden dowels designed to resemble a children's jungle gym. Up close, you discover that the bars are layered with low-relief decoration that appears vaguely floral. In fact, the decorations, made by gluing on cut-out pieces of flat rubber, are based on Ms. Gallagher's usual lexicon of google eyes, lips and wavy hair.⁷³

Gallagher's "lexicon" is often described by the artist herself as *mutating* from one of her works to the next. In paintings that feature materials such as rubber and enamel, those in watercolors, to sculpture and even film, these signs move across several frameworks. As Gallagher's first "three dimensional work," the painted sculpture's structure allows one to both enter and to observe the surface of the work while inside of it.

When I walked beneath Gallagher's sculpture at the Drawing Center's opening of Gallagher's exhibit, also titled "Preserve" in 2001, I remember looking at the ornate symbols up close, staring in at the corners where the bars met one another, the slick white paint revealing the transformed hair swooshes that I'd first met in earlier works like "Drexycia" (1997) or maybe they weren't those swooshes, but the complicated squiggly patterns that held my attention in her untitled black paintings like "Eleganza" (1998). Refusing my monkeying-around comment, when I asked Gallagher, herself, if I could swing on her jungle gym, she answered, "No. It's Fragile."

The structure and content of Gallagher's work is aptly described in the catalogue by Catherine De Zegher as follows: "The White openwork lattices or *Preserve* – a hybrid of Sol Lewitt's *Floor Piece #4* (1976) and Constant's projected architectural model *Ambience of Play* (1956) – stand between the modular structures and the serial

⁷³ Ken Johnson, "Ellen Gallagher – 'Preserve'," *New York Times on the Web* 29 March 2002, <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=990CE7DD1F3BF93AA15750C0A9649C8B63&fta=y>>.

Minimalist sculpture and the climbing frame of serried “monkey bars” in a playground.”⁷⁴ To add, in a footnote Zegher also points out that Constant, the Dutch artist, was influenced by architect and fellow country man Aldo Van Eyck, who designed, among others, sixty playgrounds in Amsterdam between 1947 and 1955. Very often the slender constructions of climbing frames in metal tubing are part of these compositions. They offer the children a stimulus to discover and an opportunity to develop the movements to which they are spontaneously inclined: jumping, climbing, and somersaulting.”⁷⁵

Gallagher’s minimalist structure, modeled in the context of the “playground,” allows for multiple points of entry, the viewer able to move through any number of given entry points. There is no given, predictable narrative in the viewer’s reading the designs embedded in the sculpture, the mutated body parts, fractured and layered throughout. Perhaps this design – Gallagher’s playing with violent, symbolic artifacts – is a technique that allows the viewer to also play in the field of signs that the work contains.

Gallagher, through the “painted sculpture,” draws the viewer into the abstract, minimalist terrain made up of her own super-signs. In “Preserve,” she mutates the swooshing hair symbols and eyes, layering them through the “bars” of her sculpture. Just as the paintings appear abstract from a distance but reveal a racially charged symbolic field up close, the sculpture provides a similar effect. However, to be able to physically enter the large sculpture, and to see the details from within the structure, adds a crucial dimension to understanding Gallagher’s use of scale and its greater import.

⁷⁴ Des Moines Art Center, Ellen Gallagher: Preserve (Des Moines: Des Moines Art Center, 2001) 55-56.

⁷⁵ Ibid. 64.

Gallagher, in describing her own work, says, “Scale shifts are also about terror.”

She elaborates:

For instance in Melville’s *Moby Dick* – why were sailors making these obsessive miniature carvings on whale-ships in the middle of nowhere looking for this large monster? The scale is also about a kind of focus and humiliation. As if you’re watching something that is too awful....That’s what I mean by humiliation – something that is unconscious and a willingness to play with something that is ugly. Making a cosmology out of these things that are so awful.⁷⁶

Gallagher’s depiction of scale as “a kind of focus and humiliation” captures the complicated sense of what it might mean to “play” within the cosmology of her sculpture. Her unique and fragile jungle gym structure, its surface designs, mirroring the miniature carvings made by Melville’s sailors, allows the viewer to be suspended within Gallagher’s own manipulation of scale. She exposes the very psychic structure of what terrifies through the small, intricate designs embossed on the gigantic white surface of her sculpture.

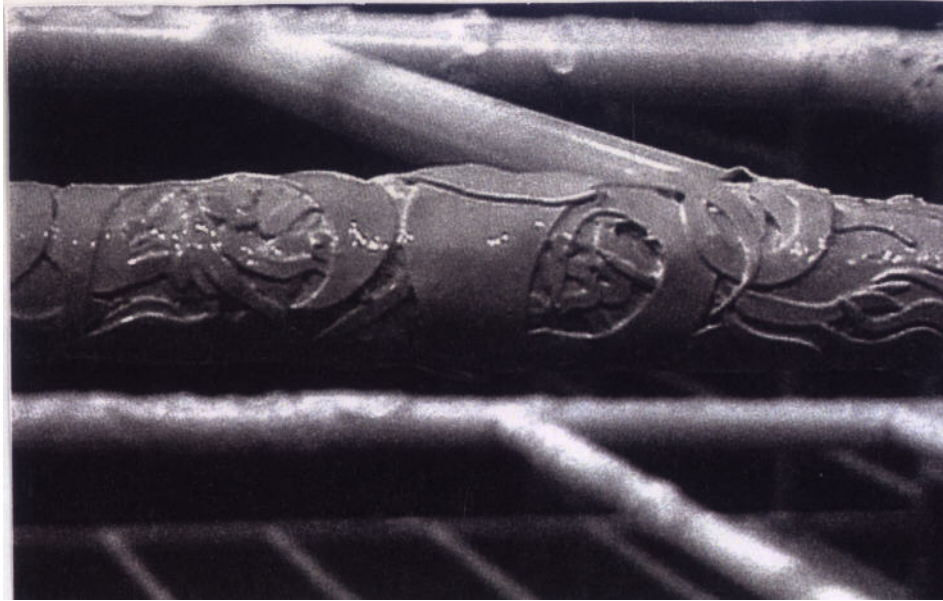
Gallagher, I would argue, also plays with humiliation. The sculpture triggers two metaphors: First, she evokes the child at play, swinging, hand over hand, from bar to bar, the threat of falling and loss in balance lost in the pleasure of play. Second, she buttresses this against the adult’s fear of falling, of being unbalanced and caught in the bars of a sculpture that unearths the very psychic structures of this humiliation. Gallagher exposes what is “awful,” through the specter of humiliation, surrounding her viewer with her own “ugly” cosmology, a lexicon of obsessively repeated, fragmented body parts, eyes and lips, fractured, then blended with hair swooshes, all making palpable the

⁷⁶ Jessica Morgan, “Interview,” *Ellen Gallagher: Catalogue for the Exhibition October 17—December 31 2001* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2001) 23.

unconscious, the awful, arranged and layered through the three-dimensional grids of her sculpture.

Placing Gallagher's "Preserve" next to Brooks' poems reveals the dimensions of sculptural possibility in an unconscious field that floats between them. Perhaps Gallagher's work may help to remap and reframe the body's pieces and fragments that Brooks, the poet, has left behind, and opened for her viewers to enter. Understanding how Gallagher's signs *mutate* through her painted sculpture is an apt frame through which to read the complexity that Brooks' poem contains as she expands the intricate matter of "skin," "heart," "honey," "white arms enfold[ing]" within the lines of her unique conceptual, modernist poem.

Just as one may enter Gallagher's sculpture from any one of a multitude of entry points to confront the terror within, one might also enter Brooks' work through its sculptural frame. To enter and to look closely at the internal landscape of "The Ballad of Pearl May Lee" through various entry points, I would argue, offers a way to enter into the poem's heart, and in turn to discover a poetics of the black body in this fragile, conceptual field. This detail of "Preserve" helps to locate my analysis:



“Jungle Gym” 2001 Detail ⁷⁷

In entering Brooks’ poem, looking through the eyes of the sheriff, who leers into the jail cell at Sammy, the reader also sees the narrator speaking to both Sammy and the audience about his demise, telling him that “They wrapped you around a cottonwood tree,”⁷⁸ the spectacle resonating within the surfaces of Gallagher’s sculpture. As I think about Sammy’s body wrapped around the tree against the raised texture of Gallagher’s painted sculpture, a new frame of logic emerges, helping to reveal a conceptual understanding of his violent end. For me, what Brooks achieves in the poetic line is as sculptural as much as it is visceral.

Brooks creates a unique fragile history through the landscape of the bodies within her poems, one kept together through what is “awful” throughout the “Ballad of Pearl May Lee.” In this landscape, what are the connections between the exquisite renderings

⁷⁷ Des Moines Art Center, *Ellen Gallagher: Preserve* (Des Moines: Des Moines Art Center, 2001) 72.

⁷⁸ Gwendolyn Brooks, “Ballad of Pearl May Lee,” *Blacks* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1994) 63. First published in *A Street in Bronzeville* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945).

of violence, torture and its actual manifestation in the black body? The black body's torture is layered within the poem's lines and the sculpture's field, a desecration that reveals violation even beyond the body's threshold. What I am attempting to explore, here, is how Gallagher's painted sculpture and Brooks' poetic line allow a space for the black body's threshold to be activated in the realm of the sublime. Edmund Burke, who argues that "terror in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently [is] the ruling principle of the sublime"⁷⁹ helps to situate this exploration. In writing about "terror," Burke points out that "Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too, whether this cause of terror, be endued with greatness of dimensions or not; for it is impossible to look on any thing as trifling, or contemptible, that may be dangerous."⁸⁰ Instead of looking away from what is terrible, Brooks and Gallagher, capture what seemingly cannot be contained.

Gallagher's cosmology, constructed from what is "awful," I would argue, mediates the very structures of terror from which her cosmology emerges. Similarly, Brooks' attention to folding the viewer into the lines of her embodied poem invokes an attention to terror and the limits of the sublime. The life of the black body's historical fragmentation plays out within the structure of the sculpture; similarly, this fragmentation echoes through Brooks' lines, each one of them extending from within and beyond the poem itself. Perhaps the frame of the poem's form is closer to Gallagher's design, made up of the black body's pieces, each locked to the next. But why the need to assemble the parts from what is awful, terrible, and from what world do these pieces emerge?

⁷⁹ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. James T. Boulton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990 c. 1757) 58.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 57.

Another article describes what happened to lynching victim Sam Hose:

After stripping Hose of his clothes and chaining him to a tree, the self-appointed executioners stacked kerosene-soaked wood high around him. Before saturating Hose with oil and applying the torch, they cut off his ears, fingers, and genitals, and skinned his face. While some in the crowd plunged knives into the victim's flesh, others watched "with unfeigning satisfaction" (as one reporter noted) the contortions of Sam Hose's body as the flames rose, distorting his features, causing his eyes to bulge out of their sockets, and rupturing his veins... Before Hose's body had even cooled, his heart and liver were removed and cut into several pieces and his bones were crushed into small particles. The crowd fought over the souvenirs.⁸¹

Ears, liver, heart – how to reclaim and reconfigure this black body stabbed, burned, some pieces ripped into souvenir, others ground to dust? In essence, these accounts offer another starting point from which to begin thinking about the role of the black body's historical violation, particularly in the context of its performance as a visceral, discursive site of violation. At the same time, the specific detail of these accounts provides a means through which to think about the black body in all of its burning and contortion as a fluid field of violation. But is there a way to unravel the after-effects of this history? If even only in record, is there a way to re-map the body parts and pieces which are left behind, the fragments that float, seeking to be claimed?

The set of poetics that Brooks sets up assumes a landscape that exists in conversation with this possibility. Brooks' work is a kind of space-making device; it provides a mode and context that makes visible an arena of violence through the photographic and the sculptural landscapes that reveal its various representations. The theatre that her poems present is a radical, conceptual space for understanding and

⁸¹ James Allen, Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America (Santa Fe: Twin Palm Publishers, 2000) 9.

interpreting the exquisite torture of the black body, a body which is often left behind, fluid and open for exploration.

What strikes me as particularly important in Brooks' re-articulation of the decimated black body is that, even though it is often fragmented, the parts do not disappear. In fact, their dissemination is a constant feature in the theater of her poems. How does one grieve in the face of the fragments that are left behind? How does one return to seeing the black body as a fragmented source, making sense of the pieces in which they manifest? Is this source somehow found between Brooks' poetry and Gallagher's sculptural, painted works?

I am reminded of a key passage from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, near the start of the novel. Here, a minor character, the Vet, a patient from a local hospital, lectures Norton, a college trustee, about his relationship to the protagonist, the *Invisible Man*.

But seriously, because you both fail to understand what is happening to you. You cannot see or hear or smell the truth of what you see and you, looking for destiny! It's classic! And the boy, this automaton, he was made of the very mud of the region and he sees far less than you. Poor stumblers, neither of you can see the other. To you he is a mark on the scorecard of your achievement, a thing and not a man: a child, or even less –A black amorphous thing. And you, for all your power, are not a man to him, but a God, a force—⁸²

For me, Ellison's passage is useful because it points to an understanding of the body as made up of pieces, whether "mud," "mark," or "amorphous thing." What is useful in this designation of the black body in such a litany is that it reveals how the pieces mutate into abstraction. The "black amorphous thing" that the protagonist becomes stems from the conversation between the vet and Norton, as Norton is marked by another litany, "not a

⁸² Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1982 c. 1952) 95.

man,” “God,” *a force*. I emphasize the latter because the two meet in a conceptual zone: the black amorphous thing rotates within the realm of the force of whiteness. This tension between fields is akin to the entities and forces that are at play within Gallagher’s “Preserve,” the black signs of the body layered and embedded (amorphous and invisible) in the white surfaces of the sculpture. This tension is also enacted throughout Brooks’ “Ballad of Pearl May Lee,” where the very question of Sammy’s body (its amorphousness) is filtered through the imagination of the white woman, the sheriff’s desires: *You paid with your hide and my heart, Sammy boy,/for your taste of pink and white honey,*⁸³ as Brooks writes, the white honey mediating and reconstituting the amorphous black body against the force of whiteness.

What Ellison’s, Brooks’ and Gallagher’s complex frames enact is a way to confront the violence of the black body’s decimation, and the reality of its bloody fragmentation. Sam Hose’s body parts, cut off, chopped and sold as pieces is another record that is left behind. But like Holberts’ and his wife’s remains, where is the space through which to mourn this record, the reality of the body being broken apart? Through the work of art, the black body is reconstituted as a conceptual space – in this space, I would argue that there is room to mourn, to grieve, to reflect on the pieces left behind.

Judith Butler writes, in *Precarious Life* about grief, she posits the idea that the mode of grieving is an expansive field within itself. She writes:

I think one is hit by waves, and that one starts out the day with an aim, a project, a plan, and finds oneself failed. One finds oneself fallen. One is exhausted but

⁸³ Gwendolyn Brooks, “Ballad of Pearl May Lee,” *Blacks* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1994) 63. First published in *A Street in Bronzeville* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945).

does not know why. Something is larger than one's own deliberate plan, one's own project, one's own knowing and choosing...⁸⁴

She continues to argue that mourning is a process that exists outside of the body – so that the question of empathy must be articulated through space. She continues with this line of thinking, where what comes into play is the following set of assertions:

If mourning involves knowing what one has lost (and melancholia originally meant, to a certain extent, not knowing), then mourning would be maintained by *its enigmatic dimension*, by the experience of not knowing incited by losing what we cannot fully fathom.⁸⁵

In one sense, not knowing is tantamount to a kind of force. Perhaps my intent here is to engage with the sculptural, the fictive and the poetic in order to develop a connection between the ways that one might attempt to map the space of not knowing: not knowing where to begin, not knowing how to grieve, how to return, and what spaces might exist as one attempts to return to the landscape of the black body's infinite and abstract dimensions, and within these dimensions, the inability to fathom despair.

Returning to this frame, I would argue that, in one sense, what Brooks and Gallagher have in common is their attempt to capture the place where the body resides: a landscape of grief made up of pieces, parts and fragments. This narrative is difficult, and seemingly impossible to map or contain. Butler is helpful here, as she describes the impossibility of mourning and capturing a transparent narrative.

What grief displays, in contrast, is the thrall in which our relations with others holds us, in ways we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves as autonomous and in control. I might try to tell a story here about what I am feeling, but it would have to be a story in which the very "I" who seeks to tell the story is stopped in the midst of the telling; the very "I" is called into question by its relation to the Other, a

⁸⁴ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2003) 21-22.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 22.

relation that does not precisely reduce me to speechlessness, but does nevertheless clutter my speech with signs of its undoing. I tell a story about the relations I choose, only to expose, somewhere along the way, the way I am gripped and undone by these very relations. My narrative falters, as it must.⁸⁶

Butler's understanding of the fragility of the narrative of grief is essential in thinking about what might emerge out of this faltering narrative. What can we make of this landscape and how does it work through the discursive relationship between the figure of not knowing what exists between the realm of grief and the landscape of the black body? How does the enigma of this experience provide a framework that suspends the body through this very question? As a fluid aesthetic field – a map that is both internal and decidedly historical – how does one recompose the fragmented and violated black body? How might we further consider the challenge that both writers confront as they attempt to make sense of the black bodies they face?

Frantz Fanon, the black psychologist and revolutionary from Martinique, who came to consciousness during the Algerian War, writes of this negotiation between the black body and the difficulty in mapping out its figuration. In *Black Skin White Masks*, he points out, "In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty."⁸⁷ As Fanon attempts to set forth his own "definitive structuring of the self and the world," he describes his own embodied relationship to it. Perhaps one way to read through his "certain uncertainty" is to think about the way the black body is defined through the densely layered field articulated through the atrocities of its insistent

⁸⁶ Ibid. 23.

⁸⁷ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967 c. 1952) 110-111.

violation. What is certain is the extent to which the black body is constantly reconfigured as an endless field of violence and obliteration. Perhaps it is this “certain uncertainty” that frames this force, the field of the unknowing. In working out the impossible possibility of conceptualizing this landscape, marking the fragments between fields, a poetics emerges, a theatre-in-seizing the black body’s fragments through radical conceptual forms.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Ibid.

Chapter Three: The Violated Black Body: Narrative Arc(s) of Possibility

How does one create a narrative in the face of lynching's spectacle? And against this horrific narrative, what are the poetics in externalizing and rearticulating what one sees? Hilton Als, in one of the preliminary essays of the *Without Sanctuary* catalogue, describes the process of writing about the lynching photographs, ruminating on his personal relationship to the images. His essay raises the question of how one develops a narrative for his particular, individual analysis. He writes:

Of course, one big difference between the people documented in these pictures and me is that I am not dead, have not been lynched or scalded or burned or whipped or stoned. But I have been looked at, watched, and seeing the harm in people's eyes – that is the prelude to becoming a dead nigger, like those seen here, that has made me understand, finally, what the word “nigger” means, and why people have used it, and the way I use it here, now: as a metaphorical lynching before the real one. “Nigger” is a slow death. And that's the slow death I feel all the time now, as a colored man.⁸⁹

Als' line of thinking is important because it reveals his specific relationship to the violated black body. Not “dead,” “lynched,” “scalded,” “burned,” “whipped,” or “stoned,” the author's experience of being “looked at” helps him to speculate about the experience he shares with those captured in the lynching postcards. What is crucial is his seeing the men and women as he sees *himself* documented in the lynching just before he imagines their end as his own, as in “becoming a dead nigger.” Als absorbs into his own body the epithet, “Nigger,” what he calls a *slow death*, understanding the harm passed to him through “their eyes” as “*a metaphorical lynching before the act.*” What strikes me about Als' carefully framed process of interpreting the images is how he reveals the distance between being a victim of lynching and experiencing it as metaphor. Of course,

⁸⁹ James Allen, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe: Twin Palm Publishers, 2000) 39.

as Als points out, one experience is not exactly like the other, but in this negotiation, a complicated battle takes place as he works through both image and epithet, struggling to confront and understand his internal, psychic relationship to lynching, and the narratives that he attempts to negotiate and deploy.

This battle echoes in the opening sentences of his essay, where he writes, “So what can I tell you about a bunch of unfortunate niggers stupid enough to get caught and hanged in America, or am I supposed to say lynched? I’m assuming this aggressive tone to establish a little distance from these images of the despised and dead, the better to determine the usefulness of this project, which escapes me, but doesn’t preclude my writing about it.”⁹⁰ As Als negotiates the trauma of writing about and relating to images of the “despised and dead,” he emerges with an understanding of the violated body as he cultivates both an *association with* and a *distance from* the violated black body. But what are the limits of his body in this spatial relationship, and how might one mark the distance between the subject (the tortured black body) and the object (the writer’s attempts to capture what it might mean)?

Als’ “distance” from the images seals his tight proximity to them, as though his relationship to the pictures is tied to his identity manifesting in slow, fluid time: “*Nigger is a slow death. And that’s the slow death I feel all the time now, as a colored man.*”⁹¹ In slowing down time, Als extends the narrative space between seeing the records of lynching and interpreting them through his own embodied response. As a “colored man,” Als carries this “slow death” in him. He provides a subject position that is tied to an understanding of these images through a realm both within, beyond, and as his self,

⁹⁰ Ibid. 38.

⁹¹ Ibid.

evolving both in his current relationship with the images and as he transcends them. He takes into account the need to fluidly express his own processing of his relationship to the black body through a field of technology (the photographs and their interpretation) and feeling (his identification with these photographs), where he is both the observer and the observed, the unnamed and named, the violated and what the violated feels. More simply put perhaps: Als provides a look into the *dynamic* relationship between the traumatized body's image and the traumatized viewer's point of view. He continues:

Did the families in these pictures stand at the periphery and wait for it to all be over, when someone, maybe the youngest among them, could climb the tree and cut Cousin or Mother down? It's hard to see if any of the lynched have anything but rope and eyes staring at them in these pictures. When they were lynched their humanity was taken away from them so why not their families? They have no names in these pictures – maybe addresses, I don't know, since I couldn't look past the pictures, really. What difference would it have made to get the facts of any of these lives, white or colored right? Don't we want this story to go away?⁹²

Als, here, provides a framework through which to read, further, the scene of lynching as a site of alternative possibilities in the face of his traumatic recollection. Unable to “look past the pictures,” Als, again, inserts his own individual narrative within the framework of not solely what he sees or experiences, but what he imagines. Just as he is interested in the moments before the lynching, tying his own current experience of being watched as a “Nigger” and a “Colored Man,” in this passage, he speculates about what may have happened during and after the lynching from another vantage point. He offers an alternative narrative by taking the lynched black body outside of the spectacle of its dehumanized violation and inserting it into a humanizing frame. Moving beyond metaphor, he imagines what may have happened, re-introducing the possibility of “the youngest among them,” who may have “cut Cousin or Mother down,” reminding the

⁹² Ibid. 43.

reader of the victim's humanity as he recreates the family who may have witnessed their cousin's or mother's death. Als attempts perhaps an impossible task: to render this site of trauma into a useable past through a story that reclaims the missing black family, returned through the author's reinvention.

In fact, Als begins to understand his relationship to the black body as being in constant formation, and even through its narratives may remain outside of his reach, he understands that the narrative may not always be succinct or intact when he asks: "What difference would it have made to get the facts of any of these lives, white or colored right? Don't we want this story to go away?" Ultimately, it seems as though Als wants to reclaim the story of the lynched black figure left behind, no matter how elusive and impossible the narrative might be to articulate. Between his own feelings upon looking at the photographs and his attempts at reconfiguring their histories, Als, in his essay, is constantly caught in the middle of trying to shape his relationship to the violated black body. For him, the story won't go away; instead it waits to be claimed, re-imagined and recuperated.

His attempts to reclaim this body and to reconstruct its narrative raise some important questions: How does one reconsider the fragmentation of the black body and its seemingly impossible reparation? Further, how does one map the articulation of the black body as an expansive site, a field – an impossible and infinite space for not only violence, but the recuperation of that violence within a shifting site of one's own particular history? Als marks out an epistemological landscape, internalizing while externalizing a frame of mourning that encompasses his own need to imagine how his mourning manifests. This mourning, however, individual, expands into a collective field

beyond his own grief. *Did the families in these pictures stand at the periphery and wait for it to all be over, when someone, maybe the youngest among them, could climb the tree and cut Cousin or Mother down?*

What Als calls into question as he thinks about his own relationship to the image is the psychic space that belongs to his self in relation to the lynched black body, left behind in the photograph waiting to be claimed. His relationship to the record of the body, as well as its return, is crucial because it points to specific power relations that exist between body, picture, narrative and text.

It might be useful, here, to consider Foucault in *Discipline & Punish*, where he explores the power dynamic at play between the condemned body which is seen as property, its ownership and narrative bound by violence and display. His explorations help to reveal how this body functions as a vehicle that reveals how power circulates between individuals. He writes:

Now, the study of this micro-physics presupposes that the power exercised on the body is conceived not as property, but as strategy, that its effects of domination are attributed not to 'appropriation', but to dispositions, manoeuvres, tactics, techniques, functionings; that one should decipher in it a network of relations, constantly in tension, in activity, rather than a privilege that one might possess; that one should take as its model a perpetual battle rather than a contract regulating a transaction or the conquest of a territory. In short, this power is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the 'privileged,' acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions – an effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated....⁹³

Though Foucault is not, specifically, describing the role or plight of the contemporary black body, his analysis of the 17th century condemned body exposes

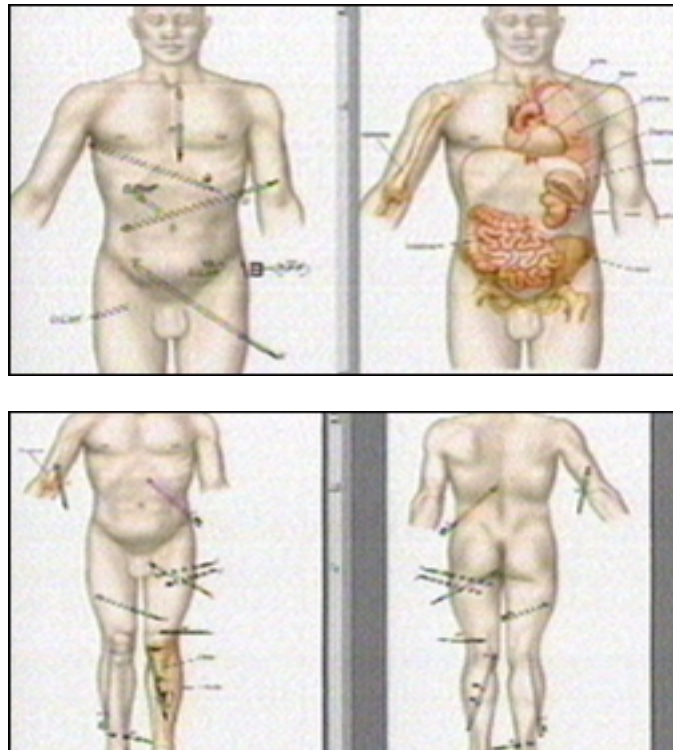
⁹³ Michel Foucault, "The Body of the Condemned," *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House, 1979) 26-27.

several useful parallels. We might extend his analysis of the “power exercised on the body” into a reading of the contemporary black body as a condemned subject, one also, to borrow Foucault, “conceived not as property, but as strategy.” One parallel emerges when Foucault points out that the condemned body should be “deciphered” in a “network of relations, constantly in tension” and “activity” as opposed to its domination being simply “acquired or preserved.” Where Foucault describes this as a “perpetual battle,” manifesting as a fluid set of “strategic positions,” I would like to insert the black body’s formation as a condemned, oppressed subject. The “techniques” of lynching, and its “functionings” projected through the lynching photographs and their dissemination via the postcards, mark an important set of the violated black body’s poetics. In the face of these techniques and strategies that reinforce oppression, an alternative narrative intervenes within this paradigm. Exposing this strategy through the complicated effects of lynching is a counter-paradigm that Als and others construct, their writings confronting lynching images and the “network of relations” that cuts between photograph, viewer, spectacle, and subject.

In the contemporary moment, how might we read from Foucault through Als to the current landscape of the violated, condemned black body? What are the ways that we might understand and see the “effects of domination...attributed not to ‘appropriation’, but to dispositions, maneuvers, tactics, techniques, functionings”? How might these tactics be played out across contemporary visual narratives of the black body’s domination?

Consider a recent narrative of the black body’s explicit violation: Amadou Diallo, a black Haitian immigrant living in New York. On February 4, 1999, NYC Police

officers, thinking him a criminal and threat, riddled him with bullets in a vestibule as he reached for his wallet. The following are several images of autopsy graphics presented by a prosecution forensic pathologist during his trial. They mark the trajectory of the 19 of 41 bullets fired that entered Diallo's body.

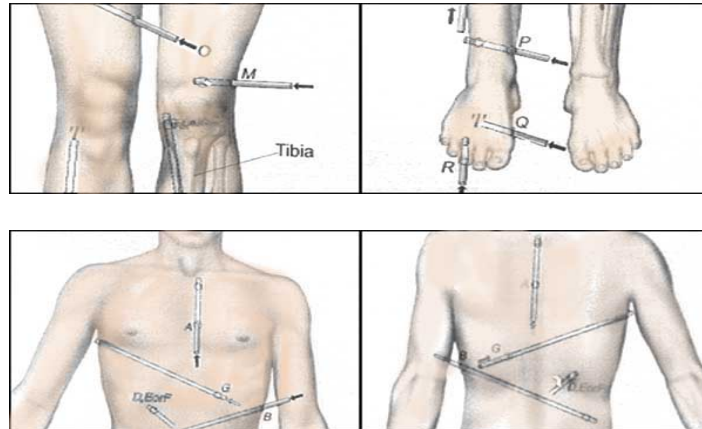


These images were used by the prosecution to show that three of Diallo's 19 gunshot wounds suggest that the officers continued to shoot him when he was already, or on the way down. Part of the report follows:

Cohen told jurors the bullet that passed through Diallo's aorta also perforated his spine and spinal cord. Diallo, the doctor said, would have been paralyzed from the waist down and falling at some point during the stream of 41 bullets. In addition, the bullets also broke bones in Diallo's left leg (the tibia and fibula), making it increasingly difficult for him to stand... One bullet, Cohen said, entered the front of Diallo's left shin and travelled up the leg from the front to the rear. Another

⁹⁴ "The Amadou Diallo Shooting Trial," [Court TV Online](http://www.courttv.com/archive/national/diallo/autopsyphoto.html) (Courtroom Television Network LLC, 2000) <<http://www.courttv.com/archive/national/diallo/autopsyphoto.html>>.

entered through the bottom of Diallo's right shoe, wounding his third right toe and travelling upwards; the third wound showed that a bullet entered Diallo's right shin and travelled in a "strikingly upward trajectory" until it lodged in an area behind the knee.⁹⁵



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What were *these* shooters trying to erase? As they filled Diallo with bullets, they not only killed him, they entered into circulation with the history of the black body's endless violation, ending in its similarly constant spectacle and violent display. Each bullet's path is traced, carefully, here, providing a map that points from Diallo's felled body to the man's also captured as spectacle in an abandoned plantation in this lynching photograph nearly ninety years before.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.



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I spent some time addressing this lynching photograph in the previous chapter alone, but here, setting it beside Diallo's court autopsy graphics offers a way of re-entering history. Perhaps in bringing these images together, what arises is a language, where their histories come together in this conjoined space, whether in the dark vestibule or in the shadows against a tree, or those surrounding a dying man's shadowed face.

From pre-1915 to 1999, the image of this unnamed man and Amadou Diallo's violent graphic end in vestibule, on display in court, then in cyberspace, reveals so much of the fall, violation and spectacle of the violated black body. In both, the bullets seem as endless as the need to erase the victims; thus, pairing these two records, for me, is crucial.

Mallek Alloula's book, *The Colonial Harem*, which consists of the "collected, arranged, and annotated" picture postcards of Algerian women produced and circulated during the first three decades of the 20th Century, helps me to think about the images of Diallo and the unnamed black man.⁹⁸ Alloula argues that in the dissemination of these postcard images of Algerian women, "probably reproduced in the millions, there is

⁹⁷ James Allen, "Lynching, Pre-1915, southern United States" (Plate 78), *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe: Twin Palm Publishers, 2000) 140.

⁹⁸ Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) x.

visible the broad outline of one of the figures of the colonial perception of the native.”⁹⁹

He continues, “This figure can be essentially defined as the practice of a right (over) sight that the colonizer arrogates to himself and that is the bearer of multiform violence. The postcard fully partakes in such violence; it extends its effects; it is its accomplished expression, no less efficient for being symbolic.”¹⁰⁰

Arguing that “[t]ravel is the essence of the postcard, and expedition is its mode,” Alloula helps the reader to see that the postcard’s arrogates its violence through its production and dissemination, shaping perception as it circulates, importing its extravagant, erotic content.¹⁰¹ In thinking about the lynching photographs of the unnamed man from *Without Sanctuary*, and Amadou Diallo’s autopsy cyberspace images next to one another, I am struck by the ways that their images engender a kind of symbolic violence similar to that engendered in the postcards of Alloula’s inquiry. Whether as postcard, or in the *Without Sanctuary* catalogue, the unnamed black man’s image circulates as readily as Diallo’s rendering of his bullet holed body in cyberspace.

What passes between the sepia-washed photograph/postcard of the lynched man left in a field and the multiple fracture of images of a “Diallo’s” torso and legs floating, bloodless and “white,” in cyberspace? What impossible language circulates between these images, as one thinks about the endless bullets that screamed through their bodies

⁹⁹ Ibid. 5.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. Barbara Harlow notes in the introduction to *The Colonial Harem* that, “The Algerian writer’s study of the postcards... reveals an intense preoccupation with the veiled female body” (x). What strikes me about Alloula’s project are the many postcards that reiterate this violence through the veil’s radical removal and erotic display. For instance, in chapter three *Women’s Prisons*, the women in the postcards are according to Alloula, “stripped of their clothing by the photographer, in an effort to render their bodies erotic”(25); and in chapter ten, *The Colonial Harem: Images of Suberoticism*, Alloula writes that, “We have here the equivalent of an anthology of breasts... There emerges from this anthology a sort of half-aesthetic concept: The Moorish bosom, the exclusive property of the exotic postcard, which sets down its canon” (105).

and the still images that are left behind to circulate through the contemporary moment? How to begin to trace out a narrative that refracts between them, one bearing their multiform modes of extravagant violence?

Perhaps, being able to access this image via the internet, to surf upon or search after it in cyberspace, offers a way back to Amadou Diallo, to see, somehow, the process of his killing, his fall, slowed down, suspended. And in this slowed-down space, how might we return to the unnamed black man in the photo, to his history bound with no records, no mappings, no hi-tech trace of the spray of bullets shot through his body?

Gwendolyn Brooks offers a unique lens through which to make more visible this slowed down depiction of the black body's violation. Here, I would like to return to her poem, "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon," specifically where Brooks imagines Caroline Bryant and her family at the kitchen table watching her husband, "The Fine Prince," lean[ing] across the table and slapping one of his children for throwing a molasses pitcher at his brother's face. In the middle of this violent scene, the poet writes:

She did not speak. When the Hand
Came down and away, and she could look at her child,
At her baby child,
She could only think of blood.
Surely her baby's cheek
Had disappeared, and its place, surely,
Hung a heaviness, a lengthening red, a red that had no end.¹⁰²

In the opening chapter of my project, I also explore this stanza, where I place it next to the court case that surrounded Emmett Till's murder. There I focus on the father's

¹⁰² Gwendolyn Brooks, "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon," *Blacks* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1994) 337. First published in *The Bean Eaters* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960).

violence toward the children and the ways that Brooks articulates this violence through her poem. Drawing on newspaper accounts that highlight the behavior of the children in the courtroom, my earlier examination emphasizes the connections between those records and the poem.

At this juncture, I would like to focus on how the poem is also a fictive attempt to outline Till's violent murder. Brooks offers an interior space, a possibility of what happened inside the home of the criminal and his wife. Brooks provides a way into the violence of the narrative by writing around the scene, and to get at the "blood," the implicit violence of the crime, by having one of her characters remember what she recalls, though has not seen. In the most innocent of templates, the innocuous field of a child's face, the author inserts her own violent reality made flat, visible, as if a projected narrative of torture that exposes itself on the soft screen-like surface. What blood is there and not there, surfacing or not surfacing under her baby's face? Is the blood from the murder of Emmett Till by her husband too much to bear? Brooks continues:

She shook her head. It was not true, of course.
It was not true at all. The
Child's face was as always, the
Color of the paste in her paste-jar. ¹⁰³

And as though the child were never struck, or Till's murder never occurred by "The Fine Prince's" hand, Brooks creates a still, white screen in the middle of her narrative, each layer of the screen giving way to an unmoving field of chalky paste. Does this color refract in the blank and bloodless screens of Diallo's white and bloodless body in

¹⁰³ Ibid.

cyberspace, the bullets frozen, tracked through his body, the paths cleanly marking his murder?

Diallo's court autopsy images and the unnamed lynched man's renderings are both images without blood, yet they operate as metaphors of the black body's violation in the public imagination. How to think of these images in the context of the "lengthening red that has no end," that then becomes "not true at all," and is ultimately as white as the "paste in [her] paste-jar"? What I am attempting to make visible, perhaps, is a field of color and space, one quite difficult to trace. But in centering on the white entity of Diallo's black body in cyberspace, the "paste in the paste jar" and the whiteness of the baby's face, the metaphorical fields expose and re-route visual histories of the violated black self, caught in the middle of this expanse.

In my attempts to understand how one might make visible, re-assess and process the complex field in which the black body's violation is presented – whether through lynching photograph, autopsy graphic, or poem – it might be important to turn again to Frantz Fanon, who offers one way to confront the relationship between the black self and the black body.

Setting forth his own conceptual frame, he demands an explanation from "the other [that] fixed [him] there," only to report that, "Nothing happened. I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together by another self".¹⁰⁴ What are the poetics of the black body suggested in the realization of one's self as the excised, exploded and then the re-configured? More particularly, what are the ways that one imagines a revised self that detaches into pieces whose embodied fragments mark the process of its own new

¹⁰⁴ Frantz Fanon, Black Skin White Masks (New York: Grove Press, 1967 c. 1952) 109.

becoming? Fanon's need to rebuild and repair his self, the act of providing a kind of self-reparation through the text, is crucial. He continues:

...completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object. What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that splattered my whole body with black blood? But I did not want this revision, this thematization. All I wanted was to be a man among other men. I wanted to come lithe and young into a world that was ours and help build it together.¹⁰⁵

Fanon illuminates the difficult task of re-composing the black self through its history of oppression by positioning himself in a dynamic relationship between his body and what he imagines to be its new conceptualization. One way that he bridges the divide between his old self and his new one is through an eviscerating metaphor – cutting a part of himself from himself. As he makes himself into an object, he refashions himself, his whole body, “splattered” with “black blood.” It is at this moment of his new self-conceptualization, through self-mutilation and re-formation, that he is not only able to move forward, but he also realizes that what is as important as regaining his self is reclaiming his humanity by rebuilding the greater world around him. In this sense, he shifts from the personal to the communal, developing his vision of a new self through a complex and embodied framework.

Thinking about this dynamic interplay between Fanon's body and how it manifests as an aesthetic field is important because it helps offer a way of thinking about the black body's fragmentation from one context – often one of historical, personal and collective violation – to another, one that is a conceptual space through which the body can be repaired, or in Fanon's case, rebuilt. This process, mapping out the material

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. 112-113.

between the violated black body through its conceptualization and ultimately its repair, is a complicated one. What process, what map, what genealogy of the black body extends from Fanon's analysis of his own body through the numerous violated black bodies like those captured in the *Without Sanctuary* catalogue, Brooks' poetry or beyond?

Toni Morrison, in her essay "The Site of Memory," reminds us of the importance of tracing out what remains in the face of a history of violation by pointing out that many authors of American slave narratives adhere to the literary conventions of the period, often shielding the viewers from the graphic atrocities of their experiences. In the novel *Beloved*, she offers her own account of the reality of slavery through her fictive lens. As a product, perhaps, of what she names her own "literary archaeology," Morrison's work uses "the remains of what were left behind to reconstruct the world these remains imply."¹⁰⁶

What is valuable, for me, are what Morrison names "the remains," the unique record of atrocities which feature the black body as a site not only of memory, but of violation, where these remains serve as a source through which to explore the black body's violent fragmentation leading, perhaps, to its psychic recovery. Next to Morrison's excavations of memory through her literary archaeology, it might be useful to posit Als' speculative narratives and Fanon's understanding of the black body's violation through his abstract, complex fields: What constitutes a poetics of the black body that extends between their works? How might one consider images of the black body within such an expansive literary framework that better reveals a history of this violation? Each of these writers offers alternative narratives to those that accompany the

¹⁰⁶ Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," *Inventing the Truth, The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. William Zinsser (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1987) 191.

remnants of the black body's violation, all attempting to provide a useable language that helps to reconstitute the social and self-definition of the black self amidst its constant violation.

With this in mind, I would like to return again to Gwendolyn Brooks. In the following, Brooks contextualizes her self within an historical field of violation, where she reveals a particular relationship to those with whom she shares a uniquely violent past. At the Fisk University Writer's Conference, when approaching the ways that her "blackness" "confronted [her] with a shrill spelling of itself," she writes:

I knew that people of my coloration and distinctive history had been bolted to trees and sliced or burned or shredded; knocked to the back of the line; provided with separate toilets, schools, neighborhoods; denied, when possible, voting rights, hounded, hooted at, or shunned, or patronizingly patted. . . ¹⁰⁷

In the autobiographical scene which Brooks presents, what are the implications in the language of the black body as she reveals it? *Bolted, sliced, burned, shredded, knocked, denied, hounded, hooted at, shunned, patted* – the black body is cast, here, across a litany of verbs which precisely reveal its violent fragmentation, its capture, manipulation and use. As she offers her own history, she also presents a complex field through which to read her blackness as it is wedded to her own social, personal and psychic fragmentation. For Brooks, this comes to her where she realizes in 1967 that "America's social climate was trying to tell me something." Among other black writers, she explains that "Suddenly there was a new black to meet," I met some of it at the Fisk University Writer's conference in Nashville."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Brooks, Gwendolyn, Report From Part One (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972) 84.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

I think that her objective relationship to Blackness, the shift in her naming “some of it,” is reminiscent of Fanon’s shift towards his understanding of the objective black self as an expanding aesthetic field, one that includes herself and others. What is striking about both writers is how they commit to metaphor an understanding of their singular black selves within a larger shared and collective experience. Both Fanon and Brooks offer a metaphorical relationship to the black body’s larger social formation. For Brooks, this is salient. It points to the reality that she recognizes her personal history in her attempts to define *the* black, or blackness as a collective and spatial aesthetic.

Elizabeth Alexander, in her book of essays, *The Black Interior*, mines a similar social, poetic and collective aesthetic as she explores the work of visual artists such as Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden. Interested in looking at the psychic interiority that manifests within black art and within black life, she attempts to give the reader a way of thinking about black representation as a psychic space. Alexander argues in particular about the difficulties black writers have in facing the defamation of the body as they attempt to create works of beauty, noting in particular how these artists resist descriptions of the black body’s annihilation. More importantly, she also gives us a way of thinking about black representation as an aesthetic space that highlights the black body’s modernity: a central argument in her work is that these artists offer a discussion of the black body as both a conceptual and corporeal reality through their art.

Exploring the relationship between the individual and collective articulation of this aesthetic identity through literature, Alexander writes, “My interest is not in psychotherapeutic culture and African American Literature – though what a fascinating topic that is – but rather the marker such language offers for identifying complex and

often unexplored interiority beyond the face of the social self.”¹⁰⁹ Alexander’s notion of an interior space is important because it presupposes a fluid relationship with the artist and the world of which she is a part. This conversation between the individual and collective self and the creative imagination which binds them is crucial. Describing the source of her project, she continues:

What I am calling dream space is to my mind the great hopeful space of African American creativity. Imagining a racial future in the black interior that we are constrained to imagine, outside of the parameters of how we are seen in this culture, is the zone where I am interested in African American Creativity. The “black interior” is not an inscrutable zone, nor colonial fantasy. Rather, I see it as an inner space in which black artists have found selves that go far, far beyond the limited expectations and definitions of what black is, isn’t or should be.¹¹⁰

As Alexander imagines an aesthetic “interior” space which exists outside of the “parameters of how we are seen in this culture,” and seeks black artistic selves that exist outside the “limited expectations and definitions of what black is, isn’t or should be,” she addresses the question of how black artists respond to the black body.

Like Fanon and Brooks before her, Alexander explores the role of the black body as a historically violated subject. In doing so, she considers how artists attempt to frame their art practices and aesthetics within this cultural context. Alexander continues:

Problem Number One: The black body has been misrepresented, absented, distorted, rendered invisible, exaggerated, made monstrous in the Western visual imagination and in the world of art....Regardless of the artist’s intent, he or she is painting against a history of defamation and annihilation of the black body and is thus challenged with resisting or redirecting the current (though ancient) vogue for a stereotypical realism.”¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Elizabeth Alexander, The Black Interior (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2004) 5.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid. 6-7.

Whereas Brooks' describes the history of the black body as *Bolted, sliced, burned, shredded, knocked, denied, hounded, hooted at, shunned, patted*, for Alexander, the battle not only echoes Brooks' concerns, but also resides in the realm of its violent representations, revealing an understanding of black selfhood as a kind of interior poetics that posits the black body in constant reflection with its defiled and annihilated image. What Alexander points to is that for her, the black artist's "inner space" is where the imaginative frameworks run deep through and past the question of its inscrutability, revealing a host of complex "selves" that make viable zones for art in the face of violation. Authors like Brooks and painters like Jacob Lawrence, for Alexander, offer such zones, deep, black interior spaces, realms of art that challenge visual expectations.

When Alexander writes about the black body in the Western visual imagination as *misrepresented, absented, distorted, rendered invisible, exaggerated, made monstrous*, she, like Brooks, recognizes the collective plight of the black body within an aesthetic framework of violation, expanding her understanding through protracted metaphor. Brooks' inner space becomes more illuminated when she describes the process, shape and texture of the materials from which she draws.

In fall 2004, I visited the Gwendolyn Brooks Papers at the Bancroft library at U.C. Berkeley. One of the items I discovered was the draft of a letter that Brooks wrote in response to an inquiry from the United States Information Agency in 1956, asking her for "a brief interpretive piece about the community in which you live" for a program called, Voice for America. The director, Theodore C. Streibert requests:

We should like you to tell why you have chosen to live and work there, touching upon characteristics which give the community its distinctive "feel". We should

hope that you would note elements or incidents of local life which you think would be especially revealing to the foreign listener.¹¹²

To this, she responds, “In Bronzeville¹¹³ there are beautiful things and there are ugly things,” only to cross this out, re-writing: “Bronzeville is strong and uncertain. It is innocent and calculating. It is foolish and very wise. It smiles at you, and sneers. It is noted for handsome things. It is noted for ugly things.” This space between “strong and uncertain,” the “handsome” and the “ugly” is reminiscent of Coleridge, where he writes that poetry “reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities.”¹¹⁴ A similar “reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities” extends through Brooks’ work, and certainly her full response to the United States Information Agency, as she describes the “feel” of her “local life.” The following is a partial transcription of her hand-written response:

There is a strong difference in Bronzeville Citizens. Many of them are warm and outgoing, are hopeful, are trusting of the future. They feel that, even though race relations leave much to be desired, there has already been an impressive amount of amelioration, and that there will be more. Others among them are indifferent to the world scenes. Glum, they have decided that there is not very far they can “go in life” (despite the staring examples of Mary McCleoud Bethune, educator, George Washington Carver, scientist, Ralph Bunche, statesman) but they do manage a happiness of sorts, centered in Bronzeville and things Bronzevillian. They like my above mentioned groups take an active interest in Church affairs, they attend movies and plays and ballgames, belong to the Parent-Teacher Association, Block Clubs (little groups banded together for the purpose of maintaining the quality and appearance of a neighborhood.), social clubs, lodges. They keep their children & themselves scrubbed and neatly dressed. They read. They obey laws and vote.

¹¹² Gwendolyn Brooks, 1917-Papers 2001 / 83 Z (Berkeley: Bancroft Collection Unpublished Materials, 2001) CTN: 2:23 U-V MISC 1950-81 n.d.

¹¹³ Ibid. In reference to Bronzeville, Brooks writes: “The name is unofficial. I have never heard a Negro say, ‘I live in Bronzeville.’ But because the color of skin seen in the community is predominately one or others of a variety of browns the name has become very popular.”

¹¹⁴ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographia Literaria: Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions ed. George Watson (London: J.M. Dent, 1965 c1817) 174.

Another group, I do not know the numbers of individuals comprising it – has no hope, is half-housed, half hungry, and half or wholly angry. This group feels that every white man is his enemy. When he meets his enemy he glowers; or he simpers cravenly, on top, while he boils beneath; once in a while he kills.¹¹⁵

This glimpse into the “inner life” of Brooks’ world and work is important because it shows how the life within the community is a kind of poetic reconciliation of opposites within itself. Brooks’ vision of Bronzeville, her rendering of its complex whole, offers a recuperative narrative in the face of the Western visual imagination that Elizabeth Alexander calls into question in her explorations of a “black interior.” Brooks makes a point, in her answer, to *not* misrepresent, make absent, distort, render invisible, exaggerate, or make monstrous the black body of her community; in fact, as she records and recalls her experiences in her Bronzeville community, she offers a complex and balanced human whole in the face of the threat of the black body’s fragmentation. From those in her community “trustful of the future” or “indifferent to the world scenes,” to those who “read,” “boil beneath,” or “once in a while...kill,” Brooks creates a multifaceted picture of her community’s black (Bronze) inner self. Her rendering and recapitulation of her community is crucial in her attempts to rewrite a narrative in the face of the black body’s constant violation. She continues:

Bronzeville testifies that to find a large group of Negroes living together is to find not curios, but People – who laugh like other people and wail, eat and beget, wonder and deduce – and everlastingly reach toward Adequacy – that approximate roundness that eases the majority of men.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Gwendolyn Brooks, 1917-Papers 2001 / 83 Z (Berkeley: Bancroft Collection Unpublished Materials, 2001) CTN: 2:23 U-V MISC 1950-81 n.d.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

Adequacy: what interests me in Brooks' use of this word, its "approximate roundness," is the sense that her understanding of cultural assimilation is highly fraught. Brooks' understanding of what she must reveal to the "foreign listener" is bound within a poetics that engenders complexity and nuance. As in her poetry, in her "answer" to the Voice for America program, the author is aware of the importance of working towards a field of representation that hopes to reconstitute a "People," that, like other people, "laugh," "wail," "eat," "beget," "wonder" and "deduce." Brooks' very plain yet specific vocabulary helps to redefine and reshape an understanding of the black self that extends throughout her work.

In Brooks' second autobiography, *Report from Part Two*, this understanding is reflected in the multiple strategies, through the autobiography, by which Image meets Picture meets Memory. How does Brooks remember, and how are we asked to interpret this memory through the graphic and dynamic prose she offers throughout her autobiography, a multi-layered and performative text?

In deploying her "story," she reorients what it means to be defined, and what it means to be black. Brooks writes her way – through the heart of representative images of blackness – back into the world, and extends this process through the "collective" experience. Her work offers a fluid space that operates as a primary mode through which to continue an analysis of the representative black body as an aesthetic field. Brooks conveys her understanding of the urgency of representation through a fluid and dynamic process. The language that she offers through this process is crucial, revealing a poetics that extends beyond her poetry into an aesthetic *sensibility* that animates and activates the black *human* self in the face of *dehumanization*.

One striking feature in her autobiographical writing is her attempt to explore the field of the black body through the cinematic. Here, she seems to process the field of the body through a series of images that begins with the black body, her own, in a theater.

She writes:

...We Black patrons sat in the dark. In the dark we Black patrons stared at the screen. There they were. (Occasionally.) On the screen. Those intruding COLORED folks! (one of the stupid names we then called ourselves and allowed ourselves to be called.) Those NEGROES! Those intruding would-be stars! Those negligibles, those Masters of stumble-English. Bug-eyed, pop-mouthed, endlessly terrified, endlessly loyal to whites (on the screen, at least), endlessly disloyal to and suspicious of other Blacks: ---- not to be trusted, not to be respected, guaranteed ---- not to be thought of seriously. Those folks were the interrupters. They came onto Our screen, Our wonderful, clean, elegant white-folks screen, Interrupting personal Escape, Interrupting personal white-oriented Dream, (which dream, of course, was unreal “even” for whites.) If those interlopers, those Interrupters, were not there, we Black patrons could feel whole, could THINK we felt whole...¹¹⁷

Brooks, in this passage, captures a unique vantage point by placing herself, again, in the center of her visual field, a black poet, a patron among others at the cinema. She uses this visual field to capture, in multiple typographic valences, the black body’s performance as both a real figure and a representative one. Immediately personal and instantly collective, Brooks captures her own subjective self as she reveals to the reader her relationship to the image that she sees on the screen: “There they were.” Emphatic and underlined, she describes sitting among other blacks patrons and seeing “those COLORED folks...those NEGROES!” on the screen. As she breaks down the layers of their caricature – *Masters of stumble-English. Bug-eyed, pop-mouthed, endlessly*

¹¹⁷ Gwendolyn Brooks, Report From Part Two (Chicago: Third World Press, 1996) 16.

terrified, endlessly loyal to the whites (on the screen at least) – Brooks creates a distance between herself and the figures that appear on the screen. She recognizes that these figures are clearly only a representative version of her subjective self, yet through them, she brings into focus her own poetic space.

The black body, as a visual field, comes into being through Brooks' use of the prosaic theater. Brooks, through what I would call a *cinematic prose*, offers an alternative narrative language as she re-evaluates what it means to exist in relation to these images. Instead of resisting them, Brooks takes them out of their static, filmic context and repositions them in relation to herself and the other Black movie patrons. In an extremely complex layering of visual surfaces, Brooks explores what it means to re-evaluate the image: "They came onto Our screen, Our wonderful, clean, elegant white-folks screen, Interrupting personal Escape, Interrupting personal white-oriented Dream (which dream, of course, was unreal, "even" for whites.)" For Brooks, escaping into the realm of the film's impossible promise of a white-oriented Dream is truly impossible with those "intruding would be stars."¹¹⁸

What strikes me in this passage are the ways that Brooks recreates this representational frame by casting it within her own performative frame, where the black body plays out in front of her as she interprets its formation. Brooks breaks the black figure out of the filmic and places it within her specific visual trajectory, helping to reveal what may be Brooks' hope for its design: "If those interlopers, those Interrupters, were not there, we Black patrons could feel whole, could THINK we felt whole." Brooks, in these passages, imagines the black body intact and complete, "feeling whole" and internalizing this sense.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

What does it mean to want to re-construct the black body's wholeness, in the center of a narrative that highlights the black body's fragmentation in a fluid, filmic field of representation? In a passage that soon follows, Brooks continues to use her prose to activate a space that hopes to resituate, to rebuild the black body through another field of cinematic black bodies. Here, she recounts her experience watching the film, *Buck and the Preacher*, (Circa 1972). She describes her "pulsing pride" when she sees for the first time in her life a "Solid screenful of hot-willed, stone-eyed Blacks, moving/ Sharply, with raw strength and deliberate prudent anger." Replacing the stereotypical caricatures of her earlier filmic experience, she reveals her experience of seeing a radically different version of what she and her community were left to face. She points out: "Of course they failed. CAREFULLY. Nevertheless I and other Blacks, left the theater with an exhilarated notion/ that a Statement had been made..."¹¹⁹ Brooks, here, exposes an understanding of the conscious black subject, a self that is both aware of her embodied relationship with how she is represented and ready to evaluate how this representation might be interpreted.

Why, for Brooks, is the medium of film so important? I would argue that the cinematic space provides a moving template for Brooks to assess both self and audience, a reflective screen against which the author constructs her analysis of the black self in relation to her internal life and the larger evaluations of the community in which she lives. I am reminded here of Brooks' contribution to the Voices of America series, and the question that generated her response: *We should like you to tell why you have chosen to live and work there, touching upon characteristics which give the community its*

¹¹⁹ Gwendolyn Brooks, Report From Part Two (Chicago, IL: Third World Press, 1996.) 17.

*distinctive “feel.”*¹²⁰ For Brooks, the cinematic screen serves as a source for her work, one she returns to, freezing frames, remembering, recording, and returning to the distinctive “feel” of her community enraptured by the possibilities of the black self.

She continues, attempting to reveal to the reader the importance of seeing this new version of the cinematic black body, one that leaps from the screen, through the audience’s perceptions. Brooks writes:

.....Blacks therein were presented as complex, reasonable human beings, capable of warm-heartedness, justified indignation, capable of courage, coordinaton, organization, subtle humor, and Black man-Black woman love, deep and sweet. Rather than shuffles, Eye-bug and soprano timorousness. Blacks were Presented as capable of achieving what they set out to do. Blacks truly loved this picture. They felt large as they Looked at it.¹²¹

In this passage, Brooks activates the black body as a subject, viewer and interpreter of her experience. In an attempt to offer a more *whole* image of the black subjective self and perhaps re-orient the scope of the body, itself, the poet offers a counter-narrative – through film – to the fragmented, black body. What stands out is Brooks’ measured understanding of the importance of this film for her and other black viewers because blacks were portrayed as “complex, reasonable human beings, capable of warm-heartedness, justified indignation, capable of courage, coordination, organization, subtle humor, and Black man-Black woman love, deep and sweet. Rather than shuffles, Eye-bug and soprano timorousness.” In this litany, what is striking is not

¹²⁰ Gwendolyn Brooks, 1917-Papers 2001 / 83 Z (Berkeley: Bancroft Collection Unpublished Materials, 2001) CTN: 2:23 U-V MISC 1950-81 n.d.

¹²¹ Gwendolyn Brooks, Report From Part Two (Chicago: Third World Press, 1996) 17.

so much that this offers a simple counter-image to the black body's fragmented depiction (shuffles, Eye-bug, soprano timorousness), but that she includes these depictions of the black body within the same aesthetic, humanizing frame.

When Brooks notes that "Blacks truly loved this picture," and that "They felt large as they as they Looked at it," she places what seems like the *entire* black body and the black self into a spectacular relationship with the poetic imagination. Brooks offers several layers of performance: the writing performs, the movies perform, the images within the movie perform, all setting forth a series of images rich for the black body as specific and rendered whole through Brooks' own lens. She complicates the form of the black body, and re-contextualizes it through her autobiographical prose as a fluid and living entity. By creating a figurative space for a whole body, she gives the black self a dynamic frame that exists in counterpoint to the static images of fragmented violation that trap the black body in an almost circular arrangement with itself.

Other black authors have considered their relationship to this circular arrangement. What unites them are the ways that their work exists within a collective space as they attempt to rebuild a whole version of the fractured black self. Reminiscent of both Brooks and Alexander, and particularly Fanon, June Jordan in her essay "Black Studies: Bringing Back the Person" from her collection of essays *Civil Wars* writes:

...Body and soul, Black America reveals the extreme questions of contemporary life, questions of freedom and identity: How can I be who I am?....Now we arise, alert, determining, and new among ourselves. I am no longer alone. We will choose. But not as we were chosen, weighed and measured, pinched, bent backwards, under heel.¹²²

¹²² June Jordan, "Black Studies: Bringing Back the Person," Civil Wars (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981) 6-7.

What is most pressing in this passage are the ways that Jordan oscillates between the collective and the individual self when she says, “I am no longer alone,” and “We will choose.” And where she continues, “But not as we were chosen, weighed and measured, pinched, bent backwards under heel,” she envisions a *process of self naming*, one that includes her self in a shared relationship to the black self and the expansive terrain of the communal and individual imagination.

First published in 1969 in the *Evergreen Review*, Jordan’s work is important situated next to Brooks writings because it connects across a collective communal landscape of the black body’s poetics in the face of social and historical attack. James Baldwin comes to a similar recognition as Jordan in his *The Fire Next Time*, first published in the *New Yorker* in 1963. In it where he points out that, “I did not intend to allow the white people of this country to tell me who I was, and limit me in that way, and polish me off that way. And yet, of course, at the same time, I *was* being spat on and defined and described and limited, and could have been polished off with no effort whatsoever.”¹²³ Baldwin, like Jordan, recognizes the individual threat of violation and the need to resist through a collective force, against what stands in as a familiar list of the black body’s violation: “spat on,” defined,” described,” limited,” “polished off.”

Baldwin’s and Jordan’s writings help to raise the question: what happens if we consider the black body to be both a source for a litany of individual violation and the site of collective possibility? How might we proceed with an understanding of the black body’s constant violation, while simultaneously finding a useful source in the body that cannot be fixed, one that remains bloodied, cut, blown open and obliterated? What about

¹²³ James Baldwin, “The Fire Next Time,” *Collected Essays* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1998) 301.

a poetics of the black body that insists upon an acceptance of this violation, art that places the violated black body at its autonomous and collective center?

One place to turn is to Gwendolyn Brooks' poem "Boy Breaking Glass," one of the poems from her collection, *In the Mecca, Poems*, first published in 1968. Cutting across Jordan's and Baldwin's political essays of the same decade, and perhaps attempting to answer the litany and lists of exterior attempts to define the black body and self, Brooks addresses the audience through the speaker's intimate yet highly charged voice: "I shall create! If not a note, a hole,/ If not an overture, a desecration."¹²⁴ In these two lines, the words *note* and *hole*, then *overture* and *desecration* offer opposing modes which work together in a fluid space. What Brooks presents is both visceral and clear, intact then shattered, the poet inside a boy in the middle of breaking. With such specific and aimed desire, what is Brooks' boy trying to put together, and why is he breaking it apart?

In her first autobiography, *Report from Part One*, the poet discusses a set of questions related to the commissioned poem, where she was to consider "how ghetto blacks, overwhelmed by inequity and power, manage to live." Brooks asks: "Does a black boy, for example, turn his eyes away from the statue of liberty? How does he talk to himself? What beauties are at his disposal?"¹²⁵

These questions pose a dilemma for her poetic subject as he faces himself and seeks beauty in the face of oppression. Not like the Statue of Liberty, of metal and stone, the "beauties at his disposal" are ultimately what he creates: *note* or *hole*, *overture* or

¹²⁴ Gwendolyn Brooks, "Boy Breaking Glass," *Blacks* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1994) 438.

¹²⁵ Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report From Part One* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972) 184-185.

deseccration. Brooks presents a personae who shatters and fragments as a means to create a fluid and intangible reality of the self.

The speaker creates a figurative space, performing a place where the body's presence extends across the realm of possibility. The boy in the poem warns: "Don't go down the plank/ if you see there's no extension." And he continues to mark the figurative distance in what I think is the pivotal point in the poem: "Nobody knew where I was and now I am no longer there."

In these lines, the poem extends possibility into the unknown bound by the untraceable. Whether an extension of plank beyond the plank, or an extension into the absence of any extension at all, Brooks articulates a space for the body's presence and absence, offering a revised and unstable poetic possibility of the self: *Nobody knew where I was and now I am no longer there*.

The poem later features the boy, chiding the viewer, attempting to make the best of what remains of his self: "It was you, it was you who threw away my name!/ And this is everything I have for me." In an act of repossession, the boy in the poem also attempts to claim his thrown-away name, reminding the reader that his knowing this, his securing this knowledge is "everything." As he makes this claim, Brooks offers an aesthetic model of the self that accretes into a fractured being who slowly discovers himself, unnamed, unbound.

It is perhaps this boy's understanding that "Nobody knew where I was and now I am no longer there" that reveals the unique space in which Brooks' poetic subject finds himself. His being "there and not there" reveals his split or dissociative self as a whole one, both of his presences actualized in poetic opposition. The absent and the present

circulate, exposing what exists, perhaps between *note* or *hole*, *overture* or *desecration*. In this fluid space, Brooks' poem unveils a series of epistemological fields that reroutes the black body's limits and possibilities.

Through a complex set of transactions of the boy's self, which comes into view, Brooks gives the reader a way to explore the "beauties at the black boy's disposal" through a fluid and endless poetic frame. In this way, it seems as though his sense of identity is as mobile as its performance, perhaps answered in the poem's close:

Who has not Congress, lobster, love, luau,
the Regency Room, the Statue of Liberty,
runs. A sloppy amalgamation.
A mistake.
A cliff.
A hymn, a snare, and an exceeding sun.¹²⁶

In these lines, Brooks creates a distance between the subject of the poem and what he does not have. What beauties are at his disposal? They are certainly not Congress, lobster, love, luau, the Regency Room, the Statue of Liberty. The boy *runs*. At this point in the poem, its final poetic conceit, the boy both escapes and liquefies. Perhaps in this moment, between note and hole, between overture and desecration, the boy in the poem most transforms. Unable to obtain beautiful things, he runs, runs into and becomes "a sloppy amalgamation." This transition from the concrete into the abstract, his meaning growing into a limitless mix, a series of fluid, complex abstractions is crucial.

Brooks complicates the boy's desires by extending what he sees by the poem's close. What makes the poem so difficult is the music that Brooks plays into the center of the conceit, a disruption that stretches the line through content: the hymn, the poem's internal song, almost a humming at the end of the poem, pulls the line in and holds, then

¹²⁶ Gwendolyn Brooks, "Boy Breaking Glass," *Blacks* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1994) 439.

spins out and catches onto the *snare*. This sound, almost like a snare drum's percussion, a sonic snag in the poem catches the reader again, destabilizing the song. At the poem's end, there is no close, only further extension, a space, a field where the reader sees a kind of strangulated light: an *exceeding sun*. The poem's pun on son and sun morphs the boy into light and space, expanding his identity into an ever-expanding visual field.

I have chosen to offer this analysis of Brooks' poem "Boy Breaking Glass" because it offers a unique way of thinking about the poetic and performative next to one another in her work. The poem helps to reconfigure the black body as a conceptual and performative field, a place where the boy breaks apart what he faces. In this act, where the body gives way to what breaks, clarity fractures through the poem's core.

Brooks offers a poetic space through the "Boy Breaking Glass," a space where one might consider the conflation of the boy and his material, whether this material is what he creates, manipulates or what may become of his own body. The poet creates a discourse where the black boy's body is both fluid and fragmented at the same time. The beauties at his disposal are revealed through the fluidity of what he sees and how his body is ultimately cast through what he discovers while he creates. This narrator, who creates as he destroys, destroys as he creates, is not only able to find beauty, he ultimately reveals it through the fluid space he both crafts and enters.

Published at the height of the black arts movement, the period which lasted, some argue, from the early 60's to the late 70's, "Boy Breaking Glass" fits within the contemporary aesthetic frame work suggested by Kimberly Benston in *Performing Blackness*, where he points out a sustaining feature of the movement to be an "intentional, autonomous understanding of the black self [that] took place through

dynamically varied experiments concerning the provenance, nature, and teleology of the sign of blackness.” Relatedly, he theorizes that the Black Arts Movement functioned “not as creed or even as method, but rather as a continuously shifting field of struggle and revision in which the relations among politics, representation, history, and revolution are productively revalued.”¹²⁷

What is the black self’s relationship to its sign or teleology? How does it constantly mediate blackness as a fluid trope to exist outside of any preconceived, static notions of blackness? How does it allow the black body to be configured as a space itself? What would this dynamic relationship look like? Benston is interested in the “relation of blackness to performance,” which is helpful, because he points out a negotiation of blackness as a kind of psychological field. He continues:

At one moment, blackness may signify a reified essence posited as the end of a revolutionary “metalanguage” projecting the community toward “something not included here”; at another moment, blackness may indicate a self-interpreting process which simultaneously “makes and unmakes” black identity in the ceaseless flux of historical change.¹²⁸

Benston is particularly interested in the role of the black body as something that must be constantly articulated, made into a figure which must be both imagined and re-imagined, and by nature, perhaps, is inherently fluid in its making and unmaking. I turn to Benston because I think that his understanding of the role of poetic experiment is crucial in thinking about the relationship between the point of creation and the point of subjective possibility for the poetic black self. As Brooks writes through this self in the line, “Nobody knew where I was and now I am no longer there,” her poem intersects with

¹²⁷ Kimberly W. Benston, *Performing Blackness Enactments of African American Modernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004) 3.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.* 31.

Benston's notion of the black poetic self as a point of infinite subjective possibility. Brooks' poetry reveals a way of re-creating the subjective field by not only mapping the black body's presence, but by also mapping its constant permutation against this threat of constant erasure through violence.

Fred Moten, in his essay, "Resistance of the Object," offers another contemporary theoretical lens through which to consider the fluidity of the black body in the face of violence. He spends some time in this central essay from his collection *In the Break* on an analysis of Sadiya Hartman's reading of a well-known passage from Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Told from the perspective of Douglass as a four year old boy, Aunt Hester's beating and torture is a crucial moment in the text, though Hartman, in her analysis, refuses to reproduce the scene of violence. Of this elision, Moten points out that:

"The question here concerns the inevitability of such reproduction even in the denial of it. This is the question of whether the performance of subjectivity – and the subjectivity that Hartmann is interested in here is definitely performed – always and everywhere reproduces what lies before it; it is also the question of whether performance in general is ever outside the economy of production. This is not to say that Hartman tries but cannot make disappear the originary performance of the violent subjection of the slave's body. Indeed, Hartman's considerable, formidable, and rare brilliance is present in the *space* she leaves for the ongoing (*re*) *production of that performance* (emphasis mine) in all its guises and for a critical awareness of how each of those guises is always already present in and disruptive of the supposed originarity of that primal scene.¹²⁹

Moten, who believes Hartman's omission is "illusory," explores the layers of this erasure as a constant and re-iterative site, whether Aunt Hester's violated body is depicted in her analysis or not. For Moten, the question might be: how is the black body constantly performed through violence, even in the absence of its violent representation?

¹²⁹ Fred Moten, *In The Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) 4.

His desire to articulate the black body's performance seems centered on the animation of the black body through Aunt Hester's actual beating, Douglass's depiction of the event, and Hartman's decision to leave it out this narrative, when she argues:

I have chosen not to reproduce Douglass's account of the beating of Aunt Hester in order to call attention to the ease with which such scenes are usually reiterated, the casualness with which they are circulated, and the consequences of this routine display of the slave's ravaged body."¹³⁰

Moten's primary argument around the elision of this scene is that Hartman does not want to reproduce a scene "where pain is alloyed with pleasure," arguing that "for Hartman, the very specter of enjoyment is reason enough to repress the encounter." This moment, where he describes this reading of the omission, for me, becomes crucial, as he writes:

So lingering in the psychoanalytic break is crucial in the interest of a certain set of complexities that cannot be overlooked but must be traced back to this origin precisely in the interest of destabilizing its originarity in general, a destabilization Douglass [found] in his original recitation. Which is also an originary repression...It's the ongoing repression of the primal scene of subjection that one wants to guard against and linger in.¹³¹

This lingered-in space, where the violated black body circulates, whether seen or un-seen, aligns itself within the figurative space offered in a poetics of the black body dependant upon its oscillations between these two trajectories. In this way, Brooks' poetic line, "Nobody knew where I was and now I am no longer there," may dually contain and expel Aunt Hester's body as a point of departure. However, it is not only the question of Aunt Hester's violated black body that circulates within this narrative; it is also how her body manifests as a constant performative and poetic site. In keeping with this assertion, Moten argues that "Douglass and Hartman confront us with the fact that

¹³⁰ Ibid. 3.

¹³¹ Ibid. 4-5.

the *conjunction* of reproduction and disappearance is performance's condition of possibility, its ontology and its mode of production.”¹³²

Moten is able to offer a theoretical lens that opens up the discursive frame of the black body as an ontological site for analysis. The performance of the black body as spectacle, whether Aunt Hester, Amadou Diallo or and unnamed man hung by a tree, is a fluid one, one whose (to borrow Moten's phrase) mode of production, whether hung, pinched, beaten or shot, or whether *described* as hung, beaten or shot, has no particular end. In this vein, I turn to Moten who asks:

What are the politics of this unavoidably reproducible and reproductive performance? What is held in the ongoing disruption of this primality? What shape must a culture take when it is so (un) grounded? What does this disturbance of capture and genesis give to black performance?¹³³

In thinking about the effects of the violated body, whether revealed or not, the cultural disturbance of its “capture and genesis,” it might be useful to consider how the representative black body's performance imports as a field of representation. From lynching post-cards to cyberspace, what frames might allow for the violated black body to continue to disrupt and complicate this embodied poetic space?

There is a tension between the black body as a conceptual field and how it might be read as a figurative space. What sets this tension is this how the black body remains visible and palpable between writers who attempt to create various recuperative narratives in the face of constant violation. In what infinite spaces might the black body and its visual and poetic texts extend? I think the landscape of the black body, what one

¹³² Ibid. 4.

¹³³ Ibid.

begins to see through the dynamic oscillations between image, memory, picture, and poem, is fluid, held tenuously within a collective space that has no end in flesh, blood, space, vestibule or field, a body marked yet moving through the arc of its “capture and genesis,” to borrow Moten’s phrase, through multiple and endless narratives of violence.¹³⁴

¹³⁴ Ibid.

Chapter Four: Carrying Hate In Front of You and Harmony Behind: On Process and the Inscrutable Black Body

In *Annie Allen*, Gwendolyn Brooks offers a suite of five sonnets in a section entitled “the children of the poor.” This section of poems is one of three that make up the collection. When asked about breaking the poems in parts that chronicle the development of her selection’s primary poetic figure, Annie Allen, Brooks says that: “...I was trying to trace the life of a young woman, and I thought it was convenient to divide her...”¹³⁵ This act of division, I would argue, is crucial in thinking about the question of process in Brooks’ work; specifically, it highlights how “tracing” out of a life echoes through the poem and the multiple figures within it. Addressing the “children of the poor,” the speaker of Brooks’ poem offers this advice in the second sonnet of the cycle:

Bewitch, bewilder. Qualify to sing
Threadwise. Devise no salt, no hempen thing
For the dear instrument to bear. Devote
The bow to silks and honey. Be remote
A while from malice and from murdering.
But first to arms, to armor. Carry hate
In front of you and harmony behind.¹³⁶

To “Bewitch, bewilder”: I start with this section of the poem, and these two words in particular, because they capture the speaker’s imparting a key lesson to the “children of the poor.” Who is this child, and how should he or she use his or her “dear instrument” in the world? And how to bear it? Brooks seems to ask what it might take to make a life while facing the constant threat of violation. In fact, the poem’s opening

¹³⁵ Gloria Wade Gayles, “Interview with Studs Terkel, 1961,” *Conversations with Gwendolyn Brooks* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2003 c. 1967) 7.

¹³⁶ Gwendolyn Brooks, “the children of the poor,” *Blacks* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1994) 118.

lines suggest this: “First Fight. Then Fiddle.”¹³⁷ What does it mean for the poet to ask the reader to “fight,” then “fiddle,” these two acts suspending the reader between violence and play, two subjective realms that not only come together in the first moments of the poem, but extend outward into Brooks’ greater poetic project?

In the previous chapter, I explore how several writers offer alternative narratives in the face of constant violence and the black body’s violation. In this chapter, I hope to not only extend this argument, but to address it in the context of the greater realm of process and what thinking about process might engender. This is to say, what I hope to do is to read beyond the interpretation of the finished poem, art-work, or other narrative, and to analyze what is under investigation in the act of art’s construction. For example, by looking closely at Brooks’ poetry between the “finished” sonnet, and a manuscript draft – in media res – one may see how her investigations expose an alternative way to read the speaker’s desire. Such investigations are crucial, and become more illuminated next to the “inner workings” of Ellen Gallagher’s art explored in interviews and photo-documentary of her paintings-in-process. By examining how the poet and the artist works through her subject matter, I will lead the reader through contemporary work by the poets Lucille Clifton and Dawn Lundy Martin, material that although is seemingly “finished,” reveals fluid, investigative modes at their centers.

In Gwendolyn Brooks’ sonnet, the speaker urges the reader to enter into this complicated subjective experience, suspended between violence and play. To “Qualify to sing/ Threadwise” is an important turn of phrase, as it marks the tension and complexity of this task. I envision the turn of a screw into a bolt, its “fitting in” to its place as I imagine the speaker’s feeling a part of a whole, locked in and squarely “qualified.” But

¹³⁷ Ibid.

just as the speaker asks her reader to *Fight*, then to *Fiddle*, this supposition is complicated in the sequence of events extended through the poem. As I read through the opening stanza, I feel jarred, free-falling from the line that ends in “sing,” to the release at the start of the next, the child, having to sing, *Threadwise*. What are the conditions of learning to sing when that voice must, in the end, be screwed in, pointed, and perfect? Is there no room for the jagged, broken voice, the song of violation to be sung, ugly? What Brooks’ speaker asks for is demanding, a voice that attempts to create beauty in the face of its demise.

Brooks’ call for this “song” sung *threadwise* is very similar to Toni Morrison’s need to recuperate the violated black body’s past in what she names a “literary archaeology.” As I pointed out in the last chapter, Morrison’s need to use “the remains of what were left behind to reconstruct the world these remains imply”¹³⁸ is relevant here as well. For Brooks, her reconstruction of what remains, evolves through the poetic line: “Devise no salt” or “hempen thing.” Instead, Brooks asks of her children of the poor – to “Devote” the bow to “silks and honey” to “Be Remote” from “Malice and from Murdering.” Brooks’ speaker asks for restraint, no salt, no malice, no murdering; in dramatic repose, she asks that the instrument bear silk and honey, some smooth relief and release from the grip of what binds her children. Yet, curiously, at the same time, the author charges them to “Carry Hate in Front of you. And harmony behind.” Weighing a difficult set of oppositions, whomever is listening to the speaker of Brooks’ poem is asked to reorganize her relationship to what harms her, in order to move forward: to

¹³⁸ Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory,” *Inventing the Truth, The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. William Zinsser (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1987) 191.

“devote,” yet “be remote,” to set forth with the difficult task of carrying hate in front, and harmony behind.

Brooks complicates her own narrative suppositions, one after another, suggesting the reader follow them, only to reveal that bearing the dear instruments is not so straightforward a task. It is as if the speaker asks the person she is addressing to be in constant motion, moving along a horizontal plane, while storing parts of her understanding in pockets of knowledge, only to have to empty these pockets as she moves along, re-negotiating through the world, step by step. Perhaps, Brooks wants to highlight that the process of moving is more important than the objective of getting there:...*Carry hate/ In front of you and harmony behind.* The line, for me, echoes through this question: What does a body look like that carries hate in front of her, armored, arms in front, trying to move forward while lugging hate in front of her through the body of a life? Perhaps this is an ugly act, the voice breaking down, cracking against the insistence in finding its harmony.

Of *Annie Allen*, Brooks points out that when she began to write the book, she says, “I was very much impressed with the effectiveness of technique, and I wanted to write poetry that that was honed to the last degree that it could be.”¹³⁹ Part of her honing of this technique may be found in Brooks’ choice in the Petrarchan sonnet form, whose purpose in the octave is usually to introduce a “problem” or theme, sometimes expressing “indignation, desire, or doubt within the speaker.”¹⁴⁰ This doubt or conflict may be

¹³⁹ Gloria Wade Gayles, “An Interview with Gwendolyn Brooks: Paul Angle, 1967,” Conversations with Gwendolyn Brooks (Jackson: University of Mississippi 2003 c. 1967) 19.

¹⁴⁰ Karl Beckson and Arthur Ganz, A Reader’s Guide to Literary Terms (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967) 154.

found in what the speaker of the poem attempts to teach the reader. Is the poem's sonnet form enough to contain the dilemma in balancing "hate" with "harmony"? And if, as is usually the case, the sestet's purpose as a whole is to resolve this conflict¹⁴¹, can the form propose an answer to this balancing act? The solution may be found in the tension of Brooks' working with the form; arguably, what Brooks describes as "the last degree" that stands just outside of the poet's grasp.

For Brooks, I would argue, the purpose of the poem may be to wrestle with the dilemma, rather than to pose any obvious solution through the model of the sonnet. Of her craft, she remarks, "The poet, first and foremost an individual is also a member of society. What affects society affects a poet. So I, starting out *usually* in the grip of a high and private suffusion, may find by the time I have arrived at a last line that there is quite some public clamor in my product."¹⁴²

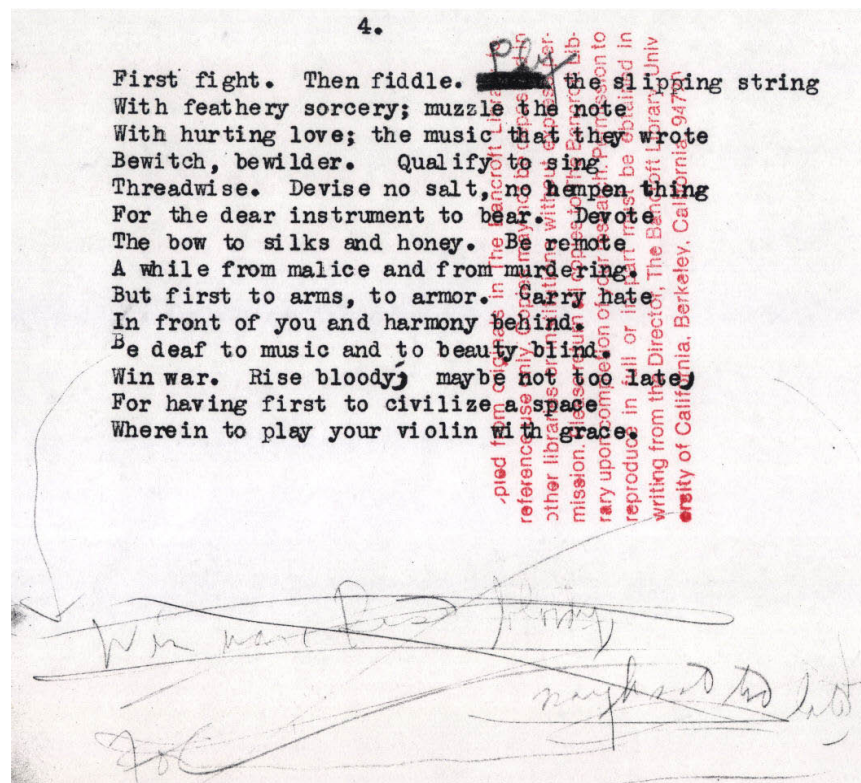
In a sense, Brooks' choice of form, for me, is as crucial as the problem that the form presents, something that she explores through much of her work. The role between the public and the private may be found by not only looking at what she "arrives" at through the sonnet, but also through the process of its construction. Brooks understands the need to displace the intentions of what the form promises through what she hopes to impart upon the reader; this is to say, what she requests of her children of the poor, may not be sustained by the form of the poem itself. Instead, what she offers are multiple positions, points within the poetic line, where the reader may travel. In what I read as a kind of horizontal deferral of suppositions, Brooks sets out to achieve what she calls a

¹⁴¹ J.A. Cuddon, A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1998) 661.

¹⁴² Gloria Wade Gayles, "An Interview with Gwendolyn Brooks/ Paul Angle, 1967," Conversations with Gwendolyn Brooks (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2003 c. 1967) 19.

“public clamor” from within her highly fraught inner state of “high and private suffusion.”¹⁴³ The question of Brooks’ poetic form makes her “product” not so much an exercise in form, but rather a test of what the lines of the poem might promise through her larger cultural project, addressing her relationship to the life that exists outside of the “finished” poem.

Consider the not yet catalogued manuscript copy of Gwendolyn Brooks’ second sonnet from *Children of the Poor*; here copied in its entirety:



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Where the opening line reads “First Fight. Then Fiddle. Ply the slipping string...”

The word “Ply” is handwritten into the draft, emerging from the black penning out of the

¹⁴³ Gloria Wade Gayles, “A Conversation with Gwendolyn Brooks: Studs Terkel/ 1961,” *Conversations with Gwendolyn Brooks* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2003 c. 1967) 7.

¹⁴⁴ Gwendolyn Brooks, *1917-Papers 2001 / 83 Z* (Berkeley: Bancroft Collection Unpublished Materials, 2001) CTN: 2:23 U-V MISC 1950-81 n.d.

word “Melt” which lay hidden beneath Brooks’ own decisive poetic hand. Is the direction of this narrative embedded through what is made visible through this manuscript draft, and what can the reader make of its scope in her finding the “public clamor” in her “product”? How to read this elision and then new inclusion, the decision that exists between *melting* and *plying*, the difference between the blacked-out word, the violin’s slipping string almost altered from linear solid to liquid by melting heat? Or what remains to be read – Brooks asking the reader to “First Fight” then to “ply the slipping string,” and by the end of the poem to “to play the violin with grace.” Not only are the acts so different, so are the demands of the reader, especially if that reader is willing and wanting to play, or to ply.

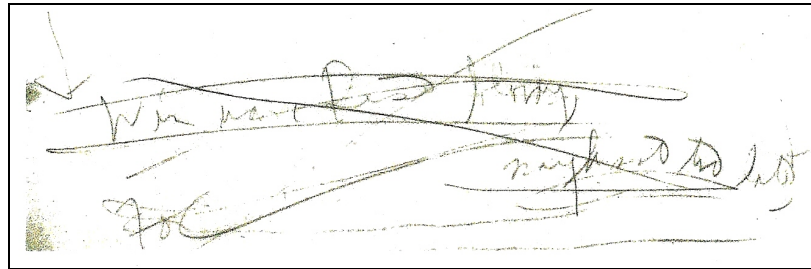
What does it mean to have to civilize a space? How might one read Brooks’ intentions in this sonnet as a series of demands that urge constant transmutation, mutation: *Bewitch, Bewilder, Rise Bloody*? Not only am I startled by the demands she places on the reader, the player, the plying, in the poem, in her hopes in having to civilize space, I am equally taken by the embodied acts she leaves behind in the draft.

What poem would exist in her melting of the string altogether, its incandescent burning, not the slipping, but the bow searing through the string and violin itself? What *language-substance*, to borrow again from Roland Barthes’ *Pleasure of the Text*, beyond music would be left behind?¹⁴⁵ What would its harmony sound like? I like, here in this *working draft* of Brooks’ poem, being able to see the erasure, the substance, the mark that she leaves behind and abandons in the poem with her etched-out mark and faded script. I am entranced by the “active revisions,” the erasure, the possibility of melting and the presence of the body rising bloody in the middle of it, her materializing and making space

¹⁴⁵ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975) 79.

just as she suggests in the poem's close: "Win war. Rise Bloody. maybe not too late/ For having first to civilize a space/ Wherein to play your violin with grace."

What moves me most about this poem is this last line before its closing couplet, which approaches a "solution." In the manuscript copy, she revisits these lines with her own free hand.



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Detail of Brooks' Handwritten Revision

By the appearance of her corrections, it seems as if Brooks is figuring out a way to work with these lines; floating at the surface of the final revision, her hand's loose and flowing marks, re-writing below the draft, offering one of the poem's most compelling suppositions. Her crafting by hand, "Win war. Rise Bloody. Maybe not too late" at the bottom of the page, reveals the energy of the lines, extending outside of the poem, the handwriting exposing another dimension of the poem's possibility. The word "For," which starts the final version of the line, "For having first to civilize a space," stands alone at the left bottom of the manuscript copy, the cursive "r" sweeping across the page. Floating alone, the *r*'s long tail of the lone preposition points to the public clamor toward which her poem ultimately leans. What I theorized earlier as a horizontal possibility of the poems' deferral, emerges, here, into what I see now as extending into an important

¹⁴⁶ Gwendolyn Brooks, 1917-Papers 2001 / 83 Z (Berkeley: Bancroft Collection Unpublished Materials, 2001) CTN: 2:23 U-V MISC 1950-81 n.d.

exterior, embodied zone. The handwritten text captures the figure, rising bloody through the surface of the page, visceral, almost moaning out to the reader through and beyond Brooks' cursive notation.

What do we make of a poetics that rearranges the poetic line from typed, to hand, the graphic and horizontal space, creating a new surface and space through which to read it? It is precisely out of seeing this drafting process, "at work," that we may come to better understand Brooks' greater poetic project. This process may be found in the tension between technique and play, the tightness of a sonnet, broken apart with the motion and weight of Brooks' hand, whether blacking out "melt," and replacing it with "ply" or with the sweep of the lines, loosely drawn and reconfigured at the bottom of the draft. What exists between the manuscript draft and the final version is process made visible in her work – within these active revisions we can see Brooks *working* as a poet, an artist whose marks on the page are, for me, similar to those of the visual artist, Ellen Gallagher, who, below, describes her technique in rendering her work out of paper, hand and ink. In an interview, she says that:

Paper as support, its own materiality is usually ignored. So the sense of a neutral surface that can accommodate any mark seems an ideal way of communicating freedom. At the same time printed material has the capacity to repeat itself endlessly and linked to distribution or manifestos – even freedom however idiosyncratic and inscrutable. And this tension is what surfaces and transforms the amnesia of the paper into a tension between the drawn and the printed. The mark and the letter."¹⁴⁷

Gallagher's understanding of paper as a "neutral surface" that can accommodate any mark as an "ideal" way of communicating freedom is especially powerful and relevant to

¹⁴⁷ Jessica Morgan, "Interview," Ellen Gallagher: Catalogue for the Exhibition October 17—December 31 2001 (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2001) 21.

the process through which Brooks modulates her relationship to freedom. The notion of an idiosyncratic or inscrutable freedom that Gallagher names is especially useful because it points back to Brooks' attempts to hone her "high and private" poetic technique while trying to reach a greater audience – "a public clamor" – as a member of the society in which she lives. Captured in the tension of her lines in fact, the notion of the inscrutable appears to be the place where Brooks' proposed freedom for the children of the poor resides and expands into a space between hate and harmony. Is this gap an inscrutable zone, a place where the reader, in this case, one of the children of the poor, might be able to exercise freedom's infinite possibilities?

The "tension" that Gallagher speaks of between the "drawn and the printed" is perhaps the same zone where Brooks' poetic process is articulated between her poem and the draft. Brooks works against the paper's amnesia, filling the space between hate in front and harmony behind with the inscrutable, the difficult to know, the seemingly impossible to report. Her poem, to include the loose and flowing writing at the bottom of the page, arguably exists as an inscrutable zone within itself, the "mark," her revisions, and the "letter" shaping its eventual construction and what it manifests well beyond its form.

But, to return to Gallagher, for a moment, what exactly is this inscrutable zone that she attempts to trace in her work, and how might a closer analysis of this zone of inscrutability as a site of freedom be played out within her art to make more palpable the importance of process in both Gallagher's and Brooks' works?

Near the early part of Gallagher's career, the artist completed a series of "black paintings." Of these paintings, the critic Thyrsa Goodeve writes that, "The black

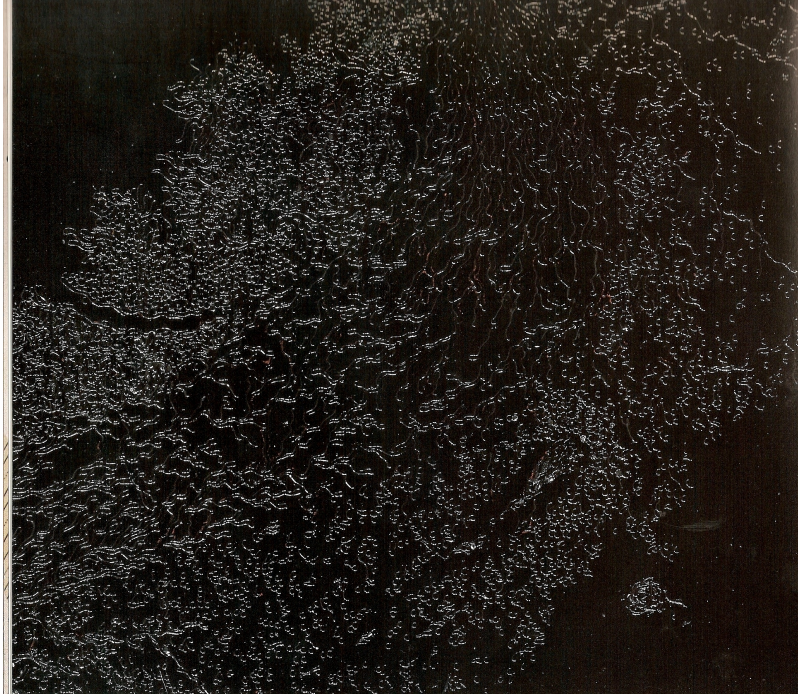
paintings are notes towards something (one an elaborate headrest, the other a fantastical landscape) made out of hand cut rubber, layered over floating hemispheres. Built as much as drawn.”¹⁴⁸ Goodeve interrupts her analysis of Gallagher’s work with excerpts of Gallagher’s own voice, a technique she imparts through the essay. She offers this telling fragment from Gallagher at the end of a paragraph: *But I never think of my works as maps...It is always notes towards something.*”¹⁴⁹

One of these black paintings, *bling bling*¹⁵⁰ is made up of paper, rubber and enamel, layered with fragments of her symbols, so that the surface’s texture takes on an almost oil-slick quality, or appears as black seaweed on a shore. To achieve this effect, the artist painstaking layers each of the designs into the surface of the canvas. Where do the “notes” of the black paintings lead, and what in the amorphousness of their designs points back to the process in Gallagher’s work? How can looking at the black paintings reveal her not working out an idea but moving towards it? And can looking, closely, at the paintings and the process reveal how Gallagher’s “notes” point back to the realm of inscrutability’s freedom in the textured surfaces of her paintings, however idiosyncratic? What resides in the depths of Gallagher’s paintings, and how will exploring these depths lead us back to what Brooks is working towards?

¹⁴⁸Thyrza Goodeve, “Act III: What Will You Make of Us,” Ellen Gallagher (London: Anthony d’ Offay Gallery, 2002) 37.

¹⁴⁹Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ellen Gallagher, “bling bling,” Rubber, paper and enamel on linen 96x120 inches, 2001. Ellen Gallagher: Catalogue for the Exhibition October 17—December 31 2001 (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2001) 90.



Detail of *bling bling*, 2001¹⁵¹

Assisting the artist Ann Hamilton in a show at the MIT List Gallery, Gallagher discusses what she learned about labor and process while working with Hamilton. Gallagher describes how “It was...beautiful to see those repetitive acts that she was developing as she went along. I still had these macho ideas about labor and here was someone who had a relationship to repetitive labor as a kind of insistence that was also conceptually activated in her mind during the process. She is an incredible improviser and part of her skill is locking down material.”¹⁵² Gallagher, herself, is interested in locking down her “notes towards something,” with the material of her work:

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Jessica Morgan, “Interview,” Ellen Gallagher: Catalogue for the Exhibition October 17—December 31 2001 (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2001) 21.



Ellen Gallagher, in her studio, at work on *bling bling*¹⁵³

In this “locking down” of material, what is Gallagher interested in capturing? What is this notion of idiosyncratic and inscrutable freedom that she attempts to create in the neutrality of the paper, or canvas that she expands through her figures? Through the labor of her work, she shapes and fills the surfaces of her painting through the meticulous configurations of her designs, pressed down by her own hand.

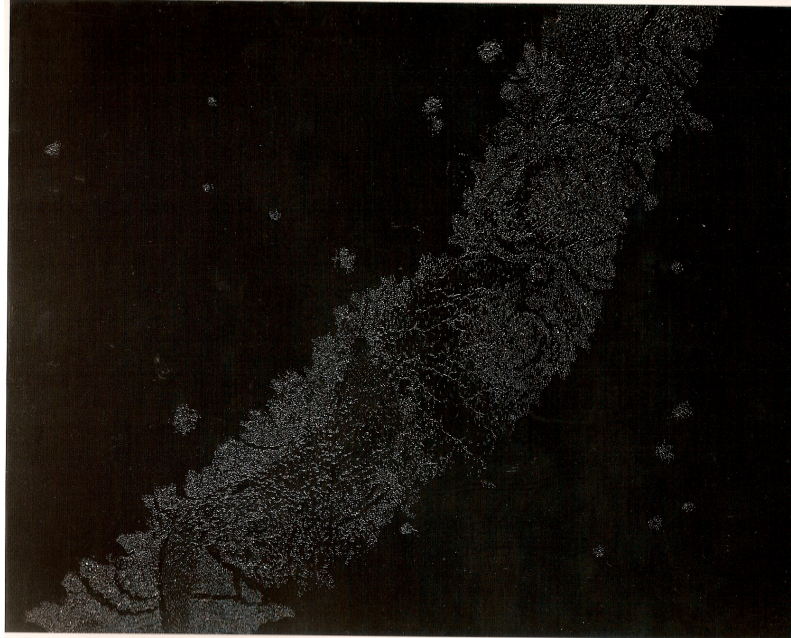
A rather large painting, *bling bling*, was one of the first paintings that I saw, in the flesh, and up close at the Greater New York Show at P.S. 1 in 2000.¹⁵⁴ That spring, I was writing an article for *Provincetown Arts* on Gallagher’s work, and I remember sitting on

¹⁵³ Ellen Gallagher, in her studio, at work on *bling bling*, Photo. Ellen Gallagher (London: Anthony d’Offay, 2002) 2.

¹⁵⁴ P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center and The Museum of Modern Art presented their first curatorial collaboration with Greater New York, showcasing more than 140 artists, to include Ellen Gallagher, at the P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, NY., February – April 2000.

the middle of the floor looking at people walk up to the painting, then back. What struck me was the shininess of the painting, and the reflective surfaces and symbols in *bling bling*, that had grown, as far as I was reading it, through the expanding economy of her idiosyncratic signs into the giant, neutral black surface. What I remember about that day were two things – first, that I was entranced, while writing about the flashes of color, red and yellow shirts that reflected against the surface of the painting. Second, I remember I was sweating while writing, moving in at distanced angles to see the intricate designs in the paintings. I was wearing a fitted mint green, short-sleeve Italian shirt that was turning red at the armpits as I sweated and wrote. Looking at this large black body somehow made me conscious of my own body, sweating, in that hot room of hipsters who were just getting to know Ellen Gallagher's work as I was.

How is process tied to subjectivity? That is to say, is Gallagher's understanding of the visual field she creates tied directly to the viewer's understanding of the material he confronts? My interpretation of the painting was less about making sense of the work, alone, but rather thinking of what it meant as a greater, visual field of the black body's violated history. In looking at a black painting, how must one confront a black self, and the violated body that might be contained, caught up in the surface? However, no matter how much I tried to figure the work within a greater history, I was struck, caught up in the expansiveness of the visual field that Gallagher presented in her painting:



bling bling, 2001 Detail¹⁵⁵

What was I reading beyond the painting's details? First, I wondered if anyone would understand, by appearance alone, the scope of Gallagher's paintings, the history of the symbolic landscape which informed her work. Second, I thought about what it might mean to others, whether or not they understood its historic under-girth, or, simply, if they *felt*, like I did, the looming presence of a large black body of work filling the museum wall. Third, of course, I was aware of what I was doing, performing, sitting cross-legged in the middle of a museum, writing, sweating, wondering what I thought, what others were thinking, and what I wanted to say about the painting, all in the mix of trying to "take in" Gallagher's work.

¹⁵⁵ Ellen Gallagher, "bling bling," Rubber, paper and enamel on linen 96x120 inches, 2001. Ellen Gallagher: Catalogue for the Exhibition October 17—December 31 2001 (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2001) 91.

At the early stages of preparing for the article, I felt walled into a set of false starts. To borrow Goodeve's technique: I would later find out that Gallagher, herself, says this about the black paintings,

"I'm really interested in the idea of a black inscrutable....When I first made the black paintings I wanted them to be big, black inscrutables but not bodies. I wanted them to be non body."¹⁵⁶

Non-body: still, I find compelling, that this notion of the black inscrutable is the very subject of the body Gallagher both presents and vacates. Like Brooks, who asks her poetic figures/subjects, in her second sonnet for the children of the poor, to empty out one psychic condition to move onto the next, Gallagher vacates a similar space as she renders her work from the black body, borrowing from the history of minstrelsy and blackface,¹⁵⁷ only to aspire them to be "non-body." Why does Gallagher want her works to be non-body, when the works seem to be so clearly about the black body? Why make a painting that in the end deflects away from the body yet engages directly with it? I think the answer may be in found in the modes of process that Gallagher is engaged in, that what the artist is interested in constructing is something that cannot be immediately mapped. For Gallagher, the "figure" that she ultimately creates does not exist within a set pattern, but rather the process in making the pattern, and what is left behind, reveals her painting's slippery form and subject.

To illuminate this, consider below, another image of Gallagher at work on what appears the under-painting of *bling bling*:

¹⁵⁶ Jessica Morgan, "Interview," Ellen Gallagher: Catalogue for the Exhibition October 17—December 31 2001 (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2001) 26.

¹⁵⁷ Ronaldo V. Wilson, "Ellen Gallagher: Read Slippage," Provincetown Arts 15 (2000) 146-147.



Ellen Gallagher at work on bling bling¹⁵⁸

As I examine this photo of Gallagher in process, I wonder if she raised the painting from the floor to the wall of her studio. What is she thinking as she paints down the lines that she will ultimately and laboriously cover with mark and texture? To the left of the early stages of *bling bling* is *Blubber*, which I discuss, at length, in the opening chapter of this project. By placing these works next to one another in her studio, Gallagher is negotiating a conversation between her paintings. The subject and forms of her works emerge through this conversation. One narrative might be: the large black hair squiggles, and hair swooshes that dot and sweep the surface of the painting *Blubber* manifest as the black formations in *bling bling*. Seeing Gallagher moving between multiple works helps to reveal how the conceptual arrangements of the works figure through the larger narrative of her paintings. In this visual conversation, each painting locks and not quite

¹⁵⁸ Ellen Gallagher at work on bling bling, Photo. Blubber (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2001) 80-81.

locks up to the next, reflecting and refracting against one another, manifesting through the larger field of her artistic process.

Reading Gallagher's painterly process next to Brooks' poetic process exposes how their particular artistic efforts reveal the black body's complex configurations. Both Gallagher and Brooks present "notes towards" what identifies the violated black body, a process that does not always reveal the subject directly. Perhaps this movement towards what is not always known can help make more uniquely visible the black body's insistent fragmentation. How might one consider Gallagher's notion of a poetics of non-body, the realm of the inscrutable, the difficult to read, the impossible to map? Is the impossible space where Brooks gathers and directs the reader through her sonnet draft, a palpable space made of marks and elisions? The issue of the black body's inscrutability as a zone for exploration is crucial; it offers a landscape through which to think about the extent of the black body's radical fragmentation within multiple fields of possibility.

In the previous chapters, I explored several instances of the black body's violation, from Emmett Till's decimated body, through the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks, to lynching photographs and narratives through *Without Sanctuary*, and the courtroom autopsy documents of Amadou Diallo. But I think in order to continue to approach this notion of the black body as the inscrutable, "non-body" more cogently, it might be important to see how one might approach the realm of the fractured black body. I would like to return, briefly, to the earlier discussion of Fanon's refashioning himself as an "object," his imagining himself cutting away part of his body, "splattered" with "black blood," then, ultimately, resisting this revision for the sake of a collective self.¹⁵⁹

Fanon's ability to both present his fragmented body as a "thematization" of the

¹⁵⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967 c. 1952) 112-113.

fragmented self, and his revision of this violation, reveals an elastic understanding of the black body's potential as a thematic site. Body becomes non-body in a back and forth flow, the author inscribing its violation and recuperation in one stretch. Re-reading Fanon provides an entry into the work of the contemporary black poet.

At this juncture, I would like to consider the work of the poets Claudia Rankine and Lucille Clifton as they approach the 1998 murder of James Byrd, who was dragged to his death behind a car, in Jasper, Texas, by three white men. The ways that the two poets render this narrative is reminiscent of the process that Brooks and Gallagher offer, in that they each help to reveal and confront a spatial and social arrangement of the black body in the face of Byrd's violent decimation.

Claudia Rankine describes the details of James Byrd's murder in the appendix of her work, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely, An American Lyric*:

On June 7, 1998, 3 men: John King, Lawrence Brewer, and Shawn Berry, offered James Byrd Jr. a ride home in Berry's pickup truck. Byrd was walking along a road in Jasper, a rural town in East Texas. He was returning home from his niece's bridal shower. Instead of bringing him home, the men brought him to a clearing in the woods where they beat him and chained him to the back of the truck. They then sped along a road just east of the town. Byrd's shredded torso was found first, and then his head, neck, and right arm were found about a mile away. Police said a trail of blood, body parts, and personal effects stretched for 2 miles.¹⁶⁰

What Rankine reconstructs in this graphic narrative account of the events is only one layer in the greater process of her work. I begin with her appendix, because what strikes me in her recounting of the event is how she focuses on the openings through what appears a fairly straightforward narrative. The "clearing in the woods" and the road where "They [then] sped," depicts how his body is gruesomely disseminated through the entry, the place Rankine captures when she writes in the body of her poem: "his shredded

¹⁶⁰ Claudia Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2004) 135.

torso was found first, and then his head, neck and right arm were found about a mile away.” What Rankine highlights are the pieces, the body’s landscape formed by Byrd’s embodied fragments and “personal effects,” left in the road, fractured, a trail of blood and body parts stretching for two miles.

Though the narrative comes at the end of Rankine’s work, it is the starting point for Rankine’s project. Her task in interpreting this incident is complicated because she rearranges the narrative through her use of poetic prose, photographs and an assortment of visual images. In the body of her project, Rankine places Byrd’s murder within a cultural matrix, namely the television news, situating it within the U.S. elections of 2000, as she meditates on how she interprets and understands Byrd as a poetic figure of loss. Referencing Cornel West’s article, “Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization,”¹⁶¹ she points out that “Cornel West makes the point that hope is different/ from American optimism. After the initial presiden-/tial election results come it, I stop watching the news./I want to continue watching, charting, and discussing/the counts, the recounts, the hand counts, but I can-/not. I lose hope...”¹⁶²

One learns that the American optimism that Rankine refers to is carefully situated between two entries in her appendix. The first is the definition of optimism that she includes from the fourth edition of the Webster’s New World College Dictionary, which reads: “(1) The doctrine held by Leibniz and others that *the existing world is the best possible*; and (2.) *the tendency to take the most hopeful or cheerful view of matters of to expect the best outcome.*”¹⁶³ (Emphasis mine.) It is also important to note the entry below

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 135. Rankine points out that West’s article appears in: The Future of the Race eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Cornel West (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).

¹⁶² Ibid. 21.

¹⁶³ Ibid. 135.

the definitions surrounding Vice President Al Gore's decision to concede the presidential election to George W. Bush on December 12, 2000. Rankine writes that, "*Gore said he wished to 'heal the divisions' created by the disputed outcomes.*"¹⁶⁴ (Again, emphasis mine.)

The best outcome that Rankine finds, the pitch-perfect world that she hopes to construct, exists between these two entries – this is the sense of American optimism that the author attempts to highlight. Not quite hope, what Rankine offers is an emotion that is closer to loss than hope, as in hoping for the best, when there is no hope. In this stream, the author places Byrd's death in the larger context of an American political landscape, the insidious drollery of the television, a nation watching and thinking about recounts, where the question of Byrd's death looms, his body broken through the field of loss that Rankine sets within her poetic prose.

Rankine reveals James Byrd within the accretion of this loss of hope, calling into question the very process of taking in the electoral information and Bush's victory: "...However Bush came to have won, he/ would still be winning ten days later and we would/ still be in the throes of our American optimism. All the/ non-reporting is a distraction from Bush himself, the/ same Bush who can't remember if two or three people/were convicted for dragging a black man to his death/ in his home state of Texas."¹⁶⁵

The question of Byrd's worth, his memory, in the American imagination, and for that matter, in Bush's imagined imagination is a highly fraught zone for Rankine. In one sense, she uses Bush as a metaphor, and re-injects the memory of James Byrd back

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. 21.

through the metaphor, so that what is revealed is the depth of loss, a space below optimism, in her lyric. In another, this zone of memory is where the black body becomes non-body, the realm of the not-remembered, the unknown, the inscrutable – Rankine reveals James Byrd’s narrative through multiple landscapes, both in her notation of the murder and her interpretation of the narrative through the scrim of the 2000 U.S. elections and the question of Bush’s apathy.

Rankine offers the visual picture just after she recounts Bush’s not remembering how many people dragged Byrd to his death:



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The poet presents, here, the epitome of Byrd’s non body, providing the reader this image, layers of blood on the street, and a group of people, standing around what was left behind at the crime scene. The shininess of the image, the blood reflecting from the street’s surface, resonates with Gallagher’s *bling bling*, the reflection revealing a space, where the very question of the inscrutable black body as “non-body” circulates between both Gallagher’s painting and this stark image. Appearing directly after the written text,

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

Rankine's use of the photograph allows a way to move from and to interpret the body's violation. Through not only the blood, but a luminescent field, Rankine's chosen image shines and remains for meditation and inquiry.

But just as Rankine, in a sense, abandons the body and the words to capture it, to reveal the luminescent field left behind, she returns to it through her writing, offering a space where her inquiry continues in the following stanza:

*You don't remember because you don't care. Sometimes my mother's voice swells and fills my forehead. Mostly I resist the flooding, but in Bush's case I find myself talking to the television screen: You don't know because you don't care.*¹⁶⁷

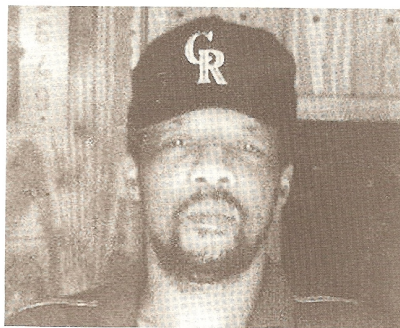
Who is Rankine's speaker addressing? For that matter, who is speaking? Is it the speaker's mother? Is the mother addressing the speaker in the poem, and the speaker addressing Bush? As the voice swells in the speaker's head, it fills her mind up and echoes against the shiny, bloody landscape, the sonic meeting the visual, both commingling beside one another, her accusations of Bush's not remembering, not caring, fusing with her mother's voice.

Rankine continues to unfurl her analysis, bringing Byrd further and further into view through the speaker's voice. This voice complicates the visual terrain, confronting the reader through the following page from Rankine's book.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.



Then, like all things impassioned, this voice takes on a life of its own: *You don't know because you don't bloody care. Do you?*



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What Rankine provides – through image and text – is a unique space for this voice to be articulated. Rankine’s choice of using what looks like a crime scene document, the word, “Head,” spray painted on the street is crucial, because it signifies not only what is not there, but who and what was there, the trace of Byrd’s head. Below it, what does it mean to see his face, staring out from below his cap, James Byrd intact, fully engaged, looking out, alive, when the reader knows he is dead? In a sense, Rankine creates a kind of living shrine, the photograph documenting what was dragged, the life erased made visible in the photograph.

The text between the images reads: “Then, like all things impassioned, this voice takes on/ a life of its own: *you don't know because you don't/ bloody care. Do you?*”

Rankine archives Byrd’s “remains” through the photographic landscape, and through the

¹⁶⁸ Claudia Rankine, Don't Let Me Be Lonely (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2004) 22.

middle of it, she negotiates this impassioned voice, one that turns into the photographic image, Byrd's "head" (both the street painted facsimile and the actual picture of it) confronting the reader. Rankine challenges the viewer to care, to remember Byrd's demise in the face of Bush's not remembering, and her accretion of his memory and remains, through photo and text. The "voice" that emerges in these lines, that which has a "life of its own," permeates the page, echoing between the two images. Borrowing from the British vernacular slang, *bloody*, as in to not *bloody care*, Rankine, by way of her mother's voice, reprimands the subject the speaker addresses, George W. Bush and beyond. In doing so, she calls into question Byrd's human value, his worth, whether or not he could be *bloody* cared for in the face of his violent death.

Lucille Clifton, too, decides to give voice to the pieces of James Byrd's body. As in Rankine's poem, Clifton weighs the question of voice quite heavily. Where Rankine exposes the multilayered conversation that exists between poetic subjects, to include Bush, her mother, the photographs, Clifton's poem resides, exclusively, in the pieces of Byrd's body. In the opening stanza of her poem "jasper texas 1998," Clifton writes:

i am a man's head hunched in the road.
i was chosen to speak by the members
of my body. The arm as it is pulled away
pointed toward me, the hand opened once
and was gone.¹⁶⁹

Like Rankine, Clifton presents a body, whose voice is reconfigured through a similarly visceral landscape. Byrd's head is laid out, "hunched in the road." In the space where Rankine redirects the reader to fragments of the body to a fresh pool of blood on the road,

¹⁶⁹ Lucille Clifton, "jasper texas 1998," *Blessing the Boats* (Rochester: BOA Editions, 2000) 20.

a sign of a “head,” then the photograph of Byrd’s face, Clifton allows Byrd’s head to speak directly, and the rest of his body parts to act in relation to his head and the demands of this voice: “I was chosen to speak by the members/ of my body....”¹⁷⁰ By a committee of body parts, the body assigns the head to speak straight into the heart of his own radical violation. Where the body is broken apart, Clifton captures the atrocity of the act, the arm being pulled away, only to have it point back to the body that is ripped apart and left behind.

Clifton presents an inscrutable zone, where what remains is a stark landscape, another field of absence: “The arm as it pulled away/ pulled away toward me, the hand opened once/and was gone.” Like the blood stains that Rankine captures in her text, the shiny surface of the field, the pool of blood left on the surface without the body from which it came, the image that Clifton leaves in the wake of violence is “gone.”

In this absence, what does Byrd’s body ultimately point to? Clifton uses it to map not only a way back to him, but somehow to find the space to represent the body as a whole, human, despite his being dragged apart. Clifton continues:

who is the human in this place,
the thing that is dragged or the dragger?¹⁷¹

For me, these lines are similar to those in Rankine’s poem, where she points out that “like all things impassioned, this voice takes on a life of its own.” This question, “who is the human in this place, /the thing that is dragged or the dragger?” is haunting because the question itself has a life of its own. The very question of what constitutes the “human,” for Brooks, is important. The fact that the speaker – Byrd’s head – poses this

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

question is important because it mediates a space for the reader's retreat. As in the photographs in Rankine's work, or in the short passages suspended between paragraphs, Clifton allows a neutral zone in the poem. Is this space the realm of the inscrutable, a place where the reader might be able negotiate a relationship with the figures within the poem? And as in Rankine's work, Clifton offers a shiny surface that couples with this indeterminate zone. Byrd's head looks up and says:

the sun is a blister overhead.
if I were alive I could not bear it.¹⁷²

If the sun is a blister – where does skin meet sky? The space between the dead body's head looking up and the sun as blister is like an open wound peering out and back to the reader. Clifton's question oscillates in this embodied space. Byrd's head is not attached to the body, nor is it living, yet Clifton allows it to speak, to bear the sun, its illuminating center pointing back to the head, just as the dragged-apart hands point back to the body.

What is left behind as we return to Byrd's image, his body as metaphor, pointing back at itself, the sun beaming down on the head that was left on the road, his voice hovering over what remains? At the end of Clifton's poem, she offers these telling lines:

the townsfolk sing we shall overcome
while hope bleeds slowly from my mouth
into the dirt that covers us all.
i am done with this dust. I am done.¹⁷³

What does it mean to be done? Is being done the space beyond death? What is the realm of this double absence that Clifton renders for her reader, this hope, bleeding slowly from his mouth into the dirt? The tone of Byrd's voice – his complaint –

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

fuses with his disintegration: he is done, as in “finished” with this dust, as his head breaks down into matter. Here, where he dissolves with the dust, what Clifton leaves behind for the reader is an abstract space, a place where the body becomes material, turning from body, to “finished,” dust that is, *done*. What Byrd’s head turns into by the poem’s end is crucial. It/he moves from voice to metaphor, body to substance, revealing Clifton’s attempt to present her own version of the inscrutable, her construction of the “non-body” enacted through her poem.

In the closing pages of this project, I would like to explore the work of Dawn Lundy Martin, a contemporary, experimental black writer, who engages with a similar manipulation of the black body as “non-body” in her poem, “The Undress,” from her debut book, *A Gathering of Matter/ A Matter of Gathering*. In this poem, I am arrested by the ways that Martin invokes and evokes the poetic black subject, a figure that she names as the ugly, black man. In this stanza, she explains what, exactly, makes him ugly:

That the body — trespassed — troped — made haven—made him awful—
deeply recognized. He unraveled—epithelium peeled —pelted first,
then simply removed. He was what we might call—would
most likely call—an ugly, black man.¹⁷⁴

Here Martin is unafraid to explore the realm between that which is “deeply recognized,” and that which is violated, “made haven.” Martin’s work offers a way of thinking of the ugly, black man as a shifting metaphor – it is as if she reveals, perhaps, what separates “the dragger from the dragged,” through her lines, words, broken by hyphens coming into meaning. Her writing engages these questions: Byrd’s body, how was it “trespassed”? –

¹⁷⁴ Dawn Lundy Martin, “The Undress,” *A Gathering of Matter/ A Matter of Gathering*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007) 22.

How do we recognize it, as we remember it through text, photograph or through its
“simple removal?”



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This is the road, where James Byrd was dragged to his death. I include it here, because I am interested in this stretch of road, and think about the distance in the end that marks the shape of his obliteration, the light, the circles, the dots marked in the middle of the road. What is left behind as we return to Byrd’s image, his body as metaphor, as point of possibility between visual and poetic landscapes – Did the draggers render him in their imagination as an ugly, black man, as he broke apart down the road? What to make of the marks left behind in his absence?

¹⁷⁵ Texas road where James Byrd Jr. was dragged to his death, Photo. Linda Johnson, 2006 c. 1998
<http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://www.soros.org/initiatives/photography/news/johnson_20060519/images/image_150x150&imgrefurl=http://www.soros.org/initiatives/photography/news/johnson_20060519&h=150&w=150&sz=10&hl=en&start=11&usg=__9AogY4K3ObBK8BKggg9AgMIY2a4=&tbnid=_2UV7VXNgxg9XM:&tbnh=96&tbnw=96&prev=/images%3Fq%3Djames%2Bbyrd%26gbv%3D2%26hl%3Den>.

Martin's poem begins with the black body as metaphor, an inscrutable black space, the identity "unraveled," for the reader, suspending the black body as surface, substance and matter. What are the ways that this realization is mediated through the black body's formation, pressured through language negotiated through the extended hyphens between her words?

Martin removes layers of the self, breaking it apart from the inside, while reconstructing the body from the inside out. She exposes the "ugly, black man" removing his skin – "epithelium peeled" – the layers of his inner skin, turning inside out, visible through her imagination. As it is defined in the *New Encyclopedia Britannica*, the epithelium is a "layer of cells closely bound to one another to form continuous sheets covering surfaces [of] the sensitive surfaces of special sense organs, glands, hair, nails and other structures...It also lines the ducts of many glands."¹⁷⁶ For Martin, what does it mean to start with the skin inside of the organs to reveal the degree of violence that is layered upon and *within* the black body?

Martin's work allows a way to work through the body *inside* these multiple surfaces. She peels the skin from within the skin. What is at stake is the inner body and the inner skin as metaphor, epithelium, organ, turned inside out for the viewer to observe as the material that Martin both imagines and manipulates in her work. In an extended line in the poem, Martin continues:

"He had undone it, reversed time, made on allowances, poured it all in a stinking black bowl."¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. 4. 15th Edition. (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1983) 530.

¹⁷⁷ Dawn Lundy Martin, "The Undress," *A Gathering of Matter/ A Matter of Gathering* (Athens: University of Georgia Press. 2007) 22.

What is this ugly, black man reversing? Is this the same black bowl, the color, depth and texture, where Gallagher's black paintings exist? For Martin, the epithelium, the inside skin of skin and organs turns into a substance, a matter that can be poured into a "stinking black bowl," identity not washed away or removed, but contained. In a series of lines, Martin captures and extends this metaphor, in bracketed phrases that she pushes well to the left of the right margin:

[What human form sleeves out of]

[An imagining outside itself]

[A grasping of the Garrote]

[A phylum called unsatisfactory]¹⁷⁸

In this sequence of lines, Martin, arguably, contains the inscrutable, unknown black body. Whether the "human form" coming out of its sleeve, the imagination occurring out of the self, the "grasping" of the "Garrote," the collars, tight strangulation, choke, or the denigration of the "phylum," whether body, or language, Martin offers a litany of alternatives, complex conceptual notes towards what defines and encapsulates the ugly, black man as complex, shifting metaphors.

Almost abandoning, for a moment, the accreting metaphors, Martin offers an understanding of what this demands. The poet, after presenting the sequence of bracketed lines returns to the left margin. She writes:

The meat is work.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸Ibid. 23.

The shift is sudden, the poet moving from a series of metaphor's constricting around absence, containing it, cutting into, or eating the meat that fills in what has been taken away. Martin chops through her poetic form, cutting into the body of the line, and offering, meat. Perhaps Martin's accreting metaphors around the "ugly, black man" is meant to engage, dissipate, forming before the reader's eyes, only to evolve as it is erased. Martin does not break bread with the reader, looking for some peaceful resolution to her understanding of the poetic subject. Instead, she threatens to fill the body as her lines devour what is left behind. They grasp at what is and is not there, her poem's subject residing in the inscrutable.

Martin, herself, teaches us how to approach reading her poetry as she discusses her craft within the lines of her "Negrotizing in Five; or, How to Write a Black Poem" in a section called, *Formlessness*. She writes, "One enters an unforgiving, inchoate world. No mold to make, fossilizing. Here is the secret: I cannot tell you because it is not known."¹⁸⁰ But what is known in Martin's work is the poet's need to fill up a space with what is inchoate, that which is undone, not quite finished, and always in process. Martin's manipulation of what is undone, what is unknown or not finished is crucial. For her, working with the ugly, black man as a metaphor demands that she understand there is no mold, no substance, that the possibility of his poetic construction is formed through the ever mutating landscape of *becoming*.

At the end of the poem, Martin's writes: "Porous skin finally gone, gouged. He no/ longer sings gospel but hums/ Silently in his head, What I have done, what I have

¹⁷⁹Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Dawn Lundy Martin, "Negrotizing in Five; or, How to Write a Black Poem," *A Gathering of Matter/ A Matter of Gathering* (Athens: University of Georgia Press. 2007) 11.

done,”¹⁸¹ which echoes with the last of Lucille Clifton’s lines in her “jasper texas 1998.” Clifton lines read,” the townsfolk sing we shall overcome/while hope bleeds slowly from my mouth/ into the dirt that covers us all./ i am done with this dust. I am done.”¹⁸² As James Byrd “speaks” at the end of Clifton’s poem – about his being *done* – and where Martin’s ugly, black man says “what I have done, what I have done,” the poems work side by side. They offer a declarative space, a field in which the body becomes a figure of possibility of what is not known, formless in the space beyond obliteration. Martin gathers the fragments of the ugly, black man that Clifton dissolves into the dirt at the end of her poem.

I would like to conclude with a letter that is included in the Gwendolyn Brooks Archives at U.C. Berkeley written to a friend and fellow writer, Annette Victorin, in response to her asking a question of Brooks, who is described by Victorin as “one of the most important personalities of the day.”¹⁸³ Victorin asks in a letter dated May 23, 1956:

...If you had only one or two moments left in which to speak to the people of the world, what pattern for peace would you suggest? – Your Pattern for Peace may be verse-weaving or prose or anything you may feel keenly to express in any fashion.¹⁸⁴

Gwendolyn Brooks responds:

¹⁸¹ Dawn Lundy Martin, “The Undress,” *A Gathering of Matter/ A Matter of Gathering* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007) 23.

¹⁸² Lucille Clifton, “jasper texas 1998,” *Blessing the Boats* (Rochester, NY: BOA Editions, 2000) 20

¹⁸³ Gwendolyn Brooks, *1917-Papers 2001 / 83 Z* (Berkeley: Bancroft Collection Unpublished Materials, 2001) CTN: 2:23 U-V MISC 1950-81 n.d.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Dear Annette,
 If I had but one or two
 moments left in which to speak
 of peace to the people of the world,
 I should ~~and could suffer words~~
~~something like this~~: Perhaps these:
 Peace will have to be worked for among nations
 as among members of a family.
 As in a family, the easy sneer, the
 quick defacement of pride, the softness
 withheld the proving chance denied,
 can lead to hate - and that hate may
 lead to the obliteration of man.

Sincerely,
 Gwendolyn Brooks

P.S. I hope you found some food -
 during me, I feel wonderfully honored.

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The body of the text above reads:

*If I had but one or two moments left in which to speak of peace to the people of the world, I should and could suffer words. Perhaps these: peace will have to be worked for among nation as among members of a family. As in a family, the easy sneer, the quick defacement of pride, the softness withheld the proving chance denied, can lead to hate – and that may lead to the obliteration of man.*¹⁸⁶

I end with Brooks' open and public answer, where she "suffers words," in her active and beautiful hand, the long strike-outs on the page that, for me, reverberate

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

against Martin's internal, and extended sequence of hyphens. Brooks offers a body bound together, "as among members of a family." I am taken not only by the full and flowing response, but by Brooks' need to bring all of the complexities of a nation together through various signs of the family's communications: the "easy sneer," the "softness" and "hate." Of course, these lines evoke the lines from the sonnet that opens this chapter: "Carry hate/In front of you and harmony behind."¹⁸⁷ This complex call may be what helps to drive the body against obliteration.

I take Brooks' call for "Peace" to be hinged to the project of the violated black body's retrieval, one that I have attempted to construct through this chapter and within the project as a whole, the black body's conceptual recuperation in the face of its violent fragmentation. To borrow Brooks, what "is worked for," I would argue must remain in process through the work of black poets and artists like Gwendolyn Brooks, Ellen Gallagher, Claudia Rankine, Lucille Clifton and Dawn Lundy Martin, each manipulating and making the violated black body visible, palpable as line, metaphor, poem, picture, mark, *becoming*.

¹⁸⁷ Gwendolyn Brooks, "the children of the poor," Blacks (Chicago: Third World Press, 1994) 118.

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Autobiographical Statement

Ronaldo V. Wilson is the author of *Narrative of the Life of the Brown Boy and the White Man*, winner of the 2007 Cave Canem Poetry Prize (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008) and *Poems of the Black Object* (Futurepoem Books, 2009). He is a graduate of U.C. Berkeley, NYU's Graduate Creative Writing Program in Poetry. Wilson has held numerous fellowships to include the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center, Djerassi, and Yaddo. A National Research Council Ford Foundation Dissertation Fellow, he has shared his work at the University of Iowa, California College of Arts and Crafts, University of Pittsburgh, James Madison University, University of Illinois, Chicago, Cooper Union School, The CUNY Graduate Center, Poet's House, New Langton Arts, Studio Museum of Harlem, The Poetry Center at San Francisco State University, and the St. Mark's Poetry Project. He currently teaches creative writing and African American Poetics at Mount Holyoke College.