

**COMPASSION AND ITS CONTIGUITIES: WITNESS POETRY AND
METONYMIC RESPONSE**

by

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Abstract

I read witness poetry as a model of response to suffering. Compassion is feeling together with another. Compassion is, then, opposed to empathy's feeling *as* another. Compassion can be better understood through the witness poetry that privileges metonymical relationships in which readers are contiguously positioned in relationship to a speaker. This emphasis on relationship can be contrasted to the collapse of relationship in identification in which a reader reads as though he or she is the lyric I, the poetic voice, rather than a listener. I discuss this reader-as-listener in contrast to the trauma studies-influenced discourse surrounding witness poetry, a discourse which focuses on indexical poetic evidence of a poet's wounds and the transferability of the poet's trauma to readers.

Compassionate response, as demonstrated by this poetry, is premised on a recognition of one's intimacy with or distance from that which one witnesses. Distance is not synonymous with disengagement, but rather with the space of relationship through which connection and consideration is possible. All intimacy involves some distance; the two are not opposites, but a continuum.

Witness involves waiting: response derives from the time of relation through which it might form. This waiting has reflection as its retrospective partner. Together, they form commemoration, which brings reflection into future and communal celebration and remembrance. Com-memoration is linked to com-passion in this communal element. My project engages witness poetry as a communal form inviting feeling in community, response to widespread suffering, and the establishment of relationship and connection.

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Statement of Originality

(Required only for Division IV Ph.D.)

I hereby certify that all of the work described within this thesis is the original work of the author.

Any published (or unpublished) ideas and/or techniques from the work of others are fully acknowledged in accordance with the standard referencing practices.

(Dale Tracy)

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In her introduction to *Intimacy*, Lauren Berlant writes that “virtually no one knows how to do intimacy” (282). Whether strongly present in proximity or weakly available at a distance, intimacy is part of any relationship. Failure to recognize the degree of intimacy appropriate to or operative in a relationship can shape a response to suffering into identification or pity, or into apathy or indifference. I engage the concept of compassion through poetry responding to social suffering and atrocity; though compassion is what it enacts, this poetry exists in reaction to massive failures in compassion.

Compassionate response to suffering depends upon a foundation of and attention to appropriate relationship to one who suffers. By appropriate, I do not mean that I propose a didactic rule for compassion, but that a relation of compassion is one fitted to its context. This project seeks to work out positions along a continuum of intimacy and distance which readers and witnesses occupy as they interact with suffering others.

I focus on compassion, literally feeling together with another, because it involves the recognition of the particular intimacy or distance in a given relationship. As compassion is explicitly my feelings in reaction to your feelings, it is a response that precludes identification. Moreover, the metonymic strategies I find in witness poetry are an expression of compassionate response. Compassion and witness poetry each operate

contiguously; both privilege response from nearby over the substitution involved in identification.

In the poetry I study here, witness depends upon awareness of and attention to relationship. In Rachel Tzvia Back's buffalo poems, the speaker encounters a buffalo as a figure of witness. The way she enters into relationship with the buffalo is demonstrative of relationship in this body of poetry more broadly: "I watch it. I wait for it to move (which it does not). I want it to look at me (which it does not). . . . I am immersed, deep in silent embrace, in the space and stillness between us, in everything it carries in its unwieldy shape" (11). The speaker does not imagine knowing what the buffalo knows from watching its witness. Rather she reports her own feelings and desires in response to it as she waits in relation to it, "immersed . . . in the space and stillness between," the space of relationship.

While I argue that witness poetry both models (diegetically) and creates (with its readers) compassionate relationships, the discourse surrounding poetry's relationship to suffering focuses more on the suffering itself than on the feelings others might feel in reaction to that suffering. Discussions of witness poetry attend to a transmission of trauma from witness through speaker to reader. In my first chapter, I argue that these discussions assume a readerly insertion into the "I" position; in this model of identification, critics propose trauma to be shared through the poem, creating in the reader another witness in a chain of witnesses. In contrast, I find the poetry in this study

to invite readers, not to feel what the speaker feels, but to feel their own responding feelings in reaction to the poem.

Poems position readers to respond in particular ways. Witness poetry, I argue, positions its readers at the greater distance (as compared to the identification involved in empathy's imagining for oneself the feelings of another) that is possible in compassion. This compassionate distance is evident when Adrienne Rich's speaker in "An Atlas of the Difficult World" watches a spider construct a web. While the speaker "know[s] / nothing all winter can enter this house or this web" (III. 111-12), she questions her assumptions: "But how do I know what she needs? Maybe simply / to spin herself a house within a house, on her own terms" (III. 114-15). The speaker's response considers her own reaction and takes into account the distance between herself and the spider; it is awareness of this distance that allows the speaker to give her attention to the spider without collapsing that relationship of attention into a non-relation of self-transplantation. She recognizes, as best she can with her limited knowledge, the spider "on her own terms."

This positioning of readers has no single form; in my second chapter, "Community and Poetry's Maps," I consider different poetic strategies and their divergent effects on readerly response. Overall, though, I find metonymy to be witness poetry's guiding figure. Metaphor as substitution contrasts metonymy as contiguity. Peter Balakian's "The Oriental Rug" illustrates the metonymical relationships I find in witness poetry. Balakian's American speaker engages with his grandparents' suffering through the

intermediary of a rug from their Armenian home. The poem is organized through the metonymical relation of that rug to the Armenian landscape (it is associated with the landscape through its design and with Armenian culture as a household object and memory-piece carried to a new country). The speaker encounters his grandparents' suffering in the Armenian genocide only through his imagined relations with the Armenian landscape, as accessed through the rug. This metonymical relationship guides the structural metonymy of the poem which effects a reader's positioning. The speaker's engagement with suffering works as a model for a reader's engagement with his engagement. My critique of the assumption, in the critical work surrounding witness poetry, of substitution/identification comes out of the poetry's organization around contiguous relations; this internal organization shapes the way readers are positioned in relation to witness poetry. Speakers do not identify with the suffering other; they do not insert themselves in the place of that suffering but feel from nearby. Readers likewise are not asked to substitute in as the lyric poem's "I." Rather, readers maintain their own relationship of listening to this witness, feeling in reaction to that witness's reaction to suffering.

Since I understand witness poetry to work through metonymy as contiguity, its strategies and my responding strategies of reading are fundamentally spatial. I look at distance, literal and metaphorical, in the contiguities between sufferer and witness, poem and event, speaker and poet, speaker and reader. I study, not just the relationships between suffering, witnessing, and reading, but also the state of being in relationship; that

is, I consider relationship itself and not only the contiguity of elements. In *Inventory*, Dionne Brand's speaker is concerned with "the loosening clasp of affinities" (29). Likewise, Antjie Krog's speaker considers relationship in South Africa, asking in "Country of grief and grace" "how long does it take / for a voice / to reach another" (a. 12-14). Engaging her "country held bleeding between us" (a. 15), she attends to the "between," the space of relationship, the space "between you and me" that "desperately ... aches" (a. 1-3). In my third chapter, I engage this interest in relationship itself by examining the strategies of connection guiding poetry by Joy Harjo, Rich, and Back.

As Krog's question ("how long does it take") suggests, the temporality of relationship is also relevant to my project. My study is concerned not only with having a reaction but also with reading it, reflecting on it, and correcting it. As such, I am concerned with the temporality involved in reading my own reaction and with attending to this temporality as I consider my poetic models. The poetry itself frequently pairs waiting with witness. Waiting is the anticipatory counterpart to reflection. Compassion differs from identification because it involves reading signs of suffering outside of what one already knows. Compassionate response cannot come through an understanding of suffering one has in advance; response must be formed through the time of relation. In my fourth chapter, I consider the relationship between Brand's *Inventory* and its readers to be one of mutual but different waiting; this waiting is, in both cases, the willingness to be in witnessing relation that is based on prolonged attention rather than on a base of knowledge. In my second chapter, I consider the similarities between poetic space and the

space of a waiting-room. A waiting-room is the space in which what is to come is anticipated. Waiting is an act or feeling that is necessarily incomplete; when waiting is completed by the arrival of that for which one waits, one is no longer waiting. Response is forever anticipating the fullness of response that can remain only potential. Response to another's suffering can never be completed; it can be stopped or turned from, but not finished. Response would end in the arrival of its fullness.

Compassion, then, involves the anticipatory temporality of waiting and the retrospective temporality of reflection. My purpose in this project is to attend to the distance from which I as a particular reader and critic read particular poems. This attention comes through waiting in relation to signs of suffering and reflection on that relation. My own critical approach, even when not identified explicitly as such, is consistently one of waiting and reflection.

This project grows out of my reflections on what might otherwise have been a fairly inconsequential personal experience. The moment of failed witness I will recount, though only a small moment in my personal life, resonates on a public scale as I consider it in terms of individual responsibility for strangers. While I was exercising at my university's fitness centre, someone, walking across the room, suddenly fell to the floor beside me, vomiting. My first thought was of his potential embarrassment at displaying this vulnerability and my instinct—which I acted upon—was to carry on with my exercise as though I hadn't noticed what was happening. After an employee came to help this man, I left, shaken and self-questioning. My reaction was clearly inadequate and

unproductive, ridiculous, even, as my proximity to the person in need was such that it was not possible that I was oblivious to his suffering. Moreover, because of this proximity, my position of responsibility was clear. Though I was not feeling the callousness I displayed, what I was feeling was a kind of identification: I matched my actions to my own feelings regarding vulnerability. Of course, I had no way of knowing what this stranger would wish me to do or not do. But, this lack of more intimate knowledge is precisely the reason for an increased awareness of my own interpretational bias and a careful attention to signs of suffering. The problem was not that I did not know what would best alleviate his suffering, but that I read his feelings as my own.

Compassion involves attention to a relationship's place along a continuum of intimacy and distance. In "Compassion (and Withholding)," Berlant finds "that scenes of vulnerability produce a desire to withhold compassionate attachment" (9). Vulnerability can produce many different forms of relationship. In terms of the temporal aspects of relation, vulnerability can go unattended (a failure of reflection) or be misread (a failure of the waiting space of interpreting signs). Considered spatially, vulnerability can be overcome by one's own experiences (identification, a failure of over-proximity) or not let to affect one's own feeling (indifference, a failure of over-distance). My critical attention to my inadequate reaction is, as I include it here, an attempt to model what I find demonstrated in the selection of poetry I bring together in this project: a thoughtful attention to reading and responding to signs of others' suffering, an attention involving openness to one's own shortcomings and an ongoing rehabilitation, resetting, and

reinvestment of lacking energies and imperfect feelings. Feeling in relation to others means attention to one's own feelings as much as it means attention to those of others.

Henry James' *The Beast in the Jungle* illustrates the intersection of temporality with contiguity (spatiality, literally or metaphorically) as this intersection pertains to intimacy and the waiting and watching involved in witnessing. This intersection is largely implicit in my readings of witness poetry but is essential to my method. My reading of James' novella allows me to demonstrate the importance of these temporal aspects for an analysis of compassionate positioning along a continuum of intimacy and distance. I also include this prose work to indicate that my strategies come through witness poetry but are not limited to that corpus or to poetry at all. In my third chapter, compassion becomes clear as a way of organizing and living relationships, actual or potential. Compassion, as a mode of being, acts as a foundation to feeling and action. My ideas and concerns regarding compassion are relevant to art and life broadly; indeed, my purpose in reading well is contiguous with a purpose to live well.

In *The Beast in the Jungle*, May Bartram, agreeing to wait and watch with John Marcher, plays a large role in writing the story by which he lives, one which is shaped entirely by the sense of its potential conclusion, Marcher's idea that he is waiting for an unknown but extraordinary fate. Ultimately, there is evidence that Bartram realizes that they have undervalued the waiting itself, the living of life expended for the deferred culmination of significance. Marcher misreads her hints as he merges his narrative of the beast (his image of the special future he feels he is destined to meet) with the narrative of

romantic love (his final belief that he has missed his special fate in overlooking romantic potential in his lifelong friendship with Bartram). He believes himself to have been wrong about this relationship rather than wrong about the forms of value he finds in his life. With the expectation of a symbolic conclusion that would discover belatedly the worth of the wait, his interpretation renders it impossible for the worth of the wait to be immanent in the living.

The Beast in the Jungle opens with Marcher's "straying apart to feel in a proper relation" (496). His straying from a group of acquaintances "had an issue promptly enough" (497): it is how he comes into contact with Bartram, one like him set aside from a spirit of "acquisition" (496). That is, Bartram and Marcher are distinguished from their larger community through a similarity in mode of relation. They both feel they need a narrative, some social "passage," to define a reason for this connection. The first option—something romantic—is ruled out in Marcher's negating response to Bartram's suggestion that the thing to come is "falling in love" (504). Instead of this romantic narrative for "passage," the critical thing that holds them together comes in an entirely opposite metaphor when Bartram "burn[s] her ships." She suggests she and Marcher share a secret about a different kind of expectation than falling in love (501), one not "familiar to so many people" and suggestive not of a narrative which, like a passage by ship or relation leading to the event of marriage, would have some determinate destination, but, as Bartram "had not lost the thread" (497), of a sewing together, such that the activity of connection is its own endpoint.

The thread Bartram puts forward is the story of Marcher's secret. Bartram helps Marcher to read his life as though it is literature, as a narrative whose end is already written. Living his life through a symbol, Marcher misvalues the actual living of it, a living which primarily takes the form of his intimate waiting with Bartram. The mistake in this story lies in reading a life as something that might be contained in all its significance in a symbol; Marcher's misinterpretation comes through creating an "image under which he had ended by figuring his life" (509).

The beast is for Marcher a symbol in the sense Roman Jakobson gives of Charles Sanders Peirce's definitions. While "[a]n index connects the *signans* to the *signatum* by virtue of the actual contiguity between the two," the symbol "is based not on an actual relation between *signans* and *signatum*, but on a prescribed, conventional, and learned relation between them" (91). For Peirce, Jakobson writes, "the index is linked to an ongoing experience in the present. The symbol, however, always possesses a general meaning and is based on a general law; everything that is truly general is related to the indefinite future. The past is an accomplished fact, whereas a general law cannot ever be totally accomplished" (92). The symbol is "only a 'frame law'" (91). The value of Marcher and Bartram's waiting, which stands in indexical relation to their relationship, is undone through the potentiality of the indefinite future of which the waiting is merely a function: the waiting, for them, is not this index of their friendship, but rather the following of the general frame law of the symbol of the beast whose significance will come clear in the future. In contrast, witness poetry values the watching together of a

speaker communicating his or her witness to a reader; this wait of watching is privileged as the space of relationship, the feeling together that is foundational to compassion.

Marcher does give an account of their friendship which values its waiting as he asserts that he is “mindful” of all Bartram has done, namely, that she has been “watching” with him; his mindfulness and her watching are indicative of their intimacy and proximity. In my second chapter, I propose mindful presence as consideration, an attentive being “here” with another. This mindfulness—linked in both witness poetry and *The Beast in the Jungle* to a shared watching— is important to my understanding of witness. Marcher’s description of his watching with Bartram indicates an indexical ethics to their relationship:

“Well, you’re really so in with me, you know—as a sort of result of my being so in with yourself. I mean of my having such an immense regard for you, being so tremendously mindful of all you’ve done for me. ... I almost feel as if you hadn’t really had time to do anything else.”

“Anything else but be interested?” she asked. “Ah what else does one ever want to be? If I’ve been ‘watching’ with you, as we long ago agreed I was to do, watching’s always in itself an absorption.” (512)

In the real-time of the experience of their relationship (as indicated by the gerund of “being in with”), this happening temporality (which is also the shared space of their togetherness), their friendship is equalized: Bartram’s “being in with” Marcher is, as he says, “a sort of result of my being so in with yourself.” That it is not a result but “a sort of result” suggests the tautological equality of their togetherness: he is in with her because she is in with him because he is in with her. Any result is only a sort of result, as it is also a sort of cause. But, despite this “immense regard” and “mindful[ness],” what they are

“in,” what this happening time of their friendship is filtered through, is a future whose value rests in its eternal futurity. Marcher’s sense that all of Bartram’s time has been caught up indicates this reservation of living for a temporality beyond the present.

Bartram, on the other hand, here suggests that meaningfulness need not attend only upon the end, where the symbol will break open and show its significance, as “watching’s always in itself an absorption.”

Though their friendship “simply existed,” its “real form” should have been “the form of their marrying” (508). Marcher’s idea suggests that an intimacy of another form, lacking this determining symbolic goal, is not a “real form.” In contrast, Bartram emphasizes their experienced intimacy:

She waited once again, always with her cold sweet eyes on him. “It’s never too late.” She had, with her gliding step, diminished the distance between them, and she stood nearer to him, close to him, a minute, as if still charged with the unspoken. . . . She only kept him waiting, however; that is he only waited. It had become suddenly, from her movement and attitude, beautiful and vivid to him that she had something more to give him . . . The end, none the less, was that what he had expected failed to come to him. (526-7)

Bartram increases her proximity to Marcher, “diminishing the distance,” coming “nearer,” being “close.” She emphasizes physically the intimacy of waiting they have shared, demonstrating the intersection of temporal and spatial relationship. That she “only kept him waiting” is really the point here. The parallel “he only waited” emphasizes the equality again of their waiting together. But Marcher is focused on the “end,” the point at which something he “expected” has “failed to come to him.” The ethics of this lyric waiting anticipate for me the call to stay in Brand’s *Inventory*; the speaker’s “stay” in

“Stay now, she’s written a letter” (34) pulls a reader of the poem into a waiting-through-words with the speaker.

Though he finally comes to an interpretation similar to that he makes of his friendship with Bartram, Marcher is stayed in this way when confronted with grief on a stranger’s face:

This brought him close, and his pace, was slow, so that—and all the more as there was a kind of hunger in his look—the two men were for a minute directly confronted. Marcher knew him at once for one of the deeply stricken—a perception so sharp that nothing else in the picture comparatively lived, neither his dress, his age, nor his presumable character and class; nothing lived but the deep ravage of the features that he showed. He *showed* them—that was the point; he was moved, as he passed, by some impulse that was either a signal for sympathy or, more possibly, a challenge to an opposed sorrow. (538)

This realization comes through the assumption that, like intimacy, suffering must have one real form. Given the story’s initial concern with proper relation, its conclusion seems to me to reenact that concern in relation to a suffering stranger. Marcher performs a kind of backward identification: he senses that he does not know the other’s pain in himself, and so assumes that he knows something about his own pain (that it is not this other one). Marcher misses a realization of something of what it means to watch or watch with another. Marcher’s recognition of this man’s sorrow might have been of the kind of encounter which occurs between himself and Bartram at the story’s start. Marcher is mindful of this man. Directly confronted, he has “a perception so sharp that nothing else in the picture . . . comparatively lived”: Marcher attends to this person’s pain outside of his dress, age, character, and class. In one sense, Marcher’s empathic relation to this man’s pain is symbolic rather than personal: the facial expression as an index of felt pain

within a lived context falls away as Marcher reads the face as a symbol of suffering: nothing of the man lives for Marcher but this symbol, “the deep ravage of the features that he showed.” Yet, at the same time, the man’s particularity is not completely undone: the rest of the picture of his life only stops living “comparatively” to the pain.

This moment, moreover, displays Marcher’s attention to the emphasized and repeated “show[ing]” of signs of suffering: there was a “hunger in his look”; he makes a “picture.” Marcher recognizes these ravaged features as an opening to relationship through a “signal for sympathy” that overcomes any aspect of the man’s identity. In Marcher’s reaction to the man’s suffering, we can see how compassion emerges from watching for signs of others’ feelings. Marcher recognizes these ravaged figures as an opening to relationship through a “signal for sympathy.” Yet, he concludes by reading even this encounter through the law of the symbol determining his life. Marcher decides this man’s suffering is, “more possibly, a challenge to an opposed sorrow,” Marcher’s own.

Though Marcher and Bartram’s friendship is intimate and compassionate, Marcher privileges his abstract future over their mutual waiting. Back values waiting as an aspect of the witnessing that is “an arc of *beckoned listening* and tender answers, always uncertain, always open—an entryway back into the still-waiting heart” (9). Waiting also has an indexical quality: waiting is in actual relationship to the passage of time, insofar as waiting is the experience of ongoing temporality. Marcher’s anticipation of the coming of the signification of his symbol disrupts this indexical connection: his

waiting is held until the conclusion, at which point he can retroactively interpret and value all that led to the moment of significance. This understanding of his life brings him to reinterpret his intimacy with Bartram as insufficient, thus devaluing what had been of the highest value in his ongoing lived experience, of the waiting-in-company that made up the largest part of his adult life.

Forms of association like index and metonymy involve a pre-established relationship between their terms. The index is a semiotic term for the causal relationship between a sign and referent. Metonymy is a rhetorical term for a relationship between signs. In both cases, the relationship is pre-existing. Indexical and metonymic relations, as well as the other kinds of contiguities and juxtapositions that I will discuss in this project, have in common this actual proximity—whether spatial (metonymy) or temporal (index)—which suggests an experience of connections as they exist. As a relation, compassion is indexical (which, when articulated literarily takes the form of metonymy), though the referential or actual relationship is continually intersecting with semiotic relationship.

As I have indicated, the more spatial metonymic relations feature more prominently in my chapters than does the temporality of the index. I use metonymy as my primary term because it makes clear the element of the contiguous in the poetic relations I examine. This contiguity indicates the proliferation of possible juxtaposition, as proximity to one thing leads to nearness to the next thing and the next. In this emphasis on the multiplicity of connection, a metonymical analysis resists a single or final

interpretation. As opposed to metaphor's "carrying beyond" (Sedgwick np), metonymy carries out meaning within the contingencies of actual connection. Such relationships must take into account the existing complexity of detail and cannot be the concentrated significance of a completed image of the past or the never-complete symbol of the future.

It is through such a contiguous connection to another (a connection in which the signs of your feeling and my feeling are in actual and unfinalizable relationship) that compassion operates, allowing one to interpret in a way that is not metaphoric (in a way that does not substitute oneself into another's feelings as though they are one's own) a suffering to which one has no direct access, that is, which one must interpret through signs. Compassion operates in relationship: it is not a feeling I have or a thing I do, but a way I come into contact with you (even if that contact is only in my imagination).ⁱ

Compassion is a kind of waiting. Marcher's interpretation of the stranger's face at the graveyard takes suffering as a generalizable form: suffering as such would be a category in which any person might substitute for the sufferer. In contrast, compassion involves the wait of interpretation. Compassion is living, however briefly, in connection to another's signs and striving to interpret them as best one can through this lingering in relation. In compassion, my feelings become contiguous with yours. My feelings do not stand in for your feelings but stand with them; our feelings can be in association, such that the significance of what I feel comes through the relationship of my feeling to your feeling. Witness does not involve only attending to another, but also attending to how one comes into association with that other. Witness, as I find it in the poetry through which it

centrally operates, is a process, not completed in an action or feeling. Witness is waiting through the intimacy of allowing oneself to be, and to be attentive to being, in relationship.

I approach from multiple directions the problem of response to suffering; I return to the same problem in contiguous ways. My anecdote indicates that my stakes in this project reach from my own life; I engage with *The Beast in the Jungle* to provide an illustration of the entanglement of spatial and temporal considerations of engagement that would otherwise remain implicit through much of my analysis; finally, witness poems provide the models through which I work out my understanding of compassion and witness. In my analyses of this poetry, I produce this same contiguous movement; I return repeatedly but differently to the same ideas within chapters (moving back to initial aspects of an argument as more details are added) and between chapters (returning to broad concerns). My first and second chapters are linked by an investigation of intimacy, while the second chapter connects to the third through questions of community. I transition from my third chapter to the fourth through my proposal that compassion is a mode of being. My last two chapters carry most explicitly my concern for an ethics of witness as it might be a part of reading and artistic creation. Neither my argument nor my way of developing it is linear: my end point is not the conclusion to my initial premises and no element is the cause of a later effect. Rather, my approach mirrors the temporality and spatiality of compassion: I pursue contiguity and coincidence across a reflective and returning mode of thought. Similarly, my primary material represents an array of

geographic and political contexts and concerns. I choose my corpus to demonstrate the prevalence of a shared metonymical strategy across contexts. Moreover, I put various political, geographic, and historical contexts into juxtaposition in order to model the contiguous strategies I find in the poetry itself.ⁱⁱ

My first chapter, “Compassion, Poetry, and Witness,” most directly engages the continuum of intimacy and distance. After attending to the shaping force of testimony and trauma studies on the reception of witness poetry, I reconsider witness poetry through metonymical relationship in contrast to the substitutive relationship I see followed as a consequence of ideas of trauma as contagion (something that can be passed on through a poem) and established modes of reading lyric poetry in which a reader reads as though he or she is the speaking “I.” These strategies of similarity contrast to the metonymical strategy of contiguity that I see operating in witness poetry and serving as a model for reading. In Balakian's “The Oriental Rug,” I explore substitution as contrasted with contiguity and identification as contrasted with compassion. Balakian raises issues of distanced witness through a speaker, who, like himself, is the American grandson of a survivor of the Armenian genocide.

In my second chapter, “Community and Poetry's Maps,” I examine the relationship between poetry and community in Rich's “An Atlas of the Difficult World” and Harjo's “A Map to the Next World.” While Rich's poem considers American patriotism and Harjo's centres on the Creek nation, both poems work as guides linked to landscape, proximate bodies, and just communities. Both poets use intersections of maps,

landscapes, and bodies to consider heuristic (literal) and hermeneutic (metaphorical) relationships with nation and national belonging. In this chapter, I propose a theoretical framework for considering one's own position in relation to another's particular suffering and to a community as a whole. This framework works through ideas of intimacy and distance through related terms (indexical, heuristic, metonymical, literal on the one hand, and on the other, iconic, hermeneutic, metaphoric, artistic) which form, not a binary, but a scale of nearness and farness. This scale is related to knowledge. One's position as witness is shaped by the degree and form of knowledge one has of what it is one witnesses. This knowledge might be an intimate experience of the details, a distanced and theoretical consideration of something outside of what otherwise touches one's life, or any number of positionings in between these extremes. Witnessing involves being present to the nature of one's relationships. This chapter investigates Rich's and Harjo's poetic representation of this presence and proposes a similar framework of attentiveness for one's position as reader or witness.

My third chapter, "Compassion across Contexts: Poetic Strategies of Substitution, Incorporation, and Juxtaposition," continues to explore community through Rich's and Harjo's poetry. I find both poets to figure compassion and community through ideas of surplus. In this connection, the communal element of compassion becomes apparent, as does the compassionate element of community. To my selections from Harjo and Rich, I add my analysis of Back's *On Ruins and Return*. Back's buffalo poems, a portion of this larger collection, bring into relationship the conflict in Israel/Palestine and the

colonization of the United States. Harjo, Rich, and Back differently address and elicit compassion through the interrelation of multiple contexts. Their distinct strategies—substitution, juxtaposition through incorporation, and juxtaposition without equation—for creating poetic relationship produce differing interpretations of the association between community and compassion.

Through Back's juxtapositional images, I propose compassionate witness as a mode of being. I follow this idea into chapter 4, "Reading Metonymically in Dionne Brand," where I return more directly to my first chapter's concern with readerly positioning. I find in Brand's *Inventory* an emphasis on ontological engagement over an epistemological concern with disseminating information or teleological purpose. I also return to the concept of waiting: Brand's poem constructs a reader's waiting through the poem that is similar to her speaker's waiting in relation to global suffering. This waiting, as prolonged attentiveness, is this poem's form of witness.

In my final chapter, "Signing Skeletons," I consider recurring tropes of ossuaries and skeletons. I find in several diverse examples—Brand's *Ossuaries*, Seamus Heaney's "Bone Dreams," Antjie Krog's "Country of grief and grace" and *Country of My Skull*, and Jan Švankmajer's short film "The Ossuary"—skeletons and ossuaries to be suggestive of the relationship between the actual and the artistic. I take a step back in this chapter to consider the architecture of this project in which I seek to address relationship: of artist to witness, individual to community, national to global contexts, witness poetry to a wider ethics, and witness of global suffering to witness of the everyday happening of lives.

Compassion is an indexical connection insofar as my feelings are an effect of the cause of your feelings. When translated into text, this relationship becomes metonymic. I consider in this chapter what is at stake in that translation.

Notes

ⁱ Lauren Berlant begins her introduction to “Compassion (and Withholding)” with a similar point about compassion and relationship: “There is nothing clear about compassion except that it implies a social relation between spectators and sufferers, with the emphasis on the spectator’s experience of feeling compassion and its subsequent relation to material practice” (1).

ⁱⁱIn investigating a global ethics, I am limited by the spatial constraints of a single project. My aim was not to be exhaustive or representative but to consider the metonymical approach as I found it repeated across contexts. My own North American context is overrepresented: my project falls perhaps more heavily toward the intimate end of the continuum between proximity and distance. My choices are circumscribed also by my choice to limit this study to poems written in English. (Though, in my final chapter, I make an exception for Antjie Krog’s self-translation of her poem, “Country of grief and grace.” I also include a film whose soundtrack consists of Jacques Prévert’s “Pour faire le portrait d’un oiseau” (“To Paint the Portrait of a Bird”) sung in Czech.

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Chapter 2

Compassion, Poetry, and Witness

This chapter focuses not on poetry in which the poetic speaker offers testimony of the experience of atrocity, but on poetry in which speakers witness this testimony rather than the event itself. I am especially interested in the distance between poem and event in poetry whose witness-speakers lack this direct experience. Many critics position the poem as direct evidence and it is the resulting suppression of the relationship between reader and poem in which I am interested. As this suppressing critical response seems particularly prominent in poetry dealing with trauma and suffering, the issue here is twofold: the distance which I will explore has to do with the relationship between depiction and experience as well as with emotional and cognitive responses to another's trauma and suffering.

In this chapter, I define compassion in relation to witnessing and against empathy and identification. I examine witnessing specifically through witness poetry and even more specifically through secondary witness poetry as a useful example of the mediation and distances which I find inherent in compassion. In reading Peter Balakian's "The Oriental Rug" as a poem featuring a speaker as a compassionate secondary witness, I look particularly at these distances as expressed through a metonymical poetic technique. After offering a close reading of this poem, I consider trauma studies in relation to witnessing and the role they play in the critical discussion surrounding witness poetry. I argue that the discussion of trauma as contagious and the suggestion that poetry is

indexical are part of the same approach to suffering, one which is not well poised to deal with the sense of respectful awe that can block engagement with suffering. The manner in which witness poetry positions its readers in relation to the poetry's witnesses suggests an alternative form of engagement. I find the close reading and attentiveness which this poetry demands for both its content and aesthetic technique as appropriate approaches to suffering's depiction in art but also as suggestive of a model of response to actual suffering, a response falling somewhere on a spectrum between intimacy and distance.

I conceptualize compassion, not as a well-defined feeling, but as underpinning the various emotions that can come out of engagement with suffering. According to the OED, compassion is “suffering together with another” or “the feeling or emotion, when a person is moved by the suffering or distress of another, and by the desire to relieve it” (np). Because the distinction between feeling in response to another—suffering together with— and actually feeling the same feelings as another is important to my project, I chose the term compassion in contrast to empathy—“the power of projecting one's personality into (and so fully comprehending) the object of contemplation” (OED)— and sympathy—“the fact or capacity of entering into or sharing the feelings of another or others” (OED).ⁱ The terms “empathy” and “sympathy” suggest moving into the other person or that person's feelings; “compassion,” in contrast, maintains a distance that allows one's feelings to be one's own.ⁱⁱ

In considering a response to another's poetically mediated pain, I mobilize compassion as an engagement that does not dissolve distance. This compassion does not

rely on identification—witness poetry emphasizes the compassionate ability to imagine, not pain one did not feel, but a relation to others feeling pain. In poetry featuring a speaker distanced from an atrocity, the speaker might demonstrate this relation to another who suffers. For me, then, the poem of secondary witnessing enacts the kind of engagement it asks of its reader. This enactment returns us to the first issue of distance: it is only in focusing on the poem as a depiction that I can understand the reader's positioning inside a zone where reading might be a compassionate act performed within an intimate distance. Thus, the two kinds of distance I noted earlier are connected in shaping the limits of a reader's position as witness: the poem represents rather than presents another's trauma to the reader who witnesses suffering without directly knowing what that suffering feels like.

I should be clear that I do not consider identification to be an improper route of engagement; rather, I think it is quite often the first way that we engage with another. I am proposing, instead, that there are other possible modes of attentive connection, modes which might require conscious thought to enact. These modes beyond identification are important for cases in which widely divergent experience makes identification difficult, as well as for preventing an over-confidence in one's knowledge of another and his or her experience. Rather than reaching for the stasis of this accomplished knowing, I suggest thinking of compassion as an attitude in which we must continually enact engagement through ongoing relationship.ⁱⁱⁱ

While identification—the search for points of agreement, of shared experience, of similar understanding—seems a reasonable first response to a text, I would not wish for response to end at this point. I explore here another mode of engagement which witness poetry—a poetry with an interest in compassion—suggests for itself. The fallacy of identification^{1v} in witness poetry is connected to the impulse to understand the poem as indexical and to understand trauma as contagious. In looking for another possibility for the reader’s role, I consider specifically how a reader of the secondary witness poem is addressed.

The figure of the secondary witness, through which I will explore these distances, is most directly considered in discussions of testimony in Holocaust studies. In this field, descendants of survivors or those accessing the experience of others through testimony are considered as secondary witnesses, able to represent what the previous generation endured only through their own relation to the first-hand stories. James E. Young discusses secondary witnessing in relation to a “post-Holocaust generation of artists” which “does not attempt to represent events it never knew immediately but instead portrays its own, necessarily hypermediated experiences of memory” (1). The secondary witness is not “willing, or able, to recall the Holocaust separately from the ways it has been passed down” (1). Similarly, Susan Gubar, in *Poetry after Auschwitz: Remembering What One Never Knew*, explains her term “proxy witness poetry”:

In stark contrast to poets of witness, poets of proxy-witnessing often acknowledge their belated dependence on after-the-fact accounts of extremities never within their purview. They do so in order to avoid any confusion between victims in their

vulnerability of ‘then’ and poets or readers in the safety of ‘now,’ to concentrate on the disturbingly specific details of experiences decidedly not their own. (146)

The distance of the witness from the event is an integral issue in these discussions of secondary witnessing.

As a concrete example of this operation of distance, I will consider the secondary witness in Armenian-American poet Peter Balakian’s poem “The Oriental Rug.” Balakian explores his relationship to his grandparents’ experience in the Armenian genocide through his speaker’s acceptance of the responsibility of secondary witnessing.^v The speaker engages with this atrocity through the mediation of the rug originally from Armenia and now lying on the floor of the speaker’s American home. The poem begins with the speaker’s memory of himself as a boy lying on the rug associated, through its floral patterns, with the Armenian landscape. These patterns have been dyed onto the wool by the “roots and berries” of the Armenian environment (l.5-7) and, through this association, the speaker imaginatively enters a landscape of flowers, vines, and insects.

The rug represents the Armenian nation through this relationship to the land’s dyeing products. The rug stands in metonymically for Armenia’s people both through this association to the physical landscape and through its place (as artifact and household object) in Armenian culture. The string of depictions here is complex; the rug does not simply take the place of a people by standing in for a geography. Rather, the literal rug is continually reintroduced, calling for an ongoing reconfiguration of the complicated relationships between rug and people, rug and land, land and people, while also disrupting the witness-speaker’s connection to all of these entities. This frequent

interposition of the rug reminds the reader that it is the rug that provides the speaker with his always distanced access to the geographical location and the genocide that occurred there.

With this structuring shift from the literal to the metaphoric, I argue, before beginning my more detailed analysis of the poem, that Balakian presents his speaker's compassionate engagement as a mediated one. Accordingly, the witness's suffering is a suffering in response, not an identificatory understanding of the other's pain. The speaker's association to the witnessed suffering is, then, metonymical in that he never reaches the pain itself; the speaker can only approach that which is associated with that pain. The speaker here demonstrates his engagement without that engagement providing a full grasp of what it is for the other to be his or herself, to suffer in or of the experiences unique to this self. Metonymy, then, is a trope of distance and difference but it is also a trope of association, of finding a closeness that allows critical specificity in its refusal to negate difference, to blur into oneness two things that are not one.

In "The Oriental Rug," this metonymical relationship is also erotic. Though perhaps not, at first thought, an obvious figure for compassion, I argue that, in witness poetry, erotic imagery recurs to express intimacy, community, and communication, elements which make up compassion as I understand it. While erotic metaphor is not the only or primary way into these concepts of suffering, witnessing, and compassion, it is one significant way that points to a persistent conceptualization of the witness-sufferer relationship in witness poetry. Joy Harjo's work offers one example of the use of erotic

imagery by a poet engaging in poetic witnessing. Writing from a Muscogee Creek perspective, Harjo offers witness to suffering brought by colonization: “My work in this life has to do with reclaiming the memory stolen from our people when we were dispossessed from our lands east of the Mississippi; it has to do with restoring us” (*Reinventing the Enemy’s Language* 59). In the first poem of *A Map to the Next World*, a collection of poetry and tales, the speaker tells us that “[w]e are ascending through the dawn / the sky blushed with the fever / of attraction” (1-3), “[t]he sun lean[ing] on one elbow after making love, / savoring the wetlands just off the freeway” (28-9). We can read this description as a form of witness through the accompanying tale’s explanation of “this moment of reconciliation, where night and morning met,” a moment at which, for the tale’s speaker, it “didn’t matter that I didn’t know ... how I was going to make sense of a past that threatened to destroy me during those times when I doubted that I deserved a place in the world. The songs that we sang all night together filled me with promise, hope, the belief in a community that understood that the world was more than a contract between buyer and seller” (15). The poem’s erotic terms indicate the intimacy of community found in “that city where we were defining what it meant to be Indian in a system of massive colonization” (14).

Desire becomes more obviously communicative later in the collection with “This is My Heart”: “This is my song. It is a good song. / It walked forever the border of fire and water / climbed ribs of desire to my lips to sing to you. / Its new wings quiver with / vulnerability” (24-28).^{vi} This song emerges from within the physical body to become

accessible to another in singing through the speaker's lips. The desire for communication is an internal ladder to the intimacy created in the offer of vulnerability, the offer to reveal that which would be otherwise internal and unknowable.

Similarly, in the following poem, "Protocol," the speaker offers to a new acquaintance "a song that will make us vulnerable / to the shimmer of the heart, allows us to walk the roots / with our peoples through any adversity to sunrise" (35-37). Thus, it is this acceptance of the vulnerability of communication that achieves the moment of reconciliation represented here and in the earlier sunrise. Further, in "earthly desire," the tale paired with "This is My Heart," the link between the desire for communication and erotic sunrise in the collection's first poem is clear: "The sky too is part of this story of attraction and yearning. The ocean and sky meet out on the horizon for the love of touch. To speak like this isn't simplification, or personification for the sake of making intimacy where there isn't—this is the truth of the matter. We are all here in this place because we desired it. Desired each other" (115). Here, the imagery of intimate communication opens out into the desire for community.

Much as in Harjo's poetry, and as we will see in "The Oriental Rug," in Seamus Heaney's "Bone Dreams" the speaker's erotic interaction with another's body is filtered through a landscape that stands in for the experience of a national group. As Joseph McGowan explains, "the immediate context in which [Heaney's] poetry is so often seen" is the "continuing 'Troubles' of the post-Partition North of Ireland" (25). Within this context of violence and division, Heaney works within a complex of language, literature,

and nation: “At school I studied the Gaelic literature of Ireland as well as the literature of England, and since then I have maintained a notion of myself as Irish in a province that insists it is British. Lately I realized that these complex pieties and dilemmas were implicit in the very terrain where I was born” (“Belfast” 35).

In “Bone Dreams,” Heaney explores these dilemmas through his speaker’s sexualized investigation of skeletal remains. The poem begins with the moment of initial contact: “White bone found / on the grazing: / the rough, porous / language of touch / and its yellowing, ribbed / impression in the grass” (l.1-6). This tactile witnessing, the communication through the “language of touch,” does not evoke the bone with finality; a “rough” language suggests inexactness. Likewise, if the language is “porous,” it is permeable to the context of its use, the particular time and place of this touching. The bone’s impression in the grass similarly evokes the context through which the bone must be articulated; “impression” can refer to the physical dent in the grass as well as to the speaker’s response to finding the bone. Our understanding of this relic is limited to the speaker’s impression of it and this personal and contextual engagement is important in thinking about Northern Ireland where, Mark R. Amstutz argues, memory has played a “problematic role” as “the Nationalist-Unionist dispute has been sustained by perceptions of injustice and in particular by memories of victimhood” (183). Since “history” in this context “has been used as a tool of conflict by helping to ossify memory and to sustain opposing worldviews,” Amstutz proposes the need to “foster a memory that is inclusive and adaptable to conflicting perceptions” (183). In “Bone Dreams,” the speaker’s

perception of the bone as a fragment of the past is subjective, individual, and intimate.

For this speaker, thinking and touching are related acts: “I touch it again, / I wind it in / the sling of mind / to pitch it at England / and follow its drop / to strange fields” (I.11-16).

The reader, then, accesses the bone through the speaker’s personal imaginative engagement—the winding of the bone in the sling of his mind— with the past’s continuing context within the present.

The drop into England and strange fields introduces the question of nation to the poem. Do these strange fields belong to England? Does this bone? The speaker does not address these questions directly, but looks for meaning in language: “In the coffered / riches of grammar / and declensions / I found *bān-hūs*” (III.1-4). He evokes this bone-house, or body, as a “love-den, blood-holt, dream-bower” (III.15-6), and the bone grows into a body-as-house with an interior of “fire, benches, / wattle and rafters / where the soul / fluttered a while / in the roofspace” (III. 5-9). Yet, the speaker moves beyond the metaphorical image of the word “bone-house,” taking the bone itself as the image of a human life, and inviting the reader to “[c]ome back past / philology and kennings, / re-enter memory / where the bone’s lair / is a love-nest / in the grass” (IV. 1-6). In imagining the bone as an individual rather than conceptualizing language as a body within which body one can live, the speaker finds the distance for dialogue through mutual and erotic touching: “Soon my hands, on the sunken / fosse of her spine, / move towards the passes / And we end up / cradling each other / between the lips / of an earthwork” (IV. 14- V. 4).

Thus, the speaker replaces the abstract body that houses literary and linguistic traditions—"the tongue's old dungeons," of "dictions / Elizabethan canopies, / Norman devices," of "the scop's / twang, the iron / flash of consonants / cleaving the line" (II. 3-4; 6-8; 13-6)—with the particular and personal interaction of the trope of a woman who is also a part of the present landscape. In the move from within to beside, from 'dungeons' to 'cradling,' the speaker creates a space—a "love-nest"—in which he enters into relationship with the bone, a tangible fragment of the past, as a synecdochal piece of the skeletal body: "I hold my lady's head / like a crystal / and ossify myself / by gazing: I am scree / on her escarpments" (IV. 6-10). The body, likewise, is metonymically connected to the physical land, which in turn provides a conceptual and literal ground for a sense of national belonging, for, as Heaney says, "when we look for the history of our sensibilities I am convinced, as Professor J. C. Beckett was convinced about the history of Ireland generally, that it is to what he called the stable element, the land itself, that we must look for continuity" ("The Sense of Place" 149).^{vii} The speaker is hardened, ossified, into scree, but in this erotic dialogue, while the land (as the escarpments that suggest this stable element of Irish sensibility, though pictured through the shifting transformations of bone-as-lady-as-land ridge) is unmoving, the speaker does not harden into immobility. Rather, the speaker writes himself as the running continuity of dialogic response to that land. Again, the communication with the bone-lady-land can only be understood, as the first stanza suggests, roughly, or—as the speaker "estimate[s] / for pleasure/ her knuckles' paving,/ the turning stiles / of the elbows, /the vallum of her brow/ and the long wicket of

collar-bone” (V. 5-12)— in what we can read as a rough estimate, but one that involves an intimate engagement of the self. Thus, the erotic engagement between the speaker and the artifact does not function to define the other that stands in for a troubled national history, but, rather, allows the speaker to work through his own position as a witness to that history.

My point is not that compassion is literally, essentially, or usually achieved through the erotic; rather, the poem’s erotic moments offer the possibility of a particular understanding of compassion as non-identificatory. I am not suggesting a definition of eroticism but am reading the erotic tropes in these poems as symbolic expressions of communication and compassion between witness and sufferer.^{viii} “The Oriental Rug,” to return to Balakian’s poem, suggests this use of compassion most specifically in the speaker’s explicitly erotic encounter with a rose. Walter Kalaidjian describes this moment as Balakian’s “inflect[ion of] floral imagery through erotic desire,” through the speaker’s “sexual communion with the imagined flowers” (45). The eroticism of this encounter is compassionate; the section ends with a touch to soothe the rose’s damaged parts—a tender action in response to suffering— as the speaker “back-rub[s] / the remains of sepals / which kept the rose alive / in blighted April when Adana / and Van were lopped off the map” (IV. 21-5).

To move more systematically through “The Oriental Rug” and its specific articulation of compassion, I suggest that the poem begins by establishing its speaker as a witness of suffering. The rug is introduced as “the brushed and bruised Kashan” (I.17),

making explicit its relation to pain. Further, the speaker's position as secondary witness is clear when he imagines his grandfather "staring at the few goats/ that walked around the carnage" while "[o]utside my [the speaker's] house the grass/never had such colour" (I.42-45).^{ix} Moreover, the speaker naps on this rug which he imagines as the Armenian landscape, while his grandfather sits, staring, on the "mossy pillow" of the real land (I.39). This contrast, recognized by the speaker remembering his childhood rug-naps, is the beginning of a dialogue between the speaker as distanced witness and his grandparents in their experience of atrocity.

The speaker enters into this communication with his grandparents' world through the rug and remembers its dyed vines "leaving a shadow like filigree/on [his] eye as [he] closed it (I.15-16). He calls his sleep a "night gazing" (I.36), indicating that a closed eye is already a kind of witnessing. Moreover, though the eye closes against this contact, the shadow of the rug's pattern remains across his face. This remnant is the first instance we get of the rug figuratively dyeing the speaker's skin. The boy is not yet consciously a witness but recognizes the pain and the need for its communication represented through the rug's "splintering green wool / bled from juniper berries" that "seemed to seep, even then" (I.17-19). The exposure goes even deeper than the surface of his skin; after he closes his eye, the dyed wool seems to bleed into a "breathing [...] inside [his] ear" (I.17-22). This breath within the ear suggests communication, but one that is wordless and nearly silent.

This breathing functions in the poem as an expelled silence, or near silence which, in its inarticulateness, signals the need for language. First appearing when the speaker feels “the wasp-nest cells / breathing in their tubular ways / inside [his] ear and further back” (I.20-22), the targeting of the further back, of his mind, of a deep consciousness, suggests the call for his translation of that breathing into a dialogue. The image of cells, as units that work as part of a larger whole, within the careful and functional pattern of a wasp-nest, suggests the possibility of organized and discernible signification. In connection to this potential for analysis, the transmission of this sensation as breath through a tube indicates a directed offering of oral and aural communication, beginning inside the ear and travelling to the interpretive and imaginative further back of the mind. This dialogue seems more likely in the next reference to breathing as it moves to an orifice associated with speech:

the sea of ivory
between the flowers
undulated as if the backs
of heavy sheep were breathing
in my mouth (I.30-33)

While the image of heavy sheep suggests gagging, an inability to speak, the association with the mouth nevertheless indicates the potential for communication and also sets up the more intimate connection that will come later in the poem. Thus, when the speaker “feel[s] the wool give way” (II.5), it is the weave of the rug giving way to the Armenian landscape, but it is also the giving way of the wool in his mouth, signalling the possibility of communication.

As the poem progresses, the speaker becomes increasingly open to the communication of a suffering that is not his own. In this engagement with the rug, there is a transposition of sensory information that signals the distinction between the suffering he witnesses and his own suffering in response; this shift in perception suggests the gap between the rug's pain and the speaker's responding pain. In this particular passage, the rug, often appearing figuratively as the Armenian landscape, is here a literal rug:

The heavy mallet a Parsee boy
once used to beat the knots
beneath the pile so
the weft would disappear
vibrates in me
as a knelling bell (III.5-6)

The rug feels pain through the sense of touch (being beaten) while the speaker feels the same action of the mallet as the vibration of a sound (the knelling bell). Yet, while both sufferer and witness feel a tactile force (beating and vibration), the speaker feels vibrations rather than the actual mallet. Moreover, this distanced action does not create the same feeling in the speaker as it does in the rug; there is an acoustic mediation in that the pain is transmitted to the speaker via a different sensory modality, importantly, one that suggests verbal communication, a shift to the auditory emphasized in the near-rhyme of 'knelling bell.' The assonance is put off only by the gerund, the indication that this sound occurs in the present and not at the time of the original suffering.

As the speaker feels the vibrations as though they are a sound, the other's touch becomes a kind of speech that the witness hears as his own pain. This communication is difficult to enact; the speaker has to "pry" his way into the rose to "undo[]" its blighted

cliché” (IV.1-2). Cliché, by definition familiar and expected, functions to relay information without being noticed itself. Balakian makes the cliché available to our attention in reading intimacy against this conventional expression of it. In this entrance into the rose and disruption of its clichéd symbolism for intimate romance, the speaker makes literal the intimacy which the rose represents; rather than functioning as a symbol, the rose acts out the romance. When the speaker “strain[s] for the symmetry/ of its inflorescence” (IV.3-4), he does not strive for the flower’s balanced blossoming but for that of the cliché. When the cliché does what it means, when its poetic action is equal to its symbolic meaning, it is no longer blighted, but suggests another intimacy. With the strain for symmetry Balakian suggests the speaker’s desire, in this intimacy of witnessing, to feel *with* rather than *for*. In this desire, there is a response to suffering rather than a replication of that same suffering in another. That is, symmetry does not occur when two sides are exactly the same, but when one side is a mirror image of the other. In compassionate witnessing, there is a reflection of one’s pain in the other rather than one shared pain produced through a melding of the witness into the sufferer. Choosing intimacy over identification, the speaker breaks through the resistance to communication and “slide[s] along the smooth/cup of a petal” (IV.6-7).

It is here, when the resistance falls away, that the poem becomes explicitly erotic. I understand the erotic as an expression of conversation or engaged relation through this equal give and take in the speaker’s alternating active and passive stance as he both “feel[s] the tubey walls/muscle [him] to the ovary” and “suck[s his] way into the

nectaries” (IV.10-1, 15). In this give and take, the reader is privy to the flower’s actions, but the speaker describes only his own feeling, repeating the word twice in this section to emphasize that his sensation is the focus of his depiction (IV.10, 16). The witness does not appropriate the other’s suffering by presuming to know how it feels; that is, in this eroticized relationship, the importance is not to know the other’s pain or pleasure, but to feel one’s own suffering or enjoyment in response to the other’s signs of feeling.

Despite the erotic imagery, to be “[w]rapped this tight” in the flower is not entirely pleasurable. At the end of this stanza, the speaker loses himself in a moment that reminds the reader that the eroticism points to an engagement with suffering:

I come apart in the thorn
(the spiky side that kept the jackal out)
and disperse whatever’s left
of me to the earth. (IV. 26-29)

Though the stanza ends here, the speaker asserts his return, beginning the next stanza with “I walk” (V.1). Throughout the poem, the speaker posits his own pain, loses himself in his pain, and then reasserts his active presence, suggesting that witnessing requires both a self to receive communication and a giving up of the self to one’s own sensation, to allow oneself to suffer together with another.

This give and take is also expressed through repeated images of carrying. From the poem’s start, the speaker carries the rug’s pattern as the filigree shadow over his eye. Later, he carries the pattern of the rug’s pain more permanently as he feels “six centuries

of Turkish heels/on [his] spine-dyed back” (II.9-10). While he carries the rug’s dyes, however, he is also painfully carried by the landscape they illustrate:

safflower, my Dyer’s Thistle,
carry me on your burr
so I may always feel
dry gusts on my neck. (V.13-6)

These gusts on the speaker’s neck are like the earlier breath, but the speaker is no longer an involuntary recipient as he asks for the perpetual painful carrying on the burr. The rug’s capacity to carry is related to its symbolic status; a metonymical depiction is one in which something nearby the thing approached is carried closer through the trope’s action. In addition to understanding the rug in this rhetorical way, we can also investigate its presence in the poem as materiality. The rug operates as an icon: it stands for the landscape by resembling it in its patterns. Yet, through the rug’s physical connection to the land—its production through the dyes of the land—its relationship to that land becomes indexical. As the rug bleeds these dyes, it is set up, in this animate indexical connection, as a living object available for an engagement imagined as physical and erotic. The “bleeding,” the term for the leaking of dyes into water before they are set, along with the earlier breathing of the sheep (and, here, the echo of bleating in bleeding), gives life to the wool so that it becomes active and embodied. As a metonymical and indexical object, then, the rug carries the speaker closer to another’s suffering in two ways. First, the rug allows the speaker a proximity to things from which he is actually

distant, and, second, the rug, as it becomes a breathing and bleeding part of the land, appears as an object available for intimate engagement.^x

Significantly, the idea of symmetry re-emerges in this engagement as the speaker also carries the rug in return: “I walk with a rug on my back./ Become to myself a barren land” (V.1-2). Throughout the poem, the speaker has gone deeper into the images on the rug in order to enter the Armenian landscape. In this last stanza, however, the rug and speaker change positions, rendering the speaker and rug equals in this dialogue where the speaker has been carried by the rug as figurative land and now carries the rug as his own land. Compassionate witnessing is a kind of carrying. Witnessing carries the cause of someone else’s suffering into the effect of one’s own suffering in response; one carries over another’s feeling into relationship with one’s own. Compassionate witnessing is also a kind of being carried. Feeling in relation to another’s feeling is to be carried away by their feeling; insofar as my feelings are an effect of your suffering, my feelings are carried by yours as secondary, belated, and contingent. As I discuss in relation to the speaker’s request to “carry me on your burr,” “The Oriental Rug” moves between witness as carrying and being carried, suggesting its combination of active and reactive elements.

To carry the rug here is to hold the responsibility for the translation of Armenia’s tragedy into something affecting in present day America. Thus, when “[d]ust from the knots/fills [his] arms/and in the peaceful New World sun/becomes fine spume” (V.3-6), the speaker carries the dust—the original suffering of the genocide— that, through this contemporary witnessing, becomes wet spume of fresh pain. In this act of carrying, the

pain from another time and place becomes active in the translation from dust to spume, an action related to the shift from dried to dyeing pigments. Thus, when the speaker has earlier “suck[ed] [his] way into the nectaries” (IV. 15), it is significantly “[t]hat wet, [he]wash[es]/to the cool leaflets (IV.18).

The poem ends with this connection between dye and communication, as the speaker makes a request: “Tyrian purple, from a mollusk shell/lodged in Phoenician sand—/gurgle all your passion in my ear” (V. 24-26). The purple dye he asks to gurgle to him derives from a shell lodged in sand that is associated with a people (the Phoenicians) known for spreading their alphabet in sailing from land to land; there is a kind of language in the dry sand that is linked, through the dyeing shell, to the gurgle of the sea’s passion. The shell next to the speaker’s ear lets him translate from the language of the dry, historical pain to the gurgle (wet in its association with the sea) that makes that dye seem fresh even if it is really dried (it is not the real sea, after all, but its noises). This gurgling shell is reminiscent of earlier images of the rug’s pattern breathing inside the speaker’s ear and mouth. Both here and earlier, the speaker imagines a translation, a carrying over or across or, in this case, a carrying into himself of suffering which he translates into poetic response. The speaker connects imaginatively to the pain of an atrocity he did not witness himself and so opens himself to a kind of dialogue, troped here as erotic and dyeing.

“The Oriental Rug,” then, does not readily allow for the kind of understanding often proposed in the wider discourse attending poetry of witness, in which the reader

seems, through identification, able to suffer the witnessed suffering, and in which the poem's purpose seems to be to pass onto this reader the witnessed trauma. In their introduction to *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub strongly emphasize the secondary trauma of witnessing testimony: "The professionally trained receivers of the testimonies which bear witness to the war atrocities ... cannot fulfill their task without, in turn, passing through the crisis of experiencing their boundaries, their separateness, their functionality, and indeed their sanity, at risk" (xvii). The phrase 'in turn' implies that the receiver of testimony follows the one giving testimony through an equivalent experience. I resist this idea of equivalence but also this conception of trauma as an authentication and measure of proper listening.

In trauma studies, psychoanalytic concepts help theorists to attend to the testimony of those who have undergone trauma as well as to consider the relationship between a listener or witness to testimony and the trauma of others. Given this overlap in concerns, trauma studies play a large role in the development of theories of witnessing and testimony. In *The Edge of Modernism: American Poetry and the Traumatic Past*, Kalaidjian explains that "[c]oming after the event, the secondary witness assumes not just an historical but, more importantly, an empathic stance toward traumatic memory" (9-10). Yet, the influence of trauma studies on the witness discourse does not always foreground the consideration of distance we see in work by theorists like Young and Gubar.^{xi}

Trauma studies have been largely applied to poetry without the tailoring of the approach to this new context, leading to a discourse peculiarly inattentive to some aspects of poetry itself. Literary scholar Thomas A. Vogler critiques theorists' understanding of trauma in relation to witness poetry. He argues that formal choices should not be considered as the unconscious manifestation of pain, stating that "[i]t would seem that only a willful blindness to how poetry and language work could lead so many critics to make so many claims for traumatic traces in the poems they discuss" (191) since "[t]he 'breaking of form' is not evidence of a loss of control, but of an *exercise* of control designed to produce particular effects" (196). Vogler rebukes theorists for creating a discourse "bound up with notions of authenticity and referentiality" and for positing "a poetry that puts us in touch with raw *facts* of existence rather than *effects* produced by rhetorical technique" (174).

Vogler focuses his critique in part on poet Carolyn Forché's defining remarks about the genre. The "poetry of witness," as termed by Forché in her introduction *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*, takes as its subject matter "situation[s] of extremity" (31). In her opening remarks to a roundtable discussion collected in William H. Gass and Lorin Cuoco's *The Writer in Politics*, Forché explains that "[r]egardless of apparent 'subject matter,' these poems bear the trace of extremity within them, and they are, as such, evidence of what occurred. They are also poems as much about poetry as are poems that have no subject other than poetry itself" ("The Poetry of Witness" 139). Though Forché here recognizes poetry's place as art, her claim that this

poetry serves as “evidence of what occurred” raises difficult issues regarding artistic depiction.

Critiquing Forché, Vogler explains that “[t]he implicit connection is that the *form* of the poem is an indexical sign of the poet’s mental state, and the ‘broken’ state of the poet’s mind is a sign of the real ‘conditions of extremity,’ responding to a force outside itself” (195).^{xii} He suggests that “in order to be sure that we have a poem of witness in this sense, we must have an authentic poet of witness, and we are back to the biographical and contextual materials needed to establish that fact, and the poet’s identity or biography are of equal or greater importance than the poem” (190). Forché begins to address this issue of the poem’s relation to the event in her own writing. Her topic, however, shifts away from the original problem of the poem’s role:

To talk about a poem as the sole trace of an event, to see it in purely evidentiary terms, is perhaps to believe our own figures of speech too rigorously. If, as Benjamin indicates, a poem is *itself* an event, a trauma that changes both a common language and an individual psyche, it is a specific kind of event, a specific kind of trauma. It is an experience entered into voluntarily. Unlike an aerial attack, a poem does not come at one unexpectedly. One has to read or listen, one has to be willing to accept the trauma. So, if a poem is an event and the trace of an event, it has, by definition, to belong to a different order of being from the trauma that marked its language in the first place. (*Against Forgetting* 33)

I quote Forché at length to give an idea of the progression of ideas in this passage. Her critique of her own use of the poem as evidence becomes a contributory aspect of her distinction between the witness’s trauma and the reader’s secondary trauma, leaving her thoughts on the original issue unclear.

This argument's complications seem to arise from a grounding conception of a witness poem's evidentiary status. This foundational idea of the poem as evidence results in a difficult positioning of the poem for the critic. If the poem is the index of another's suffering—that is, if the poem points to the suffering in the directly connected way that smoke points to fire—then the poem, as a graspable materialization of trauma, demands a special respect. This respect has the potential to manifest in silent deference or awe, and I would argue that the discourse around witness poetry suffers from precisely a deferential avoidance of critical concentration on artistic depiction.

Yet, it is not surprising that the truth of the connection to the event would be foregrounded in a poetry representing experiences of atrocity. In *Against Forgetting*, Forché collects poems that “bear the trace of extremity within them, and are, as such, evidence of what occurred” (30) and includes “biographical notes to illuminate the experience of extremity for each poet” (30). The witness genre is particularly reliant on biographical interpretation.^{xiii} Forché herself addresses the issue of the poem's relation to truth:

A poem that calls on us from the other side of a situation of extremity cannot be judged by simplistic notions of ‘accuracy’ or ‘truth to life.’ It will have to be judged, as Ludwig Wittgenstein said of confessions, by its consequences, not on our ability to verify its truth. In fact, the poem might be our only evidence that an event has occurred: it exists for us as the sole trace of an occurrence. As such, there will be nothing for us to base the poem on, no independent account that will tell us whether or not we can see a given text as being ‘objectively’ true. Poem as trace, poem as evidence. (Forché, “The Poetry of Witness” 142-43)

This line of argument is complex: Forché notes that the poem's truth is not what is at issue and may be impossible to judge. At the same time, however, she suggests that the

poem is in fact its own evidence, the ‘trace of an occurrence’; that is, the poem is not a depiction, but holds “[v]estiges or marks remaining and indicating the former presence, existence, or action of something” (“trace,” OED). Forché moves into the framework of ‘truth to life’ even as she disavows that framework. Though the tension between an inability to judge a poem’s accuracy and the poem’s serving as evidence nonetheless may not simply be resolved, this tension itself warrants attention.

The two problems of distance come together for me here. So far, my focus has been on suggestions that the reader can experience the suffering the other feels because this suffering resides in the poem as trace evidence. Now I will move to the idea that the reader can experience the suffering the other feels because empathy, as an imaginative identification, leads to a taking-on of the other’s feelings. Critics assume that the reader, witnessing the poem, would imagine him or herself into the speaker-witness position, thus inhabiting the I that feels toward the other. In this understanding, the speaker-witness feels the sufferer’s pain and the reader, inhabiting the role of witness, feels this pain as well.

Yet, if, as the expression goes, “I feel your pain,” what I am actually feeling is my own pain in response to the pain that I imagine you feel. When the speaker witnesses the other’s pain, he or she is voicing an engagement with that pain, an understanding of that pain based on the available signs of suffering. As, within the world of the poem, the speaker’s feelings are not the same feelings as those of the sufferer but, rather, are feelings in response to those feelings, the reader’s feelings are likewise a response to the

compassion that is in response to the pain. That is, the reader's relationship to the suffering which the poem represents is filtered through the witness's compassionate engagement. The reader is not (or not only and directly) in a witnessing relationship to the suffering other, but in a relationship to the witnessing I. There is a tension in the assumption that the reader will (or should) engage through identification; we are asked to associate the speaker with the poet, but we are also asked to take the space of the speaker as our own. I want to propose my understanding of compassionate engagement as a mode of reading, relating, and thinking that more precisely fulfills the position the poem provides while also allowing for a reaction more grounded in each reader's particular self. That is, while a reader is acting within this outlined reader-position, he or she is able to respond with individual feelings, feelings which may or may not be those that are expressed in the poem but that occur in reaction to those feelings.

A reader recognizing his or her role as one implied by the poem (in that a poem with a speaker implies a listener) but not provided as a ready-made space within it (that is, the reader does not imagine him- or herself as the witness within the poem) is better positioned to respond with individual feeling. A reader understanding his or her role in this way cannot assume that the emotion depicted in the poem is that which he or she must feel. This demand for a reader's active involvement mitigates the tendency to silent awe or respectful passivity as response to witness poetry. A tendency toward a special reverence is a particular difficulty involved in reading poetry depicting another's pain and witness poetry's investment in readers' self-reflection comes up against that respect for

suffering which seems not to have space for the non-suffering self. Yet, a reader conscious of being, in this context, tertiary to the secondary witness of the sufferer, can find response only in him or herself, as that response is shaped by the poem. The relationships set up by a particular poem structure modes of affective engagement; a reading position is already implicated in the poem's telling of suffering and the mode of that telling shapes a request for a mode of listening.

The modes of listening as structured in witness poetry demand further attention. In *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects*, Charles Altieri argues that “most ‘ethical’ readings tend to produce abstract substitutes for the text and so end up sharing with socio-political historicism a tendency to overread for ‘meaning’ while underreading the specific modes of affective engagement presented by works of art” (1-2). Critics understanding poetry as evidence of an event foreground ‘meaning’ in Altieri’s sense. While a centrally formalist approach of close attention to the text brings to some minds the New Critical divorce of literature from the living of human life, close reading of the poem’s artistic devices is ethically and socially engaged by virtue of the meticulousness of the focus. This reading strategy offers a poem the full attention one might give another person in the most beneficial kind of relationship.

This close reading mirrors the witnessing that secondary witness poetry outlines. That is, such a reading method would attempt to act out the compassionate witnessing of reading/thinking that the speakers act out poetically. Compassionate witnessing is about finding a distance from which one can offer one’s attention, thought, and emotion. I

propose a distance which seeks not to presume to know what another's pain feels like but does offer one's own emotion as a part of intellectual rigour and dedicated consideration. Though my rereading of witness poetry is formulated as an intervention in current critical practices concerning the genre, this intervention is only one aspect of my wider aim to think through affective and attentive reading methods.^{xiv} Witness poetry offers a unique self-modelling of this reading strategy. Yet I believe that this kind of interpretive skill would be analytically and ethically productive whether one is reading a poem, an event, or another person.

This reading strategy is intimate in the sense that it involves a reader as an individual. Intimacy is a part of attentive reading (and here I mean "reading" in its broadest sense as our continual interpretation of the signs we encounter in our daily lives). In thinking about this intimate attention, I am exploring a compassionate mode of reading. Lauren Berlant calls compassion, as a feeling central to "social life," an "intimate emotion" (5). Despite her critique of a shift of the responsibility for compassion onto the individual (3-4), then, Berlant suggests that there is already something integrally personal to compassion. This near-contradiction is, to me, evocative. Questions of compassion—its nature, who ought to mobilize it, at what level of individual and society, and what motivations and effects it might claim—move along a continuum of intimacy and distance. Thus, though I begin my discussion with ideas of distance and end with ideas of intimacy, these thoughts are not meant to depict a progression from one to the other. I do not wish to suggest any ideal resting point within a trajectory from the remote

to the nearby. Rather, I mean to highlight the tension between distance and intimacy that exists in any engagement. Witnessing involves negotiating a balance of attention to another with attention to one's own offering of emotion. It is within the metonymical action of *coming closer to* that compassion is available as a reaction that does not adopt another's feelings as our own, that does not depend on the imaginative replication in ourselves of the suffering or trauma to which we attend.

Notes

ⁱDominick LaCapra's explanation of his use of empathy in relation to trauma and history is very similar to my argument for compassion: "I employ the term *empathy* while trying to distance it from conventional or traditional associations with identification leading to a putative identity between self and other, whether through projection or incorporation. I am not employing *sympathy* both because that term has to some degree the connotation of condescension or pity (at least a superior position of the sympathizer) and because it has been commodified through its use in greeting cards and other relatively affectless or evacuated modes of expressing sorrow or fellow feeling. Moreover, *empathy* is the term that has a history both in historiography (or metahistory) and in psychoanalytic literature" (38). I choose "compassion" over "empathy" because the definition of "empathy," with its focus on projection and full understanding, suggests the kind of identification both LaCapra and I wish to avoid.

ⁱⁱFor a detailed consideration of engagement with another's pain, see Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. For Ahmed, "the ethical demand is that I must act about that which I cannot know, rather than act insofar as I know. I am moved by what does not belong to me. If I acted on her behalf only insofar as I knew how she felt, then I would act only insofar as I would appropriate her pain as my pain, that is, appropriate that which I cannot feel" (31).

ⁱⁱⁱDespite my emphasis on compassion as consciously enacted, I do not mean to say that compassion cannot happen spontaneously. I only want to stress the need for engagement in a compassionate stance. While engaged attention can be sustained without intention, it is the situations in which attention does not come (or continue) spontaneously that lead me to say that identification is not the only available approach to compassion.

^{iv}It is not because engagement based solely in identification is a response that does not move beyond the pre-existing knowledge of the self that I consider it a fallacy. There are many occasions of engagement in which the hard-hitting impact on the self warrants primary or exclusive attention, or in which lack of other knowledge, great emotional involvement, or brevity of encounter makes another sort of engagement unlikely. What I mean by the fallacy of identification here is an approach that proceeds from a sense that what the poem asks for or offers is only a finding of oneself within it or a putting of oneself into the difference depicted.

^vI was acquainted with and came to understand Balakian's poetry as secondary witness poetry in Brenda Carr Vellino's 2008 graduate level course "The Proxy Witness in Twentieth-Century Human Rights Poetry" at Carleton University. Though I do not consider their collections within the proxy witness framework, I also came to Seamus Heaney, Dionne Brand's *Inventory*, Rachel Tzvia Back's *On Ruins and Return*, and Adrienne Rich's *An Atlas of the Difficult World* in this course.

^{vi}In addition to the reading of this communication that I develop here, Harjo's use of song, fire, and water in this collection points to ceremony, balance, and memory. See

Craig S. Womack's *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* for more on the significance of Muscogee Creek references in Harjo's work.

^{vii}I find the interaction of body, land, and nation to recur significantly in the witness poetry genre. For the purposes of this chapter, I am obliged to leave aside the larger argument that might more specifically and thoroughly address this constellation of images.

^{viii}What is important to me here is not so much the erotic itself but rather to point out the corporeal, sensual, intimate relation of the witness to the suffering other. This reach to materiality is prominent in the witness poetry genre. The becoming physical of what is often claimed as ineffable, the desire to ground the truth of suffering in the body, offers much space for thought (too much space to tackle in the confines of this chapter).

^{ix}Though I refer to the speaker as "he," it is important to remember that the poem is written from the perspective of an I. This perspective is significant in terms of the speaker/sufferer/reader positions outlined by the poem.

^xNote the difference between reading the poem as an index of suffering and reading an element of the poem as a figurative index which remains nonetheless explicitly metonymical to the suffering itself. Within the poem, the rug's material connection to the land offers the speaker a direct link to the context, the setting, of suffering, but still not to the suffering itself.

^{xi}Kalaidjian does critique Gubar's understanding of the critic's empathic position: "Not only poets but literary critics of Holocaust verse are likewise susceptible to symptoms of trauma stemming from the event insofar as they disavow critical judgment in the name of empathic identification with the Holocaust's victims. Thus, Susan Gubar in *Poetry after Auschwitz* admits that "[s]ome readers may take issue with my refusal...to fault poets for overidentifying, misusing, or sensationalizing the materials they/adopted but I have withheld judgment so as to learn as much as I could from the poets' daring invocations.' What would it mean, however, to 'take issue' precisely with such acts of 'withheld judgment' suspended as they are in the name of an empathic ethics of critical reading? Might criticism, operating in this traumatized field of inquiry, all the more insist precisely on the imperative to discern exactly where 'daring invocation' treads on 'misuse'?" (67-8).

^{xii}For another discussion of testimony and indexicality, see James Berger's chapter "Representing the Holocaust," specifically pages 72-76. For Berger, the "view of testimony as direct transmission of the inconceivable event is ultimately more theological than empirical" (73-74).

^{xiii}For an idea of how emphasized this biographical authority is, note the frequency with which Forché returns to the idea in the following passage outlining the arrangement of her anthology: "Within each section, poets appear in chronological order by date of birth, with biographical notes to illuminate the experience of extremity for each poet, and a selection of poetry from available works in the English originals or in translation. The criteria for inclusion were these: poets must have personally endured such conditions;

they must be considered important to their national literatures; and their work, if not in English, must be available in a quality translation. The necessarily brief biographies included here provide information relevant to the poets' experience of extremity" (30).

^{xiv}The emergence of New Formalism suggests the potential of a current disciplinary move in this direction. For a review on this movement, see Marjorie Levinson's "What is New Formalism?"

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Chapter 3

Community and Poetry's Maps

Introductions

Joy Harjo's "A Map to the Next World" (2000) and Adrienne Rich's "An Atlas of the Difficult World" (1990-1991) explore the relationship between poem and community. Both poems use images of maps, landscapes, and bodies to navigate the heuristic and hermeneutic qualities of a poetic guide to nation. The communities in these two poems—the United States and the Creek Nation—are depicted through images of shared space characterized by the entwining of place and body. Yet, at the same time, these poems, as evidenced by the prominent image of the map, include also the distance involved in positions of witnessing.

In the same way that the framework of intimacy will not suggest easy communality, the distance points, not to disconnection, but, to the potential of travel. A map points to a place in order that its reader might position him or herself in that place. That is, a map is a point of connection between "here," one's current location, and "there," the location that one might occupy. Every depiction of place on the map is offered with the potential of becoming the location for one's presence. The map, then, is a tool in the way that the poem is a tool; both offer guidance, the map in leading the reader to a place and the poem in leading a reader to an experience, thought, or feeling. The poetry is itself map-like and presents the image of the map in an act of self-theorization. The map and the poem have a conceptual relationship in that the map offers a theory by which this poetry can be read. This understanding of literature as a map for navigating experience beyond one's own suggests a position on the continuum of the nearness or farness of that engagement. Such a position, in this context, is one that recognizes literature's capacity to represent experiences or realities and to direct its readers through representation, not

to achieving for oneself another's experience, but to navigating the distance between one's place and that of another in order to offer one's engaged presence.

In this argument about engaged presence, community, and witnessing, I understand the maps in these poems to have two registers of meaning, one metonymical/heuristic and the other metaphorical/hermeneutic. The images of maps depict the metonymical relationship of the land to the nation. These maps are heuristic tools to understanding the literal relationship between place and community. The map also depicts the metonymic connection between physical presence and the presence of mind necessary to take something into consideration or to offer one's attention. The map becomes hermeneutic in this relationship between place/community and emplacement/consideration. The map is a metaphor for "being there" for another or "being here" in an attentive relationship. In bringing together the concepts of emplacedness and place with community and consideration, the map acts as a conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between a position of attentive and considerate presence in a place (literal or figurative) and the communality of that place.

The images of the map, as well as this poetry's roads, rivers, and trails, show the process of distance in relationship with the speakers' often deictically invoked "here." Distance is related to space (actual nearness or farness in the national landscape) but also to knowledge. Knowledge here seems to have a specialized definition which I describe as meaning approached through the careful attention of witnessing. This knowledge can be distanced or intimate. Intimate knowledge knows particularity and details. Distanced knowledge is acknowledgement of the relative and changing distance from which one might witness that which is not one's own or where one is not. That is, distanced knowledge might be conceived as a sort of meta-knowledge which makes clear the difference between knowledge in the empirical sense and knowledge as epistemology. Yet,

distanced knowledge, in its acknowledgment of itself, is also here the conceptual travelling toward more intimate knowledge. Using two terms from Rich's poem, we can consider—remembering that these two knowledges are not separate but move along a shared spectrum and thus differ in degree rather than in kind—intimate knowledge to be “moored” and distanced knowledge to be “behoed.” Distanced knowledge is, then, not in contrast to intimate knowledge but is rather a recognition of the necessarily diverse starting positions (and consequent perspectives) that exist in relation to various contexts, just as, from the other side, all intimate knowledge must recognize its own relative distance from its object. Distanced knowledge is then useful to recognize as the place from which empirical intimate knowledges might be initially approached.

Intimacy refers not only to this (literally or figuratively) spatial element, this closeness to a person, place, or event, but also to an affective position out of which comes attention and consideration. Distanced knowledge, then, is affectively intimate though it approaches intimate knowledge of particularity from elsewhere. While my first chapter positioned compassion between identification and disinterest, this chapter will investigate positions along the continuum of intimate and distanced knowledge.

In suggesting this intimate attention, I use the term *mindful presence* to indicate the presence of mind involved in this affective knowing. Mindful presence suggests the metaphorical presence of the mind (consideration, attention) as well as the literal presence sometimes involved in attention (being in attendance, emplacedness).¹ The deictics of the poems' “heres” point to both the physical presence typically suggested by community but also the mental presence that does not depend on bodily attendance in order to offer a consideration that might build communality, a witnessing that is not dependent on proximity. While this non-proximity is inherent in written

communication, poetry's particular relationship to bodily presence is one that nevertheless invokes one's bodily existence. Poetry has a generic relation to proximity and distance. The implied reader present in any poem is the presence of a general category. This impersonal category of *the* reader, a category structured by the poem's particular elements of communication, is counterbalanced by *the* reader position to be one which urges *a* reader to feel in his or her own particularity. The positioning of readers into remembrance of themselves is a common feature of witness poetry. This positioning is not distinct from questions of lived experience and of witness to other lives.

In Rich's and Harjo's poems and their maps, issues of distance and intimacy come through a consistent tension between metaphor (a constructed, conceptual relationship that requires interpretation) and metonymy (a literal relationship that requires only knowledge of the referent). The poems construct chains of metonyms that come to form a metaphor. The images of maps as heuristic tools to navigate the actual details they represent—details of place, of community, of witnessing and witnessed lives—combine to create a conceptual relationship requiring interpretation. Knowing the details (through the poetry's heuristic or metonymic actions) comes in connection with interpreting the larger emplacement of the details (through the poetry's hermeneutic and metaphoric suggestions). Knowing that involves interpretation always involves distance because interpretation is translative—and knowing is also always interpretive to different degrees. Much as distanced knowledge is still intimate, intimate knowledge is still distanced. Interpretation, in this moving and combining of details, involves the process of distance that the map represents; it involves the walking of roads not one's own. Thus, distanced, metaphoric, hermeneutic knowing is anageographic, or out of its own place. Anageographic knowing is interpretive but the interpretation comes out of the combinations of the particulars in

their contexts. A witness might, then, attend well to a context outside of his or her experience, place, or time. This definition of distanced knowledge follows from my discussion so far.

However, the idea of distanced knowing as a hermeneutic and metaphoric endeavour suggests that distanced knowledge can be understood additionally as an interpretive knowledge of a possible interaction of details. The details of community are removed from the places of community and held in thought in the theoretic place of the poem. The details might be gained through heuristic tools of understanding but their combination into potential difference is achieved through hermeneutic interpretive activity.

It is not coincidentally that attention is the return for an offer to enter into a lyrical “here.” “Attention” is related to “attendance,” a word which includes the idea of being “here” and also offering consideration: “The action, fact, or state of attending or giving heed; earnest direction of the mind, consideration, or regard; *esp.* in phr. to pay or give attention . The mental power or faculty of attending” (OED). The language of “giv[ing] attention” suggests something of the reciprocation of an earlier giving. “Consideration,” likewise connected with attention, makes even clearer my understanding of “giving.” Consideration is linked to generosity in its definition as “Regard for the circumstances, feelings, comfort, etc. of another; thoughtfulness for another; thoughtful kindness” (OED). It also clarifies my use of attention: “The keeping of a subject before the mind; attentive thought, reflection, meditation” (OED). Consideration also, I think, gets at a sense of conscious witnessing, as it also means “[t]he action of taking into account, or fact of being taken into account; regard, account” (OED) or to understand something to be of “[i]mportance, consequence” (OED). These words collectively get at the multiple registers of meaning in the word “presence,” and the distinction “mindful presence” that I use to distinguish the extra mental action that can be added to (or come without) being “here.”

In this framework of witnessing, attention, and affective, interpretive knowledge, the map is an icon (it resembles the landscape for which it stands) but once one mentally inserts oneself into the map, it becomes an index (as a means of navigation—one imagines oneself moving down the representation of a road and this imagining allows the successful movement in reality). This action of reading changes the map from being figuratively representative of a space to being directly connected to navigation of that space. The heuristic action and the representation combine to produce this indexical quality. If one is not “here” but looking at the map in the absence of its referent and the need to navigate that referent, the map is not transformed into this metonymical, indexical relationship with the space. When one interprets the map through the perspective of distance (when one is not in and will not be in the space the map depicts), the map is metaphor. One is not in direct knowable connection to the details the map represents but rather is in a position of interpretation. In this case, one reads the map hermeneutically as revealing possibilities of particular emplacements within various considerations of the represented details of the space. A map exists whether one uses it or not, but once one does use it as a means of navigation—heuristically or hermeneutically—, one is responsible for reading it well. Witnessing is a deictic moment of inserting oneself—or being inserted—“here,” even when this insertion is into a possible or potential “here,” an insertion preceded by the hermeneutic process of travelling distance.

We can consider a map and a poem as similar modes of meaning-making. A poem might also be read both heuristically—as guidance in one’s own life—or hermeneutically—in the navigation of experiences one has not had. While both kinds of reading are needed, reading for what is familiar comes more easily than reading to learn to better connect to, understand, feel for, unfamiliar experience. The approach to distanced knowledge, to something lacking the

familiarity that marks it as something having to do with you, might require practice. Yet, again, intimate and distanced knowledge are part of a continuum. The heuristic approach seems often to come first, but can lead to the hermeneutic. Attention to what affects one personally might prepare one for being affected personally by something outside of one's personal experience.

This interaction of heuristic and hermeneutic processes is relevant to considering Rich's and Harjo's speakers as witnesses. As the map offers the position of attentive presence, we might approach it deictically. The speakers often emphasize their emplacedness and include deictic reference, positioning themselves "here." Yet, the speakers also travel, suggesting both the heuristic and hermeneutic approaches to knowledge of the contexts (remembering still that the hermeneutic derives from the heuristic, that the two do not represent a dichotomy). In either case, this poetry features a deictic accountability. A poem offers a metaphorical, hermeneutic representation of the community with which it engages. Yet the action of the witness-speaker-poet makes the representation of community an index for the real, lived community this poetic community represents and might impact. While the communities are not co-identified (they remain known separately and are distinguishable within the poem), the represented community is occupied as a map (used as a map, a tool) to navigate the lived community, thus creating a literal, metonymic, heuristic connection between the poetic community and the lived community, one that depends upon an ethical obligation of the witness to navigate well.

1.1.1 Witnessing is primarily associated with sight. To witness is "to experience by personal (esp. ocular) observation; to be present as an observer at; to see with one's own eyes. In early use said mainly of the eyes or the ears. (In loose writing often used merely as a synonym of 'see')" (OED). But witnessing also involves giving testimony of what has been seen, "to testify to, attest; to furnish oral or written evidence of" (OED). In the poetry I study here, the ekphrastic

action of verbally representing the images of maps is a witnessing action. The speakers call attention to their act of telling in moments in which the mimetic showing is disrupted by a diegetic telling of what is shown. That is, while the poetry represents, the speakers here sometimes narrate their act of representing. In the ekphrastic moments especially, mimesis (what is told) is subsumed in diegesis (the telling). Ekphrasis offers an icon as it represents through a relationship of resemblance. The ekphrastic responsibility (much like the responsibility of testimony) would seem to be one of accuracy to the original. However, in the poetry included here, the witnessing ekphrastic ethic is indexical. I do not mean index in the sense of conjuring the original, an idea from which I distance myself in my first chapter, but in the sense of “[t]hat which serves to direct or point to a particular fact or conclusion” (OED). Rather than the telling leading back to the seen, the witness’s verbalization of the visual leads away from the details represented (but precisely through the representation of those details) to response.

The context for my investigation is the poetic concern in Rich’s and Harjo’s collections with national community. The central image is the map. The relationship between intimacy and distance functions as an overarching structure to my reading of the poems. My key terms—mooring, behoved, presence, gift, knowledge—come out of the poetry itself, though I add mindful presence (to differentiate between physical attendance and attentive presence of mind), attention and consideration (to describe the action of these witness-speakers), and communality (to emphasize at times a sense of a “[c]ommunal state or condition; solidarity” [OED] as opposed to community, which suggests belonging as limited by place or identity: “A body of people who live in the same place, usually sharing a common cultural or ethnic identity. Hence: a place where a particular body of people lives” [OED]. In this context of nation, community indeed limits belonging. I use both terms as seems most appropriate).

Maps

For Rich, the national setting is the United States and, for Harjo, the Creek Nation existing within the borders of the United States. Both poets explore national belonging through linked landscape and body imagery. To consider first “An Atlas of the Difficult World,” I look to Terre Ryan, in *This Ecstatic Nation: The American Landscape and the Aesthetics of Patriotism*. Ryan argues that

Contemporary American landscape aesthetics and the rhetoric that surrounds them, in the employ of commercial or political ends, resonate with nation-building mythology and the promise of the techno-industrial sublime. Such images link the American landscape with patriotism, engineering, and industrial development, repeating the overworked plotline of the Manifest Destiny era. (124)

Tracing landscape imagery through American history, and engaging with others’ (like Jonathan Foreman’s) notions of the connection between blood and land, Ryan finds the landscape to be linked with patriotism, nation-building, and conquest:

‘Unlike foreign patriotisms, American patriotism has almost nothing to do with notions of blood and soil,’ writes Jonathan Foreman in *The Pocket Book of Patriotism*. ‘We, alone, are a people dedicated to a proposition.’ American patriotism springs from the ideals of our nation’s founders, he adds, and it remains inspired by ‘faith in human possibility.’ Foreman has it partly right. But a few centuries of traditions have demonstrated that American patriotism has *everything* to do ‘with notions of blood and soil.’ (128)

Ryan goes on to point out the multiple references to both blood and soil in important American documents like “The Gettysburg Address” and in “our enormous body of landscape imagery and our frontier and war mythologies, all intertwined and active in contemporary culture” (128-29).

Land and blood, as figured in Rich’s poetry, function in opposition to the association of the tamed landscape and the nation united by its citizens’ shed blood, though retaining notions of the connection between individual body and place within nation. Rich writes of “the facts of blood and bread, the social and political forces of my time and place” (171). For her, blood and bread together mean a particular embodiment in a particular place and time:

As a woman I have a country; as a woman I cannot divest myself of that country merely by condemning its government or by saying three times ‘As a woman my country is the whole world’ [as Virginia Woolf once wrote]. Tribal loyalties aside, and even if nation-states are now just pretexts used by multinational conglomerates to serve their interests, I need to understand how a place on the map is also a place in history within which as a woman, a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist I am created and trying to create. (212)

Harjo positions herself as poet similarly, and, indeed, Harjo mentions Rich in her response to Marilyn Kallet’s question about her “true teachers of poetry, those who have influenced your work” (Coltelli 115). Harjo’s landscape in her poetry, as she tells Joseph Bruchac, is that which is “between a woman and all the places I’ve ever been” (Coltelli 30). In the same interview, Harjo indicates that this personal positioning is tied to her concern with community and belonging: “I really can’t help but think that at some point it will all be this way, the community will be a world community” (32).

Both poets engage with the tension between home and travel in relation to community and belonging. As Maeera Shreiber argues in her article “‘Where Are We Moored?’: Adrienne Rich, Women’s Mourning, and the Limits of Lament,” “this is a poet for whom ‘change’ is an operative condition of being, a poet for whom the ‘road’ serves as a dominant image, a way of representing a commitment to an ongoing interrogation of the terms of belonging” (301). In an interview with Sharon Stever, Harjo describes “a moment of global awareness and therefore global responsibility. ... The differences are not points of division; rather they link the whole. What you see is one fragile, luminescent, tender, little place, or home” (Coltelli 82). Harjo’s version of witness, in which ‘[w]hat you see’ is ‘one... little place, or home,’ involves a movement from the heuristic to the hermeneutic. Home is what ‘you’ can see from your perspective, but that witnessing opens up into a global scale in the recognition of home as ‘fragile, luminescent, tender, little.’ The intimacy of home—its tenderness, its brightness as a focal point in the realm of the witnessable—is balanced by its fragility and littleness on a larger

scale of increasingly distanced knowledge. Harjo recognizes the tender feeling of one's own home along with the fragility that special closeness involves in relation to all places.

Harjo's emphasis on community is related to a united responsibility, while her depiction of movement and landscape is important in the more particular context of the Trail of Tears. Earlier with Stever, Harjo discusses the trope of travelling in her poetry in this context: "I've also considered it in the light of the removal of the Muscogee people from Alabama to Oklahoma. It was a forced walk away from our original homeland. Perhaps that is why I am always traveling" (Coltelli 75).ⁱⁱ Craig S. Womack, in a chapter of his book *Red on Red* that demonstrates the importance of the specific Muscogee Creek content of Harjo's poetry, makes clear the importance of the image of the map in terms of its connection to Creek culture. Womack references "the story of Creeks carrying the embers from the square grounds all the way from Alabama to Oklahoma during Indian Removal and rekindling the sacred fire on their arrival in their new home" (235), arguing that Harjo, in her poetry collection *In Mad Love and War*, "suggests that one can take up migratory paths if these sacred relationships are held in active memory, if one remembers these story connections, the act of memory itself a cleansing and rekindling of old fires" (235).ⁱⁱⁱ As Harjo tells Stever, "I've had to learn that my home is within me. I can take it everywhere. It's always there" (Coletti 76). The idea of home recurs in her interviews, and she tells Kallet that home is a place that is "more than land—but of the land—a tradition of mythologies, of ongoing history ... it forms us" (Coltelli 112).

Adrienne Rich's "An Atlas of the Difficult World" also pursues the relationship of land and nation through the image of travelling. The long, many-sectioned poem comprising the first half of the collection by the same title, begins with the "declarations" of others struggling (1.13). The speaker is uncomfortable with the suffering of a woman murdered by a man who appears to be

her lover: “I don’t want to hear” (I.39); “I don’t want to think” (I.45); “I don’t want to know” (I.48). Yet, this section ends with the speaker’s positioning as a witness, as she delineates a witness’s space as paths that have not been one’s own: “These are not the roads / you knew me by. But the woman driving, walking, watching / for life and death, is the same” (Rich I.75-77). If she was known before (“you knew me”) and “is the same,” then the speaker has always been this witness, but the roads have changed. The violence against the woman is a violence the speaker doesn’t want to hear and think and, in this witnessing, know, but she clearly has heard and thought and witnessed, and does know: she tells us the details she does not want to know at the same moment that she tells us she does not want to know them. Her move to new roads suggests an openness to know suffering she does not want to know, indicates the choice to know what she does not want to know. This change in roads is a widening of her witnessing to, we find, a national scene. Her repositioning is emphasized in this repetition of the speaker’s earlier claim that “[t]his is no place you ever knew me” (I.62). It is in this place to which she comes to know (arrives in order to know and approaches knowing) and has not been known that she grounds herself: “—this is where I live now. ... I fix on the land. I am stuck to earth” (Rich I.60-66).

Having established herself as a witness grounded by the task of “walking,” “watching,” and knowing, the speaker articulates this witnessing as an availability to alternative and unexpected ways of seeing: “I promised to show you a map you say but this is a mural / then yes let it be these are small distinctions / where do we see it from is the question” (II. 22-24). Her map is a mural that points to this “where” from which we might see. The difference between a map and a mural is significant; our guide is a picture rather than a plan for direction. While Rich’s speaker describes her roads for us, readers are deterred from merely replicating the speaker’s path. A

mural is, though, like a map, particularly connected with place. According to the National Society of Mural Painters, a mural demonstrates a commitment to “art for public space” (np) and is moreover tailored to that public space: “A mural is not just a large painting set into a given space. It must be designed for a specific space and serve the purpose of the building” (np). While a map aids one in navigating a space through its symbolic replication of that space, a mural changes the quality of a space. A map points to ways to be in a space from outside of it, while a mural shapes the experience of a place as a part of it. As murals frequently perform a commemorative function, this shaping incorporates intangible aspects of a place—the memories of a community—into large-scale availability.

The distinction between map and mural calls into play a cartographical aesthetics, or an aesthetics that seems cartographical but turns out not to be after all: Rich offers us one kind of representation only to clarify that we have ended up with another. At least, the ‘you’ here understands the speaker to have promised a map and delivered a mural (“I promised to show you a map you say but this is a mural”). This interlocutor seems imagined by the speaker to voice the objection she expects when her words promise to be metaphorically a visual representation of space but might in fact provide a more aesthetic than a prescriptive or directive representation of that space. Yet, her response to this objection likewise is not definitive. It seems she includes the objection only so that it can remain active, so that readers cannot simply re-classify the map as a mural and move on. The indication that “this is a mural” is deictically ambiguous: the speaker might indicate that she has a mural rather than a map or that, forgetting about the map altogether, she tells us a poem that is a mural. If her poem is a mural, we might expect, not the description of images found elsewhere, but the presentation of images making up a poem. If the map is the mural (rather than a map), then we might consider the poem to be explicitly ekphrastic and

expect diegetic access to the map-mural. In the first case, the poem refers to itself and gives us its images. In the second case, the poem refers to something else and describes those already existing images. In this ambiguity, the poem, the map, and the mural become more entangled and conflated. The hermeneutic (poem and mural) becomes difficult to differentiate from the heuristic (map). Functional guiding is made inseparable from artistic creation, from imaginative production. And indeed, the speaker tells us that “these are small distinctions / where do we see it from is the question” (II. 23-24). Important to consider as we continue is how the poem (/map/mural) structures our seeing, our position as readers.

Joy Harjo’s speaker in “A Map to the Next World” is likewise making a map for a space to be achieved through the figurative travel of both speaker and reader: “I wished to make a map for those who / would climb through the hole in the sky” (1-2). Much like Rich’s disinclination to produce a firm and transferable guide, Harjo’s poem ends with the direction that “You must make your own map” (51), indicating a concern with the relationship between experience and representation. The speaker asserts that “[w]hat I am telling you is real and is printed in a warning on the map” (20). It is more common to hear a declaration that something is “true” rather than “real.” While truth is conceptual, reality suggests actual existence. This realness of what is told suggests a heuristic investigation of community through a testimony of experience; we might say here that these *are* the roads she’s been known by.

What the speaker tells is both told in the poem and represented on the map the poem describes. Yet, we can access what is on the map only through the telling. In a poem that is already a description of the map, what is the distinction between the moment the speaker tells us something about the map and the moment she tells us again that she is telling us something about the map she is describing? When she tells us she is telling us something real, and that this reality

can be found on the map, the speaker emphasizes that this telling is a representation. Diegesis takes over from mimesis and we are directed to focus on the telling rather than the told, the act of testimony rather than the story as completed object. Though the poem describes a map, our access to the map is mediated, not only because we are reading a representation, and not only because we get a verbal description rather than an actual image, but also because we are reminded that the concept of a map that we receive is not our concept of a map, but the speaker's. Since "[y]ou must make your own map," the speaker's sharing of her map is more demonstrative than definitive. Mapping her direct experience that the reader cannot access, the speaker also offers the image of a map with which the reader can engage. Yet, even this image is largely withheld as readers are reminded so insistently that they are only told of this image, not given it directly.

Harjo's poem is not the map itself: the speaker says that she "wished to make a map" but not that this is it or that its creation indeed occurred. Within the poem, the map is always a mediated object and, even further, it is often not an object at all but an experience. Thus, the map is at times tangible and material and, at others, it is a figurative way of reading land, bodies, and inherited knowledge. We can see this progression over the first half of the poem:

The map must be of sand and can't be read by ordinary light. It must carry fire to the next tribal town, for renewal of spirit.

In the legend are instructions on the language of the land, how it was we forgot to acknowledge the gift, as if we were not in it or of it.

...

Trees of ashes wave good-bye to good-bye and the map appears to disappear. We no longer know the names of the birds here, how to speak to them by their personal names.

...

What I am telling you is real and is printed in a warning on the map. Our forgetfulness stalks us, walks the earth behind us, leaving a trail of paper diapers, needles, and wasted blood.

...

The place of entry is the sea of your mother's blood, your father's small death

as he longs to know himself in another.

There is no exit.

The map can be interpreted through the wall of the intestine—a spiral on the road of knowledge. (6-28)

The speaker first explains that “[t]he map must be made of sand and can’t be read by ordinary light. It must carry fire / to the next tribal town, for renewal of spirit” (6-7). Here the map is figurative, a metaphor for that which will keep alive cultural tradition.

The idea of the map as a metaphor for memory and story shifts in “A Map to the Next World’s” very next line: “In the legend are instructions on the language of the land” (8). The presence of a legend invokes the image of a literal map rather than the abstract and conceptual image of sand that can be read and carry fire. Yet, again, the legend could indicate both the key on a physical map and the narrative of a people. Womack argues that Harjo’s poetry “demonstrates the ways physical and spiritual realities are constantly rubbing up against each other” (224). A nation, likewise, depends upon recognition of both physical and spiritual realities. Womack suggests these dual components of a nation, explaining the legal/political aspects of the Oklahoma Creek Nation that make it a “sovereign country existing within the borders of the United States” (25) and also arguing that “[a] key component of nationhood is a people’s idea of themselves, their imaginings of who they are. The ongoing expression of a tribal voice, through imagination, language, and literature, contributes to keeping sovereignty alive in the citizens of a nation” (14).

Creek national community seems in crisis in the poem’s next reference to the map where we find ashes rather than symbolic fire: “Trees of ashes wave good-bye to good-bye and the map appears to disappear” (16). Saying “good-bye to good-bye” seems final; it is the last good-bye if good-bye as an option is dismissed. The destruction appears permanent and the map “appears to disappear.” Yet the map returns, literalized as an object “printed” with what is “real” (20). Just as

quickly, the map becomes the life one enters through the physical union of one's parents (24-5). The map, "interpreted through the wall of the intestine" (27), is now the understanding of one's life through one's own embodied existence.

Interpretive cues for this reading through the self are not plentiful, as at the next world to which this poem titularly guides us, "there will be / no X, no guidebook with words you can carry" (33-34). A guidebook cannot be carried because the maps and guiding tools in this poetry structure their reader's insertion. The guidebook can carry one who lives it but cannot be carried by one as an abstract authority for navigation. The absence of an "X" indicates that a meaningful symbol (like the words in the guidebook), this indication of the correct place, cannot be carried from one kind of knowledge to the next, but must be selected and created in the carrying itself.

Reading back with this lack of guide in mind, the line "the map appears to disappear" seems more hopeful; it seems to mean now that the map appears in order that it might disappear. That is, the map will disappear once it achieves the speaker's goal as stated at the start of the poem: "[i]n the last days of the fourth world I wished to make a map for those who / would climb through the hole in the sky" (1-2). The map as a material, tangible object will disappear, becoming an integrated part of a living existence rather than an external aid. This reading indicates another difference between the real and the true: what the speaker is telling us is real and printed on the map, but the map will disappear when its readers can live what is true in one's own experience. When there is no guidebook, "[y]ou will have to navigate by your mother's voice, renew the song she is singing" (35). For now, though, the image of the map becomes, again, material as "[f]resh courage ... lights the map printed with the blood of history, a map you will have to / know by your intention, by the language of suns" (36-38).^{iv} The map is given

tangibility, though its materiality is metaphoric as it is printed by history, known by intention and by cultural belief.

This poem as map stands in for the community itself and also works as a guide to enter it. The map is at times (when it is presented as materiality) an icon in its metaphorically mimetic representation of the nation. However, the diegetic interruption of this mimesis reveals the speaker creating her poem-map as she uses it to place herself within the community it represents. The map then becomes an index as it is a real part of the community it represents: the poem-map's description of the community helps to uphold the community. Since "[y]ou must make your own map" (51), any use of this map must be indexical.

The map in Rich's poem similarly shifts between the tangible and the immaterial. The speaker "fix[es] on the land" (I.66) that becomes "the map of our country" (II.1). In relation to the country, this land functions both metaphorically (as a terrain to unite across) and metonymically (as the location of the United States).^v "An Atlas of the Difficult World" is not composed of images of a material or tangible map. Rather, we are given a poem that calls itself an atlas or operates as one. The poem does not visually evoke an atlas, leaving open images besides a book of maps. Like the Atlas of Greek myth, "An Atlas of the Difficult World" holds up—holds up for its readers to see and upholds a community spirit among them—the images of the places of the United States, of its landscape and the people in it. In sequence, the poem describes fields (I); roads real and metaphorical (I.54-77); the interior of a room (III); a flower that "binds/the map of this country together" (IV.1)—so here the country is its own map through its landscape; its "roadsides from Vermont to / California" (IV. 4-5); a history of the places and monuments of battles, whether of war (V.2-4), of prison (V.12, 22), of migration (V. 10, 21-38), of prejudice (V.49-63); American promises of work for Irish emigrants (VI); New York (VII); the

Pacific ocean and the mental terrain of an emotional struggle (VIII); places of loneliness, stories of lonely travels and a grave of a lonely death (IX); a prison cell (X); a Pacific bay at the freeze of winter and the country investigated through lists of its citizens' efforts and livelihoods, and of its options for patriotism, for where these citizens might be moored and bound (XI); one woman's beauty and "blueprints of resistance and mercy" (XII. 2); and the imagined places where various "you"s "have landed" and read this poem (XIII. 41).

Rich does offer one image of "a map of our country" (II.1), but this image is the one that, as I mentioned earlier, shifts the image of the map into the new form of the mural (II.22). The written image of a map is nearly ekphrastic, especially when we find that this map is actually a mural. Yet, neither the map nor the mural is described in the poem; they are invoked diegetically without being evoked mimetically.

The ekphrastic element is even more apparent in "The Oriental Rug." As I discuss in Chapter One, Balakian offers a written representation of a visual representation: the speaker describes the patterns of the rug, which is itself a metonymic representation of the Armenian landscape. The speaker also takes this pattern onto his body, making the poem a verbal interpretation of the representing function of his own physicality. Further, this poetic interpretation in part reads the rug's visual and tactile interpretation of the landscape through the lens of another visual representation of the same land. The speaker describes "the dark balm / of the marshy hillsides / of my faraway land—the poppied acres / of Adoian's hands" (III.14-8). As Balakian's notes explain, "Adoian" is the "family name of painter Arshile Gorky, who was born in Van" an "Armenian province in eastern Turkey" (176).

Ekphrasis is a procedure of mediation: words stand in for an absent visual entity. Ekphrasis is, then, especially appropriate in the witnessing genre. While much poetry uses words

to evoke images, witnessing, as we saw from its definition, is primarily understood to be engaged in moving from the visible to the verbal. While primary testimony describing the event itself is not ekphrastic, the secondary witness—like Balakian—has to work with the translation of what was seen into what is told. This process of mediation and translation suggests the appropriateness of a genre emphasizing the absence of the visual object. As W.J.T. Mitchell explains,

A verbal representation cannot represent—that is, make present—its object in the same way a visual representation can. It may refer to an object, describe it, invoke it, but it can never bring its visual presence before us in the way pictures do. Words can ‘cite,’ but never ‘sight’ their objects. Ekphrasis, then, is a curiosity: it is the name of a minor and rather obscure literary genre (poems which describe works of visual art) and of a more general topic (the verbal representation of visual representation). (152)

What Mitchell does not make clear is that the difference between citing and sighting an object is not the same issue in verbal representation in general that it is in deliberately ekphrastic strategies specifically. These strategies (not found only in poetry with a fully determined ekphrastic goal but also in many poems with moments of ekphrasis), have a particular goal of *re*-presentation. Verbal representation can never make present its object, but one might argue that ekphrasis does not wish to achieve this presence. The ekphrastic object, already presented in one form, is translated into a new form rather than presented again as a new original.

So, when Rich leaves her atlases and maps at the level of ambiguous description, and when Harjo invokes a material map only to suggest that it will disappear in the face of lived experience, we find an emphasis on words as things that do not bring us their objects and do not seem meant to do so. Both descriptions avoid the icon: neither poet presents us with a graspable image of a map. In their privileging of diegesis over mimesis, the poets assert the map as an indexical object. In the hermeneutic structure of these descriptions in which the map itself is not much present, the reader is required to be more present, to follow the descriptions into his or her own creation of the map. In this indexical use of the map, Rich creates a hermeneutic community

by writing of particular lives in the United States and recombining these details into a hopeful, potential community, one that is metonymically related to the lived community of the nation. This metonymical connection comes out of the aspect of nationhood that relies on the conceptual understanding of the nation by its members.⁵ Community is similarly hermeneutic for Harjo. As the last line of her poem indicates, the map must be created by each individual. The hermeneutic community here is formed by each individual interpretation of the details of this nation in relation to the self.

Rich speaks in similar terms about Elizabeth Bishop: “More and more, her poems embodied a need to place herself in the actual, to come to terms with a personal past, with family and class, and race, with her presence as a poet in cities and landscapes where human suffering is not a metaphor” (126). Though, for Rich, “[s]ome of the poems in her first book ... I found impenetrable: intellectualized to the point of obliquity (e.g., ‘The Map’)” (125), Rich’s central image (the map) and one of her central terms (mooring) resonate with this precursor map poem’s interest in the border of water at land and the border of depiction at the original. According to Sara Meyer, “The Map” “maps a reading, drawing boundary lines between sea and land, ‘printer’ and reader, fact and fiction, landscape and fantasy. The result is a multitude of questions about relationships, representation and referentiality. ... The map as picture devours the map as sign. Here signs receive meanings which exceed the world of reference they are supposed to serve” (237). Rich’s poem engages with the boundaries of meaning-making through overlapping, provisional forms as they are filtered through the actual form of the poem. As she verbally creates a map, Rich’s speaker offers interpretations of it, thus creating a map that is concerned with its own function. Her poem offers a map that becomes a mural—the map is described in words that proclaim it to be a picture, thus complicating the map as sign. That this poem is a

reflection of a referent but also an active tool to act on that referent is engaged through its description as a sign (a map, whose referent is the landscape or political boundaries it depicts) and an interpretation (a mural, whose pictures may represent or refer, or may not at all). Bishop's "The Map" also investigates the boundaries of artistic depiction. Her speaker comments on her own interpretation of the map: "We can stroke these lovely bays, / under a glass as if they were expected to blossom, / or as if to provide a clean cage for invisible fish" (11-13). The ocular, mental, tactile disruption of stroking represents our interpretive shaping of these bays under our glass. Our own looking—the setting apart space with the glass, this decision about the boundaries of focus—has expectations that structure meaning. Yet, since we look "as if" something "were expected," the recognition that we expect something turns that expectation into a simile of itself; our expectations stand in for themselves as if those expectations existed. Our analysis now only does something like setting boundaries for interpretation, something that performs the boundaries without expecting their implications to hold. The affection with which this analysis works—the stroking of lovely things—suggests a tenderness toward and enjoyment of such boundaries that might be in line with Harjo's "fragile, luminescent, tender, little place, or home." Bishop's poem and Harjo's comment each approach an interpretation in an affectionate move that also dismantles the perspective into its composite pieces, or reduces its magnificence. Bishop's speaker can stroke lovely bays into an almost blossom because she holds up a glass to the fiction involved in the gesture ("as if they were expected to blossom") much as Harjo can recognize a place as luminescent only in the midst of its fragile, tender, littleness.

That it is as if we expected the provision of a cage suggests that there was some need beforehand, that these invisible fish required us to "provide" a cage whose cleanliness suggests its own similar invisibility. This invisibility is "as if" our restrictions to meaning go unnoticed as

the unremarkably clear response to a requirement. If invisible fish are as yet unknown meaning, then stroking the bays with lyrical attention and ekphrastic energy might restrict meaning so cleanly we do not see it happening. In the relegation of this expectation to the realm of the “as if,” it seems that the actual role of interpretation here is not to reproduce meaning but to be aware of our interpretive ability to restrict it or to make it more open (the other option: the bay’s blossoming, that conceptually unclear transformation of bay to flower, or, perhaps, the excitement of the bay to overwhelm its mapped boundaries by flood). Bishop makes visible the expectations of interpretation, thus changing them. The readers of Rich’s poem likewise become aware of their own expectations of interpretation when Rich changes her poem to an atlas to a map to a mural. The poem positions its readers to consider boundaries of meaning in interpretation, the way an interpretive community, as far as it is structured by the object of interpretation, constructs those boundaries.

Bishop’s under glass bay waters suggest also Hart Crane’s “chained bay waters” (4), a line from “To Brooklyn Bridge” which Rich quotes in “An Atlas to the Difficult World” (V.11). For Paul Giles, this line might indicate the “bay of NY harbor – chain bridge is another name for suspension bridge” (226) but also “water chained or imprisoned by poet” (226). Like Bishop, Crane considers interpretive boundaries in the ambiguity of meaning in this poem. Rich’s borrowing of this line indicates her own glass or chain: she writes as if we expected “Liberty” but her reader can only “catch [it] if you can” (V.6). In the context of “To Brooklyn Bridge” and (more obliquely) “The Map,” this section of Rich’s poem examines interpretation as something that inserts the reader into the poem as one who contains its meaning, as the arranger of a glass cage or chain. In this imperative to “catch if you can,” the reader is sent out into the poem to catch liberty, to stroke its loveliness, to imprison in the poem’s representation of the United

States a meaning of liberty. This positioning makes the blossoming of a prison out of what should have been the Statue of Liberty all the more affecting: Rich indicates Crane's line "over the chained bay waters" as borrowed through italicization and an end note. Yet, while Crane's line ends with the word "Liberty," Rich repositions the word: "catch if you can ... these pilgrim ants pouring out from the bronze eyes, ears, / nostrils, / the mouth of Liberty / over the chained bay waters / San Quentin" (V.6-12). She does not note "Liberty" in its relationship to "To Brooklyn Bridge." Rich recontextualizes the word "Liberty" so that it seems only to refer, with its bronze orifices, to the Statue of Liberty, depriving the word of the doubled meaning it holds in Crane's poem as potentially both a symbol of freedom and freedom itself. Rich replaces "Liberty" with "San Quentin" so that the juxtaposition of Liberty with chained bays and a prison interrupts Crane's contiguous ocular chain—a view of a bridge with a view of a sign (statue) of Liberty—that builds up from the chained bay waters. If in Crane's poem, Liberty might "forsake our eyes" (5), in Rich's poem it stands clearly in ironic juxtaposition to detainment.

In another kind of juxtaposition to detainment, Rich's poem begins with the evocation of place, of walking, of the "terrain" (I. 53) that becomes linked to the American state in the poem's second part with the introductory phrase, "Here is a map of our country" (II.1). The deictic presentation of the land as a map of the country evokes a sense of presence. This presence is both spatial—in terms of being "here," or moored somewhere—and mindful—in terms of mooring as an emotional presence or presence of thought or, perhaps better, as I have been tweaking a figure of speech into the notion of attentiveness, a presence of mind. Mindful presence is also the knowledge experienced in the act of witnessing. The speaker is mindfully attentive to the "here" of the map of the country as she uses the map to interpret the country's flaws: "Here is a map of our country: / here is the Sea of Indifference, glazed with salt / This is the haunted river flowing

from brow to groin / we dare not taste its water” (II. 1-4). This map of the country continues over the land’s physical and immaterial spaces: “This is the desert ... breadbasket ... birthplace ... cemetery ... sea-town of myth and story ... These are other battlefields ... here are the forests primeval ... These are the suburbs of acquiescence ... This is the capital of money and dolor” (II.5-18). The evils are “missiles ... “foreclosed farms” ... “bankruptcy” ... “battlefields” ... “silence” (II.5-16). The spatial country is evoked from the position of the witness, the mindful presence of attention to these places and their losses and lackings. The list ends with “I promised to show you a map you say but this is a mural / then yes let it be these are small distinctions / where do we see it from is the question” (II. 22-4). The “where” created by the presentation of the map or mural is important in terms of the space that presentation creates. In this offer of the map’s presence, the reader is brought into the position of witness, so that we too see this map from the watching roads.

Bodies

Rich’s “fissured, cracked terrain” (I.53) is, as literal land, metonymically connected to the country as its location but also metaphorically to the disintegrating community. In this dual signification, the landscape here operates in parallel to the concept of the map or atlas in the poem, metonymically representing community much as the rug in “The Oriental Rug” does the Armenian nation. Yet, while the land is both a literal and figurative grounding of the national community, it also, in “An Atlas of a Difficult World,” becomes a body that is mapped as the nation: “Here is a map of our country: / here is the Sea of Indifference, glazed with salt / This is the haunted river flowing from brow to groin / we dare not taste its water” (II. 1-4). This representation is curiously shifting: the image of a map depicts a landscape which we understand

symbolically as a body, or the image of the landscape functions as a map when we read it as a body.

Rich maps her nation's flaws through these waterways —this sea and river become important in relation to her repeated question, “Where are we moored?” If “we” can be moored on this map, we are boats at sea (of indifference). It is significant that Rich does not focus on the seas bordering the nation, but rather, if the river flows from brow to groin into this sea, on a body of water largely surrounded by the body of the nation, fed by a river traversing its core. Mooring seems not to be important for situating the nation within its fixed borders, but rather for providing a stabilizing influence for a community within water that flows and connects, much as the speaker must be fixed to the land that holds roads to be walked. This river and its sea are positioned at the centre of this road map.

Yet, if the river is haunted and flows only into indifference, then the river needs to be exorcised through the drinking that is not dared. This communal drinking, this acknowledgment and remembrance of national ghosts, the taking into the individual bodies the failures of the nation, is an intimate mooring. The acceptance of the landscape-as-community into one's body is precisely the kind of mooring that allows for movement, for walking and witnessing the roads not one's own.

Harjo also makes this connection between body, land, map, and community. For Harjo, the map is life—you enter it because you are conceived: “The place of entry is the sea of your mother's blood, your father's small death / as he longs to know himself in another” (24-25). The physicality of her map suggests its unavoidability, but the fact that you must make your own map suggests that its interpretation is a choice, the undertaking of a responsibility. One enters onto the map in entering life, but the map is also a part of the person and can be read through his or her

body: “The map can be interpreted through the wall of the intestine—a spiral on the / road of knowledge” (27-8). Moreover, the landscape and the body are entwined on the map: “You will see red cliffs. They are the heart, contain the ladder” (41). Harjo’s image of an intestinal spiral on the road to knowledge demonstrates the kind of making a map might take. Knowledge might be a road, with a start and an end-point, but the kind of coming-to that is a deep internalization—organ-deep, metaphorically speaking—is a spiral, a re-turning to the same ideas. A spiral follows back in on itself into a density around an inner point or a deepening toward some central concept. The image of the heart as red cliffs containing the ladder seems another rendition of this idea (the poem itself spiralling around the concept of the spiral of the road to knowledge) from the opposite perspective. The heart-cliffs have a ladder for climbing back out of the depth, for thinking back up and out. The multiplicity of cliffs comprising the heart suggests a span of truths through which one might climb for perspective.

But this map is not only personal internalization and traversal of knowledges; as I have already discussed, this map addresses the Creek nation, carrying in it Creek specific symbols. The map shows the connection of the community as well as the individual to the land: “In the legend are instructions on the language of the land, how it was we / forgot to acknowledge the gift, as if we were not in it or of it” (8-9). Harjo’s individual map is likewise made communal in its connection to both physical body and physical geography: the individual’s interior map is made up of the individual body—intestines, heart (27, 41)— as well as features of a terrain—red cliffs (41). Moreover, the map must be interpreted “by your intention, by the language of suns” (38); the personal interpretation (“your intention”) and the cultural understanding (the language of suns indicates an important aspect of Creek belief [see n4]) are linked appositionally by a comma, suggesting the connection of the personal and the communal as a shared motion rather

than as separate endeavours. Harjo's landscape is something that can be carried within the person, indicating a focus on the place of individual within community, while Rich's landscape as a shared social body indicates an exploration of community itself.^{vi}

Rich's speaker demonstrates a desire to achieve a certain kind of public life through a national body. Harjo's kinship ties are important in relation to cultural continuance (song, fire). Both poets use similar images in similarly metaphoric and metonymic ways, though in importantly divergent contexts in terms of Rich's pull of the country toward community and Harjo's investment in a nation within that country's borders. Another difference (though I will qualify it later on) occurs in the spatio-temporal operation of these images. Rich's poem foregrounds an understanding of public life and social ties, of people living and acting together in a shared place, while Harjo's poem is linked to a shared history of discrimination. Consequently, the common body in "An Atlas of the Difficult World" operates more spatially, notably in the introduction of the image of the map: "Here is a map of our country ... *where* do we see it from is the question" (II. 1, 24 italics added). Moreover, this section is an anaphoric list of various places in the present day country, establishing a repeated, deictic, "This is the ..." formulation that further suggests presence in this current country (II.3-21). Harjo's map image is more temporal, as, for example, it is "printed with the blood of history" (37). Moreover, the call to remember the historical moment of forced removal looks both forward and backward in time while also indicating a concern with place as unavailable as an only, secure cultural grounding: "Remember the hole of our shame marking the act of abandoning our tribal / grounds" (44-45). For Rich, then, these images of shared embodiment correspond to the context of shared space and national discourse while for Harjo images of passed-on embodiment through reproduction corresponds to a shared history of experience and a future of passed-on stories. The current lived

story, premised on the shared context and shared proximity in Rich's poem is, in Harjo's, a shared ongoing story in a shared temporal context of memory and continuation.

Rather than a succession of figurative substitutions, these poems deliver a concatenation of simultaneous metonyms: the metonym of the land for the country becomes also the metonym of the land as a national community via the human body (for Rich) or, in opposite container-content relationship, the individual body as that which holds the nation as land and community (for Harjo). These shifts are not subsequent, because the land remains land while it is also the body-public, and the body is still a body while it houses the land that underpins national identity. Thus, in each moment that the nation is understood through the trope of the map, it is also understood through both figurative and literal conceptions of a geographical location and the physical bodies of its occupants.

Gifts and Dedications

These figural and literal registers of land and body are recognizable in the speaker's repeated question: "Where are we moored? / What are our bindings? / What behooves us?" (XI. 63-5). An answer to these questions seems linked, in its similarity to wandering other roads, to the kindness of straining to see another from outside of one's own perspective, as well as to questions of intimacy and distance. The earlier openness in trajectory becomes a kind of kindness when a "desperate man [...] /experiences his first kindness, / someone to strain with him, / to strain to see him as he strains to see himself" (X. 10-13.). The image of one straining to see another as he strains to see himself suggests the distance involved in knowing. The one straining to see along with another is straining across a distance between one person with his or her lifetime of particular experiences and another. The image makes apparent, though, the continuum

of intimate and distanced knowledge as even the man straining to see himself finds his most intimate knowledge—his own seeing of himself—distanced from himself.

The speaker's questions are repeated in separate sections of the poem. In their first instance, the lines are typographically offset from one another: "Where are we moored? What / are the bindings? What be- / hooves us?" (V. 17-9). The large spaces suggest a lack of bindings, a lack of mooring, but "An Atlas of the Difficult World" works within the tension between wandering and fixedness, walking and mooring. The striding over of the enjambed lines contrasts the long stillness of the caesura—caused by the question mark and extended space—in the middle of the lines: the formal aspects of these questions juxtapose moving with stopping, wandering with mooring, roads with "here."

In contrast to the first iteration of these questions in a right aligned stanza with enjambed lines and extra spacing between sentences, in their repetition, the questions are asked with a firmer form, presented in end-stopped lines and centred on the page (XI. 63-5).^{vii} These prominent lines end this section. The first time the questions are asked, the enjambment and spacing seem tentative, the right alignment and separation from the rest of the section make the lines seem jotted in the margin, a commentary on the rest of the section rather than the main point, the conclusion, the call to action. In their restatement, the questions seem rather like an envoi, both in its conventional place as a concluding offering in certain poetic forms, as well as in its more literal meaning as a "sending forth," a call to be answered, a call heightened beyond the call a question mark already makes for a response.

In asking where "we" might find mooring and what behooves "us," Rich's speaker interrogates the possibility of a nation as a community. "An Atlas of the Difficult World" maps the positions those in the United States might be behooved to take in order to answer to the

conception of a nation moored in community. Rich's speaker suggests that this nation is lacking as a community: "Catch if you can your country's moment, begin / where any calendar's ripped off [...] / --catch if you can this unbound land these states without a cause" (V. 1-6). These "states without a cause" can be the country's regions, but "state" can also be read as a condition or situation. These states are, then, the literal politically bound communities of the nation, lacking a cause in the sense of the interests or goals that might be taken up in relation to the states' status as communities. At the same time, the states are also the condition in which the speaker finds her country. These conditions might be understood as a disengaged emotional and political state if "cause" here refers to something producing an effect or consequence. To catch the country's moment is to begin in the past, to recover the page ripped from the calendar. The imperative form paired with the address to a "you" rather than spoken by the "I" of the poem or the "we" of the imagined community makes a demand of the reader, though a demand pessimistically framed as one potentially unfulfillable. It might not be possible for the reader to catch the present moment through this remembering. Indeed, the alliteration and assonance of 'catch' and 'can' leaves catch connected so closely to its conditionality that the action cannot be considered aside from the uncertainty of its possibility. The 'if' intrudes before we can even find out what it is we ought to be catching. The repetition of the phrase increases its urgency while simultaneously increasing its unlikeliness.

In "The Nation-State: A Modest Defense," David Miller, in answering "What does it mean to think of oneself as belonging to a national community?" (138), suggests that one aspect of this belonging has to do with catching your country's moment in the binding of historical obligation:

The historic national community is a community of obligation. Because our forebears have toiled and spilt their blood to build and defend the nation, we who are born into it

inherit an obligation to continue their work, which we discharge partly toward our contemporaries and partly toward our descendants. The historical community stretches forward into the future too. This then means that when we speak of the nation as an ethical community we have in mind not merely the kind of community that exists between a group of contemporaries who practise mutual aid among themselves and which would dissolve at the point at which that practice ceased; but a community which, because it stretches back and forward across the generations, is not one that the present generation can renounce. (139)

I earlier discussed Harjo's poem as the better example of this historic obligation. "A Map to the Next World" focuses often on remembering and forgetting (9, 12, 20-1, 44) and is a future-oriented passing on of obligation, as the speaker instructs that "You will have to navigate by your mother's voice, renew the song she is singing" (21). Yet, Rich also engages with a historical conception of community (thus my formulation of Rich's poem as spatial and Harjo's as temporal is not firm, but offered as a heuristic frame). The speaker reflects on a house of personal memories, where the "old medicine bottles" (III.80) dug up years ago by the speaker's children resonate with the "pneumonia wind":

it's warm, warm,
pneumonia wind, death of innocence wind, unwinding wind,
time-hurling wind. And it has a voice in the house. I hear
conversations that can't be happening, overheard in the bedrooms
and I'm not talking of ghosts. The ghosts are here of course but
they speak plainly
—haven't I offered food and wine, listened well for them all
these years,
not only those known in life but those before our time
of self-deception, our intricate losing game of innocence long
overdue? (III.95-105)

The "time-hurling wind" brings conversations from the past back into the house to join the ghosts to which the speaker has long tended and attended. The present time of self-deception and the obligation to ghosts from "before our time" suggests a present behaving. Moreover, in this house where gifts sit on "shelves of things / both useful and unused, things arrived here by chance or choice" (III.54-5), the speaker describes a "broken-spouted" teapot from her

grandmother (56, 58) and one from “a refugee who killed herself” (61) which “cannot be used because / coated inside—why?—with flaking paint: / ‘You will always use it for flowers,’ she instructed when she / gave it” (III. 61-5). The interjected “why?” is an emphasized aside that goes unanswered, but in being asked and set apart, it indicates an important concern with the object’s history as well as its future. The gift from a family member of an older generation resonates with Harjo’s poem as dedication while the gift from a refugee suggests a need for ongoing witness. That neither teapot can be used for its proper purpose indicates this attention to suffering might involve the thoughtful creativity required by “things arrived here by chance or choice.” Thus, though some of these things were unchosen, they are “useful”; though some are “unused,” they are not *useless*. The instruction to use the teapot otherwise than for its usual use suggests the operation of the gift as an object of possibility—here, the possibility of remembrance. The refugee’s instructions are not phrased as instruction but as prophecy: “You will always use it for flowers.” To play out this future-tensed statement as reality, the receiver of the teapot and the instruction must first remember the instruction and the refugee.

The gift creates a community of obligation. Marcel Mauss in *The Gift* suggests that to offer a gift is also to deliver a commitment. Mary Douglas writes in her foreword to Mauss’s work that “[w]hat is wrong with the so-called free gift is the donor’s intention to be exempt from return gifts coming from the recipient. Refusing requital puts the act of giving outside any mutual ties. ... According to Marcel Mauss that is what is wrong with the free gift. A gift that does nothing to enhance solidarity is a contradiction” (vii). For Mauss, “it is not individuals but collectivities that impose obligations of exchange and contract upon each other” (5). The gift of the teapot necessitates that the speaker look back toward its causes and forward to its use, to remember the refugee and to respect her instructions, inside of an understanding of interpersonal

ties. There is an implication in the idea of a gift that one must use the useful and attend to what arrives in the context of community building. Especially in relation to a gift that comes with instructions, there is an element of trust that the receiver will accept that obligation.

Yet Adam Seligman complicates the idea of this obligation of a political community as formed by a country of “historic obligation” (Miller) and, as Margaret Canovan puts it, the “sufficient sense of mutual trust and obligation to generate and support effective sharing” (30).

Canovan notes that though

Seligman argues that the ‘generalization and universalization of trust’ involved in this nation-building has been a necessary condition for the kind of democratic legitimacy and conflict management required by civil society ... the process of abstraction and universalization that created the Western liberal nation and made possible the autonomous individual and civil society may in fact be continuing to destroy social bonds to the point of undermining itself. Perhaps it is the case that ‘the very universalization of trust... vitiates the mutuality and communality upon which trust must be based.’ (40-1)

Thus, Canovan explains that while “[c]ivil society was made possible ... because individuals had been released from communal identities, and had instead become members of new, more abstract national communities that transcended ethnicity,” the thinning out of this trust to span a nation may undermine the communality it requires (40).

Rich suggests fragmentation in the American nation as she describes its citizens as “each ... now a driven grain, a nucleus, a city in crisis” (24). While these citizens are, however, both “touched and untouched in /passing” (XI.22-3), the “crisis,” not contained by any punctuation, carries into the next line that begins a long invocation of the nation’s citizens, of whom “some [are] busy constructing enclosures, bunkers, to escape the com/mon fate” (XI.25-6). This long anaphoric list gives various categories of “some” that make up the country. The first stanza of this section of “somes,” separated from the section proper by a blank line, describes “the death-freeze of the century:/ a precise, calliper-grip holds the stars and the quarter-/moon/in arrest”

(XI.1-4). This frozen, detached state works as an epigraphical metaphor for the following section. The “hardest plants” have had their “juices sucked awry” and are “slumped on their stems like old faces evicted from cheap hotels/ —*into the streets of the universe, now!*” (XI.4-9). The italicized imperative offers a different understanding of the speaker’s earlier wandering of roads. This image of eviction into the streets operates as a counter-call to the demand, or shifts the demand onto the reader, implying the need for the purposeful wandering of the roads from which one’s kindness might be to see the “old faces” that are “sucked awry” by unjust demands. Noticeably, the juices aren’t sucked away, but awry, or “away from the straight” (OED). “Awry” means as well, though, “to fall into error” (OED). The sense of injustice in this passage comes from this sense that people are frozen “out of the right course” (OED).

The list shows people working with conflicting tactics—“some who try to teach the moment, some who preach the/ moment” (XI.28-9)—or from conflicting experiences and options that preclude shared goals—“some for whom peace is a white man’s word and a white man’s / privilege” (XI.38-9). The list ends, though, in the description of

some who have learned to handle and contemplate the shapes of
powerlessness and power
as the nurse learns hip and thigh and weight of the body he has
to lift and sponge, day upon day
as she blows with her every skill on the spirit’s embers (XI.40-4).

The shift in pronoun indicates a move out of the individual into a group of nurses, a “some.” The nurse’s particular kind of help offers the possibility of community, linked here with dying fire much as it is, in the image of trees of ashes, in Harjo’s poem. Again Rich, also like Harjo, imagines community through physicality as the nurse’s help is focused through the “hip and thigh and weight of the body”; this physical and intimate proximity suggests presence in its literal meaning of attendance as well as in the kindness of attention.

Yet this attention to intimacy founded in the particularity of this one body also models the attention, the mindful presence, the consideration, I see the poem proposing. This detailed particularity is not used to achieve a general rule or abstract understanding that is removed from that particularity, but rather a recombination of particularities understood through juxtaposition. Witnessing can provide this juxtaposition first through the act of attending and second through the interpretive connections coming out of the combinations of the known particulars. Attention to the particular lives making up a community is an attention that culminates (culminates continually, that is, always knowing but never reaching to an ultimate and final knowledge) in an interpretive knowledge of the possible interaction of these details.

Rich imagines a lyric community of such witnesses and though her speaker “knows you are reading this poem,” knows the conditions under which various imagined readers do this reading, she can only posit this knowledge because of her attention to the details of particular experience of the United States. This poem gives us the hermeneutic community it envisions: we have the speaker’s or poet’s interpretation of the details of the country that could be recombined to foster community.

Shreiber argues that though Rich “writes with enormous insight of Whitman’s failure to represent difference and its attendant discontinuities,” she is, in this poem’s Whitmanesque lists of individual lives, “culpable in some of the same ways. While she works hard to avoid Whitman’s invasiveness, she nonetheless ends up duplicating his tendency to make universal sameness the grounds for sympathetic identification” (314). Rich, however, makes clear her desire for community outside of identification. In *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* she writes of “[w]e who are not the same. We who are many and do not want to be the same” (225). Likewise, here, her community is based not on common identity or identification, but on the offer of mutual

obligation. Much as the gift of the teapot comes with the obligation to fulfill a particularly suggested future use, the speaker's offering of the map serves as a gift asking for something in return: "I promised to show you a map you say but this is a mural / then yes let it be these are small distinctions / where do we see it from is the question" (II. 22-4). The "promise" holds a community in its temporal operation from the moment it is spoken forward into an expected future. Though the speaker breaks this promise—she does not present the reader with the object the reader expected to have to use—, she suggests that there is a small distinction between what comes by chance and what by choice; it seems the reader might benefit from understanding this creative flexibility. Further though, the speaker's promise of mimetically showing the map but actual offer of diegetically telling it leaves an absence of tangible images in which readers play a role in constructing the map. In giving the poem as a gift, the speaker requires readers to put themselves into the walking of roads. As in Harjo's poem, this is not a map that one can carry.

The idea of gifting provides a context for understanding this poetry's dedications. The last section of "An Atlas of a Difficult World" is titled "(Dedications)." In contrast to Harjo's dedication to her daughter, this dedication is contemporary (and beyond) rather than generational, and open rather than specific as it is available to any reader of this poem as he or she reads it. A dedication is a way of giving over and Rich gives over this poem to an imagined community. She posits a community of readers in joining them with a goal: "I know you are reading this poem listening for something, torn / between bitterness and hope / turning back once again to the task you cannot refuse" (XIII. 36-38). The speaker presumes that this goal already exists in the lived community as the lyric community of "this poem" is created by those "listening for something" in the poem. Ernest Renan suggests that "[a] nation's existence is, if you will pardon the metaphor, a daily plebiscite, just as an individual's existence is a perpetual

affirmation of life” (53). Readers can choose to listen for this dedication and receive the obligation for becoming part of this community in connection to life in the United States. The readers have to “turn[] back” from the poem: the poem is something aside, something to which one can turn (ask of, rely on), and, in contrast to the individual’s “task,” a turning that can be refused.

A dedication is akin to a gift in that they both ask for something in return. The listening is this return; listening is already the attention this poem suggests is necessary for the community it describes. The gift of a dedication is the provision of a “here” for all those who come to it by chance or choice; this open dedication is not a gift given directly to each person but available to any reader. The dedication is, then, a form of belonging that is non-exclusive; it is the community formed by generosity and mutual obligation. The poem dedicated is a gift like the teapot that can be repurposed: you will always use it for listening. Listening, as opposed to reading, suggests the physical presence associated with the togetherness of community. Moreover, the readers’ assumed emotional response—not between bitterness and hope, but emphatically (emphasized by the line break) torn between the two— imagines them to be emotionally in motion, unable to rest at either end of the spectrum. The “you” here might function, not as an individual, but as the general category of the reader inside of which any individual reader might be affected at any point of the spectrum of emotion. Since this “you” stands in for the whole picture of response, the poem only assumes that the reader feels something. Even apathy, or indifference, falls on this scale between bitterness and hope.

Though the speaker, it is true, is imagining the connection, Rich, as the writer of the poem, does have some control over what its readers might find in it, and so some control over that for which readers might reasonably look. A dedication might be considered a kind of trust in

this moment where the poem offers something through the assumption that its readers will want to find it. There is an implication of community in the offer of knowing a need to the extent that the speaker is willing to offer fulfillment of that need, and to the extent that the poem, designed to fulfill this need, will gather readers who need that fulfillment. Thus, “I know you are reading this poem in a waiting-room / of eyes met and unmeeting, of identity with strangers” (XIII. 21-2), is not a presumption but a reaching out.

This relationship with the poem’s readers has echoes of Walt Whitman’s “Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand,” featuring a speaker likewise aware that he speaks out of a poem and to a reader unknown yet nevertheless addressable. I understand the condition of this poetry’s readers differently than does Piotr Gwiżdza: “Like Whitman, Rich envisions her audience as a matter of perpetual potentiality ... Like Whitman, too, she insists on the transcendental connection between poet and reader, an act of extra-verbal communication between two strangers. Poetry is somehow more than words; it is not only a form of art, but also a mode of intimate attachment” (np). Though readers remain potential, there is nothing transcendental, extra-verbal, nor anything, even, that is exclusive to, though it is clearly shaped by, poetry in this connection. Rich offers something to her readers. This something is, probably through Rich’s choice more than chance, a poem, and the reader’s position is structured by that form. Poetry can only make a connection through its words—it does not overcome words, it *is* words. Of course words are always more than words (this is the point of words—they are signs to indicate something else; words are always attached to something beyond themselves) but if poetry achieves this intimacy, it does so precisely through its words and whatever attendant “more” those words hold.^{viii}

I understand this direct address to be, not overcoming its own mode, but exploring the limits of poetry's communicative ability. Whitman and Rich both write out of a desire to create a sense of national community, a desire which requires a public audience but one that is made up of individuals who feel themselves to be parts of this wider group. Michael Warner reads "To a Stranger" as an address to a reader that exists between the individual and the public:

this 'you' is, after all, not you but a pronominal shifter, addressing the in principle anonymous and indefinite audience of the print public sphere. At the same time, you know that you are not being addressed by a complacently generic you, of a kind that I am using to address you in this sentence. In 'To a Stranger,' while we remain on notice about our place in nonintimate public discourse, we are nevertheless solicited into an intimate recognition exchange. (41)

This "you" manages the different levels of address through its indication that, in speaking to a community, it speaks to a community of individuals, each of whom is necessary in his or her individuality for the community to exist at all. And, similarly, it is through the presence of the whole—a community of readers, readers who, together, are 'the reader' of the poem—that any individual reader might be addressed as 'you.' "The reader" becomes the heuristic guide to any particular reader's hermeneutic navigation of the poem. The direct address serves as a map through which readers can chart their particular response through the possibilities provided by the poetic terrain.

The effectiveness of this address is dependent on the foregrounding of its context. What Warner says about "To a Stranger" I think is even better applicable to "Whoever you are, holding me now in hand": "we cannot possibly *be* the self addressed in second-person attributions. But we also cannot simply fictionalize either the speaker or the scene of address, in the manner of 'My Last Duchess,' because the speaker himself indicates the genericizing conventions of publication" (41). Though such an address always comes through the space of the general reader role that might be occupied by any real reader, the poem's awareness of the nature of its own

address makes clear its boundaries. Within these boundaries, we cannot discount the address as impossible—merely general, artificial, undirected—or imagine it as transcendent—overcoming itself as poetic address to become direct contact.

Thus, when the speaker “know[s] you are reading this poem in a waiting-room,” it is the concept of the waiting-room which indicates the potential for intimate connection. Like a waiting-room, in which nothing is meant to happen but the potential of something happening later, a poem is a space in which an address does not really happen (at the moment of its creation there is no one to be actually addressed) but in which waits the potential for the realization of that address in a future reader.

Through the eyes that are both “met and unmeeting,” this section of Rich’s poem moves toward a community among strangers that is not yet established. Though there is already “identity with strangers” here, the kind of community I read in this poem is not dependent on identification. The unmet eyes of these strangers suggest here that shared identity, whether through the common activity of reading this poem, the common place of a waiting-room, the common status of stranger, or the common place of the United States is not enough to posit community. The poem does not address a reader metonymically—as part of the whole—because no one reader can stand in for the whole national community. Yet, for the same reason, neither does the poem address a reader synecdochally—as though any reader might be substituted for another. When we consider the address in its general sense, we can think of it metonymically only in the sense of contiguity and juxtaposition. The address holds a horizontal space in which all readers are beside each other as the reader of the poem. While both Whitman and Rich look to establish national identity in these poems, there is a suggestion in these lines that a multiply shared address cannot establish a shared identity without the mutual meeting of eyes—that is,

without a form of witness that also establishes difference within the general address of shared identity. The position of an addressed reader, understood as a space of metonymical contiguity, allows for the conceptual visibility of this difference within unification.

Bishop's "In the Waiting Room" is, like "The Map" earlier, a useful pretext for Rich's "(Dedications)" section and this "identity with strangers." In the poem, Elizabeth, reading an issue of *National Geographic* in a waiting room, experiences a cry of pain which seems to her to be shared by herself and her aunt. When Elizabeth feels a destabilization of her self in a profound moment of identification, she becomes unable to meet the eyes of the others in the waiting room:

I scarcely dared to look
to see what it was I was.
I gave a sidelong glance
--I couldn't look any higher--
at shadowy gray knees,
trousers and skirts and boots
and different pairs of hands
lying under the lamps. (64-71)

The "scarcely dared to look to see" is a nearly tautological emphasis on sight that signals a breakdown in the kind of witness through which a community between selves might be established. Lee Zimmerman comments on this troubled sense of what it is to be a person among other persons: "Coming in out of the cold, blue-black, isolating space means renouncing any degree of the crucial difference necessary for relatedness. Self and others, inside and outside, aren't *related* but are "just one," a realization Bishop is loathe to confront, as she 'scarcely dared to look' at the other people in the waiting room 'to see what it was I was' (160). If she *is* the others (if they are "all just one"), she isn't *like* them, a distinction she quietly insists on by calling this experience of ostensible kinship 'unlikely'" (513).

The sudden sense that a cry of pain might be shared as one common experience breaks down Elizabeth's ability to learn about the others around her as it fragments them into body parts

and articles of clothing. The identification arising from the felt shared experience is here dissolving rather than unifying. Elizabeth tries to read the frames of the people around her—their bodies, their coverings—but the cry of pain that can't be singularly attributed produces for her an inability to contextualize people in the experiences of their own bodies. The texts of people are unframeable, and the lack of framework makes them unreadable.

Lee Edelman, working from his reading of Elizabeth's reading of the *National Geographic* magazine in which she "studies the cover, the margins, and the date in order to construct a frame for her reading experience that will circumscribe or contain it" (193), writes that "[t]o gloss this passage as the young girl hearing 'her aunt cry out in pain' is surely to ignore the real problem that both the girl and the text experience here: the problem of determining the place from which this voice originates. Since the poem asserts that it comes from 'inside,' the meanings of 'inside' and 'outside' must be determined, their geo-graphical relation, as it were, must be mapped" (185-86). Edelman, though, points out the difficulty in determining this distinction, and of the model of "reading as mastery" (188): "Though only in the course of reading the magazine does 'Elizabeth' perceive the inadequacy of her positioning as a reader, Bishop's text implies from the outset the insufficiency of any mode of interpretation that claims to release the meaning it locates 'inside' a text by asserting its own ability to speak from a position of mastery 'outside' of it" (188).

The 'you' indicating simultaneously *the* and *a* reader points precisely to this difficulty of inside and outside the text. *The* reader is the position created by the poem. While *a* reader approaches the poem from outside, he or she is invited by the poem into this internally shaped position. The nature of this 'you,' as Warner makes clear, is one that comes both from the inside—as a general and public call shaped in the poem—and from the outside—as an address

actively seeking the real response of individuals. The difference between the shared identity of the generic 'you' in Rich's and Whitman's poems and the shared identity which Elizabeth experiences is that a reader reading as 'you' is afforded a framework from which to read that eliminates the problem of inside/outside while still maintaining the boundaries of that framework. These poems call attention to their own status as poems, highlighting the possibilities and limits of poetry through which the address explicitly operates.

In contrast, Elizabeth is herself in the space of a reader within Bishop's poem and her call to identity comes from outside of the frame of what she is able to read. The call is incommensurably outside and inside herself, incommensurably outside and inside the waiting room. In Rich's and Whitman's poems, the explicit grounding in the language of a poem provides a frame to make clear the context of the address to shared (national) identity. A particular reader is not lost within Rich's collection of depicted 'yous' or Whitman's intimate 'you' because these 'yous' exist within the framework of words waiting for the actual readers whose acceptance of such a role extends the address outside of the poem and into the possibility of the community it seeks to create. It is only in the indication that no one reader is the only one that the poem looks for readers in plurality, that such an address can maintain its insideness (its continued waiting for 'you,' the general category of reader) at the same time that it is completed outside of itself (in its particular call to 'you,' an individual reader).

The speaker in Whitman's "To a Stranger," is, like Elizabeth in Bishop's poem and a "you" in Rich's, in a condition of waiting: "I am to wait, I do not doubt I am to meet you again, / I am to see to it that I do not lose you" (Whitman 15-6). For Rich and Whitman, the "identity with strangers," with readers, is always a kind of waiting, a waiting in words. If a poem is a space like a map, it is also a space like a waiting room. "I am to see to it that I do not lose you"

suggests Rich's meeting of eyes and Elizabeth's inability to look up to eye level. Seeing is necessary to not losing 'you,' losing an individual reader in the assertion of *the* reader. "I do not doubt"—rather than "I am sure"—affirms through negation much as the address affirms its facility through its incompleteness in waiting. Like the promise to show a map and its fulfillment in the telling of a mural, the waiting-room is a promise fulfilled by this dedication of another, poetic, space. A waiting-room promises the coming or happening of something else; it is a space designed for the time before the next thing. A dedication is "[t]he giving up or devoting (of oneself, one's time, labour, etc.) to the service of a person or to the pursuit of a purpose." (OED). The poem itself—Rich's labour—is dedicated to the readers who wait still for the map of the country as a community. As the section is titled parenthetically— (Dedications)—it makes room for readers to take the dedication as an aside, to approach the section without it. If the poem is offered as a gifted communal space to its readers, its surround of parentheses makes it a gift that an individual reader can choose to unwrap or not, to bring it outside into a completion in oneself as reader, or, to open as a map, an acceptance of the dedication's terms of poetic navigation.

Notes

ⁱThis language of ‘mindful presence’ fittingly resonates with that of Buddhism. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s account of the Buddhist idea of realization describes forms of attention and consideration in contradistinction to a kind of attention ending in knowledge. Sedgwick distinguishes “between knowing something—even knowing it to be true—and realizing it, taking it as real” (208). Sedgwick suggests that this difference is not well recognized in Western thought: “it does seem remarkable both how much attention Buddhism pays to the gap between knowing and realizing, and retroactively, how little attention is paid to it in Western thought. To practice Buddhism, after all, is to spend all the time you can in the attempt to realize a set of understandings most of whose propositional contents are familiar to you from the beginning of your practice” (208-9).

ⁱⁱ“In the early 19th century, the United States Indian policy focused on the removal of the Muscogee and the other Southeastern tribes to areas beyond the Mississippi River. In the removal treaty of 1832, Muscogee leadership exchanged the last of the cherished Muscogee ancestral homelands for new lands in Indian Territory (Oklahoma). Many of the Lower Muscogee (Creek) had settled in the new homeland after the treaty of Washington in 1827. But for the majority of Muscogee people the process of severing ties to a land they felt so much a part of proved impossible. The U.S. Army enforced the removal of more than 20,000 Muscogee(Creeks) to Indian Territory in 1836 and 37” (*Muscogee (Creek) Nation*).

ⁱⁱⁱWhile Harjo’s poetry includes these specific Creek elements, Craig S. Womack points out that she also works within a pan-tribal tradition: “Harjo’s Creek grounding strengthens her pan-tribal vision” (225). In this poem specifically, take as example of this pan-tribal vision its first lines—“I wished to make a map for those who/would climb through the hole in the sky” (1-2)—which refer to an element of creation stories that is common among many indigenous groups in North America.

^{iv}The “language of suns” suggests the significance the sun holds in Creek cultural understanding: “The fire supplied heat and light for both the households and the community ceremonies, as the sun supplied these things so that all life forms might flourish and continue. For the Mvskoke people, the sun and the sacred fire within the ceremonial ring (pasko’fv) are the same” (*Muskoke (Creek) Nation*).

^vThe complex shifting of literality here is comparable to the function of the rug in Peter Balakian’s “The Oriental Rug” as I discuss it in my first chapter. Balakian’s poem features a rug dyed with parts of the literal landscape, and also standing in for that landscape. Likewise, the land is literally a part of the Armenian nation while it sometimes stands in entirely for the nation and its people. The landscape in Rich’s poem is similarly metonymically and variously signifying.

^{vi}However, Rich also has moments when the map is inside the body (VII.14-5), so it’s not a case of divergent tactics, but of the simultaneous existence of multiple ways of understanding the relationship of the individual to the community.

^{vii}In section 5, the lines appear in the following manner:

Where are we moored? What
are the bindings? What be-
hooves us?

Section 11 ends with the lines as follows:

Where are we moored?

What are the bindings?

What behooves us?

^{viii} Useful here is Allen Grossman's essay "Whitman's 'Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand': Remarks on the Endlessly Repeated Rediscovery of the Incommensurability of the Person" in which he argues that the "originality of Whitman consists of a poetic discourse which presents itself as none other than the speech of the principle of representation" (118). He reads Whitman's poem as "the reinvention of representation through the overcoming of representation with the intention of producing by poetic means a 'human form' that is truly human because free" (118). Free, that is, from the representational law that "visibility is *commensurability*" because "[t]here is no image of the incommensurable, as there is no actual social formation characterized by equality" (114). It is, then, only through the words as they struggle to overcome the inequalities of representation that they might produce the "acknowledgment which has been made free (or as free as poetic originality can make it...)" (119).

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Chapter 4

Compassion across Contexts: Poetic Strategies of Substitution, Incorporation, and Juxtaposition

In this chapter, I examine a bridging compassionate response in three collections of poetry, whose authors depict compassion as a feeling that might transcend a given circumstance. Poetry engaging at once varying levels of particularity and abstraction may, in both its successes and failures, aid in a conceptualization of compassion that is broad enough to navigate between contexts without being dissociated from lived details. Compassion is, definitionally, a feeling, precisely a feeling along with another. In the act of suffering together with another, then, compassion is necessarily particularized. Compassion as a feeling seems most available as a reaction to the suffering of a particular person or group. Thus, we might expect compassion outside of a circumscribed set of details to take the form of an abstract value. My interest here is to investigate compassion through poetry engaging multiple circumstances without abstraction. Adrienne Rich's *An Atlas of the Difficult World* (1990-1991), Joy Harjo's *A Map to the Next World* (2000), and Rachel Tzvia Back's *On Ruins & Return: The Buffalo Poems* (1999-2005) each differently approaches compassion's extension beyond a single context.

Compassion emphasizes encounter in response to suffering: "Suffering together with another, participation in suffering; fellow-feeling" (OED). As a fellow-feeling, compassion is a kind of feeling in community. It is noteworthy that borders, particularly national ones, are insistently present in this poetry. Compassion's relation to community and belonging is a central concern in these explorations of broadened compassion. Rather than an isolated instance of a feeling, compassion operates here as a disposition that is tied to one's way of being in the world.

Feeling compassion in this poetry becomes a part of a way of being a person. As a term describing a mode of life in which one has fellow-feeling, compassion can exist as a general state with the capacity to become at any instant particularized.

Poetry is a mode dependent—to a greater or lesser degree with particular poets—on the consciously particular use of language. That is, poetry deals with ideas contingent on their particular shapes in image, rhythm, or word. Often, poetry reaches toward the non-contingent idea or feeling through particular instantiation. Thus, the relationship between concepts and the forms they take in specific images, comparisons, diction, and sound is a poetic concern. In this sense, poetry seems especially appropriate for traversing abstraction and particularity in terms of content since it already does so formally, in the manner of its construction.

Rich, Back, and Harjo differently work through the interaction between concept and particular example. Their poetic divergences are not limited merely to content; the approaches diverge at their logical underpinnings, their poetic tactics. In investigating the underlying mechanisms through which these particular poems bring together their elements, I find Rich and Back each to employ juxtaposition in contrast to Harjo's substitutive approach. Harjo's method of substitution depends upon replacement through similarity while this emphasis on similarity operates through the omission of particularized detail. In contrast, Back's presentation of an image shared across contexts allows for the inclusion of separately contextualized detail while Rich's images gather a diversity and plenitude of details into their purviews. Back's image is one of juxtaposition without equation, while Rich's images create juxtaposition through incorporation.

Through Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle's understanding of metonymy and metaphor, we can consider juxtaposition as a metonymic strategy and substitution as a metaphoric one.ⁱ In

juxtaposition, elements are contiguous, working through combination. In substitution, elements work through selection; one element can take the place of another.ⁱⁱ Through juxtaposition, Rich creates a single context through which elements signify. Back juxtaposes separate contexts, creating a new meaning in their interaction. Back and Rich each approach compassion as part of living while Harjo, I argue, presents an idea of compassion without depicting the feeling itself. Though her speaker identifies compassion as her mode of being, this compassion comes across as an abstraction in its assertion without specific demonstration of the role of feeling in a way of living.

While these particular collections present these differences, however, I choose them also for the similar frameworks in which this concern with compassion operates: each of these poets depicts an idea of waste which might be reconceptualised or recycled into generosity. This vocabulary of waste and generosity comes from the poems themselves, but points, for me, to an interest in theorizing compassion in terms of excess. Compassion is a feeling that one feels in reaction to another person's feelings; it is "[t]he feeling or emotion, when a person is moved by the suffering or distress of another" (OED). Compassion, then, is in some sense excess (surplus) feeling: it is feeling that exceeds reaction to one's own experiences; it is feeling only possible through attention to others' experiences. It is also in some sense excess (wasted) in that the concept of compassion depends on a separation between the one suffering and the one feeling compassion: though compassion is "participation in suffering," it can only be participation in one's own distinct suffering in relation to what another feels. In contrast to empathy, with its sense of imaginatively joining another in his or her pain, compassion makes clear that it is a feeling in response to and separate from the suffering of another.

My suggestion of compassion's excess is clarified in relation to the concept of a "we-intention" which Oren Izenberg explains in his essay "We Are Reading: Collective Intentions Across Poems." As "work on social-action concepts like collective intention has aimed to recover the individual basis of collective life" (100), Izenberg says that the question to ask is, "How is it possible that individuals, with their single minds (minds that must be understood in some relation to individual brains and bodies) are nonetheless capable of formulating collective intentions and undertaking cooperative actions?" (101). He turns to an "account of collective action" termed

'summative,' because it argues that collective intentions consist exclusively of individual intentions plus something else. Thus, according to the influential summative account put forward by Raimo Tuomela and Kaarlo Miller, what it means to say that 'we intend' to act together is that I intend to do something, that I believe that it can be done (that it is logically and empirically possible), that I believe that you intend to do it, and that I believe that you have a set of beliefs equivalent to mine (that is to say, that you also believe both that I will do it and that it can be done). (101)

If I suffer together with another, I intend to participate in his or her suffering.ⁱⁱⁱ But the other's suffering does not have the same intention: since the suffering elicits the compassion, the other suffers first. This suffering cannot include my intention to suffer together. Though I intend to suffer with you, my suffering is more individual than that: I suffer that you suffer, but I do not partake of your suffering with you. My efforts are wasted in the sense that this we-intention (we are suffering) is predicated on its partial failure. This we-intention is also generous as the urge for and belief in the value of compassion as surplus suffering, unnecessary, additional suffering whose effect is to make another's suffering a collective one, even as my additional suffering does not come through a sharing and subtraction of your suffering.

I begin with Harjo and Rich in my demonstration of compassion as a surplus suffering involved with community. The speakers in Harjo's "The End" and Rich's "An Atlas of the

Difficult World” extend compassion within and between communities. These two poems are written out of positions within the specific communities of the Creek Nation and the United States. Rich’s speaker articulates an idea of patriotism which works through the relationship between a felt connection to the abstract nation and a felt connection to the diverse individuals and groups making up the country. Harjo’s speaker engages with atrocity in Cambodia by comparing it to atrocity in the United States. I will consider this comparative poem in relation to other poems in the collection written specifically in the context of Creek history and community.

Both Rich and Harjo indicate tools or materials that might build generosity from waste. Rich’s speaker desires ignorance, but waste is the material that might allow her to remedy that which she wishes not to know: “I don’t want to know / wreckage, dreck and waste, but these are the materials” (I. 48-9). This assertion that “these are the materials” is repeated (V. 56), suggesting that the lists of national mistakes, harmful choices, and individual suffering are those things available to be worked into community. What remains in destruction, the wreckage, is what might be reworked into value. Harjo’s speaker, when constructing her map in the poem “A Map to the Next World,” finds tools in the desires that remain through suffering: “My only tools were the desires of humans as they emerged from the killing / fields, from the bedrooms and the kitchens” (Harjo 3-4). The idea of turning waste into persisting community is prominent in Harjo’s collection and is even more explicit in “Returning from the Enemy” where the speaker posits “the ability to make songs out of the debris of destruction” 14.1-4).^{iv}

Rich’s speaker witnesses destruction or wreckage in the dividedness of her country, its isolations and marginalizations. In line with what Piotr Gwiazda calls Rich’s “growing preoccupation with the idea of civic responsibility” (np), compassion in this poem takes the form of patriotism, love of one’s own.^v Rich, in an interview with Bill Moyers, says that *An Atlas of*

the Difficult World "reflects on the condition of my country, which I wrote very consciously as a citizen poet, looking at the geography, the history, the people of my country" (qtd. in Gwiazda np). Rich's speaker is "bent on fathoming what it means to love my country" (XI.12). She sees "some busy constructing enclosures, bunkers, to escape the com / mon fate" (XI. 25-6). This observation begins a list of "some"s, groups and their actions or experiences in living within this common fate. The anaphoric "some" indicates a proliferation of tactics for living in this country, tactics shaped by their relationships to power. It is the "some who have learned to handle and contemplate the shapes of / powerlessness and power" (XI. 40-1) that lead into the study of what it is to be a patriot: "A patriot is one who wrestles for the / soul of her country / as she wrestles for her own being" (XI. 46-8). Access to the soul unifying the country comes through the "handling" of these shapes.

Rich's image of tangible access to the intangible soul of her country is reminiscent of Whitman's concluding two stanzas in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry":

We descend upon you and all things—we arrest you all;
 We realize the soul only by you, you faithful solids and fluids;
 Through you color, form, location, sublimity, ideality;
 Through you every proof, comparison, and all the suggestions
 and determinations of ourselves.
 [line break]
 You have waited, you always wait, you dumb, beautiful ministers! you novices!
 We receive you with free sense at last, and are insatiate henceforward;
 Not you any more shall be able to foil us, or withhold yourselves from us;
 We use you, and do not cast you aside—we plant you permanently
 within us;
 We fathom you not—we love you—there is perfection
 in you also;
 You furnish your parts toward eternity;
 Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul.

Much as Rich "wrestle[s]" for the communal soul, Whitman's 'we' "realize the soul" through tangible means, through "solids and fluids." However, wrestling for the soul is not wrestling the

soul itself; tangible parts are not equivalent to a tangible whole. Whitman's lists move from the material to the immaterial: "Through you color, form, location, sublimity, ideality; / Through you every proof, comparison, and all the suggestions and determinations of ourselves" (24. 3-4). Color, form, and location seem aspects of the parts leading "toward eternity," the sublime and ideal soul. As the use of asyndeton omits any conjoining words which might indicate a shift in relationship between the first words and the last, the juxtaposed elements seem to combine as the soul. Yet, in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," each element does not come together to create the soul. Instead, each individual provides its parts "toward the soul." Each individual furnishing his or her parts is "accomplish[ing], complet[ing], or fulfill[ing]" ("furnish" OED), not the soul itself, but "toward" such "sublimity, ideality." Moreover, the individuals in this trans-temporal community "have waited" but also "always wait." The accomplishment of the soul is ongoing "toward eternity" and so it is always in completion rather than complete. Similarly, for Rich, a patriot is one who wrestles "for" the soul of her country, not one who wrestles the soul itself. The soul remains immaterial as the surplus that is the conception of community; it is not the "solids and fluids," but the "proof, comparison, and all the suggestions and determinations of ourselves."^{vi}

The unity of the communal soul is akin to the surplus figuring compassion in Rich's poem. Rich's speaker is a witness to her country and her compassion (as a form of patriotism) extends to all its contexts. These juxtaposed contexts together create something more than the sum of the parts, a surplus depicted as a soul. Individuals are metonymically related to the soul of the community; this surplus—the concept of the unity of the nation—is created *through* but not *of* the individuals belonging to community. The soul of community is not composed of the

community's individuals but of their desire for community, their conceptual movement toward its existence as an operative idea.^{vii}

This communal soul, for Whitman and for Rich, is constructed rather than inherent. Useful here is Benedict Anderson's insight that a nation is "an imagined political community" and is so "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). In "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," first "We arrest you" but "We receive you with free sense at last" (24.1; 25.2). It is in arresting the parts for this purpose of unity that the parts are free in determination: once a whole is proposed, the parts can be already a part of that whole. Then the sense is free: meaning is unarrested insofar as the meaning is already invested in the part as it signifies in relation to a whole, in "you" as you belong to "we" and in "we" as the idea of "we" (a group of individuals) is implicated in an overlapping concept of "we" as community (a meaningful group). While Rich's speaker is "bent on fathoming what it means to love my country," for Whitman, "We fathom you not—we love you" (25.5). Rich's desire to understand what it is to have patriotic love contrasts Whitman's assertion of love in the place of fathoming. Rich's speaker wants to know what loving this country means, how to fathom belonging, precisely because she loves a country made up of individuals who are not all able to participate in the national community. Anderson argues that a nation "is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that might prevail in each, the nation is always perceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (6). Rich's focus in this poem is how this sense of comradeship can be moved from the projected notion of community into an actual functioning of the country through addressing the inequality and exploitation in her nation.

“An Atlas of the Difficult World” links its idea of national community with a readerly community in a section entitled “(The Dream-Site).” As the centre of the poem (the seventh section, with six sections on either side), this section can be read to underpin the poem as a whole. Only this section and the last (“(Dedications)”) are titled. The link of the central section with the concluding section indicates the dedications to those reading the poem are a way of asserting this communal dream-site, directing it out of the poem to those whom the speaker “know[s] ... are reading.” Moreover, the bracketed titles indicate their own superfluous status; they are not necessary for the structural logic of this poem, but additional. The surplus of these two sections (of the centre and the conclusion) indicates the essence (the soul) of the poem, an essence dependent on community with readers. In this move, the poem particularizes the realm in which it might be effective, a realm proper to its mode (this written art suggests its hope for effect on readers). As with the soul of a national community, the soul of this poem only exists if readers take the speaker’s suggestion of its presence and join in the belief in the poem as an effective force.

It is in this way that the poem is a dream-site, a symbolic realm. As a dream-site, the poem’s centre is not the depiction of particular lives, but an evocation of their connection:

every known constellation flinging out fiery threads
and you could distinguish all
--cobwebs, tendrils, anatomies of stars
coherently hammocked, blueblack avenues between
--you knew your way among them, knew you were part of them
until, neck aching, you sat straight up and saw:
[line break]
It was New York, the dream-site
the lost city the city of dreadful light
where once as the sacks of garbage rose like barricades around us we
stood listening to riffs from Pharaoh Sanders’ window
on the brownstone steps
went striding the avenues in our fiery hair
in our bodies young and ordinary riding the subways reading

or pressed against other bodies
feeling in them the maps of Brooklyn Queens Manhattan
The Bronx unscrolling in the long breakneck
express plunges
as darkly we felt our own blood
streaming a living city overhead
coherently webbed and knotted bristling
we and all the others
known and unknown
living its life. (VII.1-28)

In “every known constellation” are the particularities of the lived community, the lives that construct it. These constellations are “coherently hammocked,” “distinguishable,” separated by “avenues.” The “you” knows the constellations, the way among them, “your” place in them, until the change in perspective set things “striding” and “streaming” into a “webbed and knotted” “living city.” This new knowing is an insertion; we “went striding the avenues in our fiery hair” leads to “we felt our own blood / streaming a living city overhead.” We can return here to the account of hermeneutic and heuristic navigation I introduce in the previous chapter. This section begins with a hermeneutic tactic of interpretation. The speaker has knowledge derived from moving between examples. Walking the avenues alone, she makes connections from a distance. As the section continues, the speaker creates a new kind of understanding through heuristic encounter. Her map becomes created through direct encounter with the environment through which she moves.

This section repeats various forms of “to know” until the “until,” an indication of a new perspective. The initial knowledge is physically separated from this new perspective by a line break. The speaker was confident of her own belonging in her traveling among groups “coherently hammocked”—knowable, understandable—until the blueblack avenues become instead a “lost city” of “dreadful light.” This dreadful enlightenment is the insertion into a different heuristic; it comes through another kind of seeing, an “aching,” a sitting up. This

moment of affective and active realization is both grounding (the speaker sees New York instead of the sky) and also figuratively ungrounding (it is a dream-site).

The separate “you” turns into the group experience of the “we” after the line break. Now, “striding the avenues,” there are no longer hammocked groups, distinguishable and known; however, the stars remain “coherently webbed.” While coherently connected, groups are not hammocked aside, but live “knotted and bristling.” Attention to the places of this community comes bodily as “we” are “pressed against other bodies / feeling in them the maps of Brooklyn Queens Manhattan.” Though maps are felt in other bodies, the semiotic field actually exists in the relationship between bodies. It is the haptic “press” that holds the maps of the cities. The “we” here do not read maps but feel them: the felt relationship emphasizes a heuristic rather than a hermeneutic understanding. In the space of contact between the bodies, the maps are the sign of the something extra of community, the significance that exists as something felt and lived between people.

This section is reminiscent of sections five and six of Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”:

What is it, then, between us?
What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?
[line break]
Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place avails not.
...
I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution;
I too had receiv'd identity by my Body;
That I was, I knew was of my body—and what I should be,
I knew I should be of my body.

The distance “between us” is a signifying space. It is precisely in this “between” individuals that the unity of community exists. Yet, this space between, as distance and separation, “avails not.” The speaker depicts the abstract notion of community through the identity of his material body:

“That I was, I knew was of my body—and what I should be, I knew I should be of my body” (6.14.3). As Rich’s poem similarly highlights the bodies which press together in a haptic experience, the focus of both poems is less the concept of community than it is the work of creating the concept; both poems explore the lived experience that leads to the concept. The nation’s unity is felt through a heuristic experience of living in proximity to the lives of others. The meaning created through this juxtaposition is the surplus of community.

Likewise, in Rich’s lines, feeling something of the whole through the individual body is emphasized in the physical inclusion of the striders in the “living city.” The city lives as those individuals living in it “darkly ... felt our own blood /streaming.” This sensation of living together comes through feeling a blood that is shared as ours and also reflexive as “our own”: this collective possessive dislodges the sense of blood streaming from the individual body into an abstract communal entity, emphasizing a shared space between people, mapped with streaming blood as though the avenues become arteries. It is in feeling this blood as a heuristic to community that the community comes to life. The we-intention of community Izenberg finds in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” is similarly evident in Rich’s dream of “we and all the others / known and unknown / living its life.” Izenberg argues that “Whitman’s will to act jointly—and his confidence that the world will permit it—license his belief in other people and their motives, even when those other people are at the greatest imaginable distance away (the distance between actual present and notional future)” (103). Rich’s speaker displays this same confidence in these unknown people who— no less for being unknown—live together a life. Rich’s living city operates as a microcosm for the country as a whole, depicting togetherness in a dreamily defined locality in order to point toward a larger belonging.

In her introduction to *Compassion: the culture and politics of an emotion*, Lauren Berlant is critical of imagining an abstract togetherness for a country founded on local interaction:

The problem of social interdependence is no longer deemed structural but located in the faith that binds to itself a visible, lived-in community. In this view all occupants of the United States are local: we cultivate compassion for those lacking the foundations for belonging *where we live*, and where we live is less the United States of promise and progress or rights and resources than it is a community whose fundamental asset is humane recognition. Operating powerfully is a presumption that the local is the same thing as the communal, both experientially and institutionally. This remediation of national life away from the federal state does not blank out the nation but sees patriotism as a feeling of abstract intimacy practiced from the ground up. (3)

Rich's "An Atlas of the Difficult World" indeed seems predicated on "humane recognition" but, significantly, the recognition is not limited to the local, though imagined through it here. In this poem "where we live" is expanded along the roads that span the country to become a community premised on a patriotic questioning and critique of the "United States of promise and progress," "rights and resources." When the speaker says that "[t]hese are not the roads / you knew me by" (l.75-6), she follows Muriel Rukeyser in "uncovering her country: *there are roads to take*" (V. 48). Rich foregrounds the travelling necessary to deny a myth of inclusivity based on locality; her image of community in the United States falls somewhere between the visible, lived-in community and an abstract intimacy. Rich defines "[a]bstractions" as "severed from the doings of living people, fed back to people as slogans" (*Blood, Bread, and Poetry* 213). In the depiction of the dream city, "living its life" is the idea that matters; her theory of patriotism is grounding in its depiction as something that exists only because it is lived. At the same time, her focus on different ways of living and lives not included in common images of the nation let "the doings of living people" escape becoming its own slogan.

As she investigates the connection between lived, material reality and the conceptions involved with that living, Rich's speaker suggests a generosity that transcends local borders and fosters inclusive community in the United States:

Late summers, early autumns, you can see something that binds
the map of this country together: the girasol, orange gold-
petalled
...
her tubers the
jerusalem artichoke
that has fed the Indians, fed the hobos, could feed us all.
Is there anything in the soil, cross-country, that makes for
a plant so generous? *Spendthrift* we say, as if
accounting for nature's waste (IV. 1-14).

The girasol binds the map—the symbolic guide to the country—but the actual soil may not be as fertile as is the symbol of this land. The plant might grow only from 'nature's waste' which we convert into symbol. Our 'accounting' makes the flower into currency: if nature is 'spendthrift,' one who spends money recklessly, then girasols are as money, a symbol of value. In this interpretation of the United States, the country is symbolically united, but this plant which might be read as generosity is instead symbolic of value wasted. Nature's waste, the plant's generosity, is the excessive proliferation of the flower. Yet, Rich's speaker reads the flower as surplus: the flower is not the map representing the country but an additional element binding the map together. The girasol is not only a generously proliferating plant, but here represents the 'more' than the sum of the country's parts.^{viii} Negatively, the girasol is the land's excess expenditure; positively, it is the country's surplus value.

A symbol of the value of community and the surplus of the sum of the parts, this girasol is another manifestation of the soul of the nation. The speaker also names the girasol as "Jerusalem artichoke," Jerusalem being a corruption of girasol, the Spanish name for sunflower.^{ix} The plant is neither from Jerusalem nor an artichoke. This sliding of the name and its connotations

emphasizes the space between the material flower and its concept. The girasol binds the country, literally covering its geographical expanse as the concept of the girasol binds the map. The map is a conceptualization of the geography of the country, but points in this poem to the concept of community, or of a concept of the material land as the ground of community. Much like the emphasis on bodily presence in the dream-site, the girasols are invoked as access to a conception of national community.

Thus, Rich juxtaposes several options for imagining the surplus of community. Temporality as the living cycle of the girasol (you can see it at one point—“late summers, early autumns”—in the year) matches the cyclic circulation of “our own blood streaming.” The image of the living city is an image of the generous soil; the constellations are a star-map reflecting the map-binding flowers. Like the girasol’s name, the symbol shifts: several suggestions of the concept exist in juxtaposition. In juxtaposition, there is no tangible depiction of a national community but meaning created in the space between symbols. The interaction of these signs, the semiotic press of symbols, generates a concept of national community.

This interaction requires space for multiple symbols to interact. Such a space requires the removal of borders which separate individuals and groups, preventing the interaction which forms a national hermeneutic space. Rich relates waste to borders: “Ours [our waste] darkens / the states to their strict borders, flushes / down borderless streams” (IV.14-6). The “strict borders” oppose not only the “borderless streams” of the space of the land (rather than the place of the country) but also the symbolically binding, symbolically generous proliferation of the girasol. If the girasol’s cross-country presence is the surplus that binds the map, then these borders are the resistance to that symbolic unity. Rich’s girasol section lists the elements of community the speaker argues the country needs. This list’s beginning of “Waste” (IV.18)

indicates the importance of “those who could bind, join, reweave, cohere, replenish / now at risk in this segregate republic” (IV. 20-21).

The contrast between waste and generosity is similarly apparent in Harjo’s *A Map to the Next World*. In “Protocol,” Harjo considers the obligation to remember generosity: “I will consider the gift / of those who kept walking though their feet were bloodied / with cold and distance, as their houses and beloved lands / burned behind them” (26-29). The speaker depicts as waste a failure to recognize the gift of survival from the generation that walked the Trail of Tears: “Our for / getfulness stalks us, walks the earth behind us, leaving a trail of paper diapers, / needles and wasted blood” (20-22). As with Rich’s *girasol*, a shared conception of the land provides connection, here between a past generation and a present one: “In the legend are instructions on the language of the land, how it was we / forgot to acknowledge the gift, as if we were not in it or of it” (8-9). The significance of this language comes from the lived experience of a semiotic system (the land’s language) and the inheritance of a previous interpretation of that system (the legend). The ambiguous pronoun reference here—each “it” might refer to the legend, the instruction, the language, or the land—makes it unclear what the community is of or in: the actual land, the semiotic register of language describing the land, the instructions for interpreting that language, and/or the framework of a legend for those interpretive aids. This ambiguity places community within an intersection of shared material conditions and the various ways in which these conditions might be interpreted. In its conceptual element, its hermeneutic level, the community is open to shifting lived relationships to the legend, its instructions, the land, and its language.

While Rich’s generous national spirit seeks to unite different groups within a logic of juxtaposition through maps felt through contiguous bodies and blood cycling at the scope of a

city, Harjo's uniting through memory offers a similar, though temporal, juxtaposition of a past signifying system generating meaning with current experience of communal belonging. Yet, Harjo's approach here can be contrasted to her strategy for offering shared feeling outside of a shared context. Harjo's "The End" explores compassion for experiences outside of the speaker's own context. This poem begins with an epigraph explaining the cremation of Pol Pot, "infamous leader of the Khmer Rouge, responsible for the killing of thousands" (24). In the accompanying tale "Compassionate Fire," Harjo indicates that 'the end' for the speaker was of a "nine-year relationship" but posits the possibility that "[t]hat night *the end* slithered through the unconscious of the city ..., a monster from the waters of the deep conscious..., dragging us through our fears at the deepest point of the night" (26). The speaker extends her mental state and circumstances to the strangers near her in the New York hotel. In this night she "tried to sleep in the hotel room, accompanied by the sounds of the thousands who surrounded me in that city, souls clammering in the present, from the past and present and possible future" (26). While the "sounds of the thousands who surrounded me" is euphonic, these sounds produce for a reader the tongue-twisting clammering of the difficult accumulation of similar sounds. In the speaker's "accompani[ment] by the sounds" of those nearby "clammering" as a description suggests an intrusiveness by those around her, a difficult appeal to her attention. The shift from being "accompanied" to being "surrounded" seems a move from community (posited not only in nearness but in the identificatory dispersal of the speaker's pain to each of these nearby strangers) to claustrophobia. This reaction to the mingled voices comes in contrast to the earlier privileging of a shared understanding of the language of the land or of "the ability to make songs out of the debris of destruction." While the speaker at first imagines a community of the deep conscious, here she comes to find this extension of community to be claustrophobic in its

inclusivity of voices. There is a sense here that the speaker wants to escape this surround of sound, this clammering for attention. Indeed, she comes to extricate herself from this mass as a compassionate traveller, as one with a special ability to move between contexts. Tensions between being a stranger and knowing or not knowing others; between being an isolated stranger and “the myth of the lonely stranger” as a “lie / by those who think they own everything” (17-18); between particular detail (the elucidated facts of the speaker’s situation) and generalization (the extension of the speaker’s feelings to the city of strangers) occur throughout this poem.

The speaker moves from the poem’s setting in New York City where she “was a stranger” in “a room / of ten thousand strangers, in a city of millions more” (1-2) to “traveling / through the dark” (6-7) to the end of Pol Pot’s life in Cambodia. Her own experience of an ending brings the speaker to consider the aftermath of tyranny in another country: “What I had / feared in the dark was betrayal, so I found myself there / in the power of wreckage” (30-32). As she moves to this other context, the speaker differentiates herself from those around her in emphasizing her particular ability for “traveling” and seeing, when “[n]o one else saw anything” (9). Yet, the disruption to her personal life also brings her to align herself with the strangers of her current location, through the image of a monster that unsettles the sleep of all those in New York. The hotel room setting likewise brings the speaker together with those around her as it is “just / a hotel room, one of millions,” though it also distinguishes her as one who sees when

No one saw it. No one saw anything
because it was dark and in the middle of the night and it was just
a hotel room, one of millions of hotel rooms all over
the world, filled with strangers looking for refuge,
sleep, for sex or love.
We were a blur of distinctions,
made a fragrance like a glut of flowers or piss on concrete.
Every detail mattered
utterly, especially in the dark, when I began traveling.
And I was alone though the myth of the lonely stranger is a lie

by those who think they own everything, even the earth
and the entrails and breath of the earth. This was the end.
It was Cambodia or some place like it. (9-20)

The speaker contrasts her attention to “every detail” with the city of strangers that did not see anything. These strangers, like those creating barricades in “An Atlas of the Difficult World,” miss the “blur of distinctions” in “looking for refuge.” Yet, the speaker does not provide us with distinctions or details, only the assertion of both. In defiance of its own unfulfilled assertion, the poem unsettles the specificity of Pol Pot’s destructive reign in Cambodia by the addition of “or some place like it.” The blur of distinctions becomes a general indication of shared difference. This poem offers a valorization of engagement with difference without engagement with actual difference. If the speaker moves outside of her own context, she does so to make a generalized comment about compassion.

The act of witness through which one might feel compassion is likewise vaguely indicated in the poem. The process of coming to witness occurs in the dark; the speaker’s inability to see in the transition between this place and the next creates a silence around the process of witnessing, around what might be involved in making connections between two contexts or in the process of moving out of one’s own place to a place of visitation. The speaker is “traveling / through the dark” without a framework for making connections between details.

In the tale, Harjo links Pol Pot—through the idea that “evil often sit[s] in the chairs of rulers,” after they are “chosen according to the ability to acquire power and money, not because of their outstanding gifts of service, compassion and love for the community” (27)—to a suffering closer to home: “Andrew Jackson was made president after being medaled with high war honors by the U.S. Government for killing Mvskoke women and children who were resisting being forced from their homelands” (26). The recognition of separate suffering as a shared issue

of a larger and widespread lack of “compassion and love for the community” seems to suggest community as an open category that might contain any community or all communities or existence itself as already community. If the comparison could be Cambodia or someplace like it, the point seems to be that suffering transcends borders. Yet, how might this point be compelling if suffering is only abstractly invoked? Though the poem tells its readers that there is suffering in these two contexts, it does not depict that suffering.

What is at stake in this connection between divergent contexts of suffering, then? Though the details “mattered utterly,” they are not included. Why insist that details matter without providing any? What is emphasized in providing a blur of distinctions rather than the distinctions themselves? Details matter utterly here as those which are selected by the speaker to indicate something common in the suffering of one group of people and another: details, then, are not so much what the speaker offers as what we are to understand to lie behind the speaker’s assertions of similarity. The logic of details in this poem is of the register of similarity or the substitutive: the speaker does not evoke Cambodia in its detail but invokes it as Cambodia or someplace like it as a place in which evil reigned. The details behind Cambodia make it or someplace like it an adequate example of noncompassionate leadership for which any other example could be substituted to make the same point.

In the tale, the speaker asserts that “[t]here is an exact address of compassion and in this place even Pol Pot and Andrew Jackson will one day open their eyes. But it is sometimes difficult to translate this knowing into the here and now” (27). The “address” of compassion indicates compassion as occupying a place, such as the figurative place of a witnessing community, and also that compassion speaks out, demanding its own attention. The speaker seems to have her eyes open, so to speak, to the compassion that speaks out, but the exact

address of compassion is precisely this figurative or abstract place. Working from an exact address of compassion, she moves with a substitutive logic, filling and refilling this address with examples evoked through their detail-stripped similarity. This speaker makes an argument about what it is to be a compassionate person by positing herself as such a person. Readers, though, must accept this argument as self-evident.

If being compassionate is about “open eyes,” the poem includes an unresolved contradiction in depicting witness as occurring “through the dark.” If compassion has an “exact address,” there is an inconsistency in leaving out the detail that matters utterly. The poem translates the call of compassion, its address, into an openness that exists beyond any single context of compassion in this world, leaving eyes open to details that cannot be specified in the dark. The poem and tale offer a frank statement of compassion without an indication of how another person might see as the speaker sees, how another might cease to be one of the “strangers looking for refuge” (12), who cannot see “anything / because it was dark” (9-10). The poem provides the category of engagement (compassionate witnessing) without providing its elements (how one might aim to open one’s eyes to suffering). The tensions in the speaker’s self-positions—being a stranger and being one of many, being a special witness and being in the dark with everyone else, being grounded in context and detail and being able to move freely between contexts through a blur of distinctions—indicate a difficulty in seeing this speaker’s special proclivity for compassion at the same time as understanding compassion as an address that everyone should both hear and find. This poem gives voice to compassion’s address, but leaves its location for those who already know how to travel.

“The End” indicates a personal context of suffering alongside one not personally experienced by the speaker, but her own heartache, the treatment of indigenous populations

under Andrew Jackson, and Pol Pot's regime are not substantially connected through the speaker's representation of a condition of witnessing. In contrast, Rachel Tzvia Back's collection mingles two contexts in an investigation including the contexts themselves as well as what it means to witness them together. Back, a poet born in the United States and living in Israel, approaches compassion across contexts in a series of "buffalo poems" (68) in her collection *On Ruins & Return: The Buffalo Poems*. In these poems, the speaker witnesses the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, a conflict she engages with through the image of a buffalo. This buffalo's wandering across space and time allows the juxtaposition of the violence in Israel with the buffalo slaughter occurring during the colonization of the United States. The animal appears as an image drawing witness to its own slaughter while it at the same time facilitates a poetic response to the violence committed and suffered by human groups in both the United States and in Israel: "On American plains there were once / sixty million, here / there were none / though now I see him here / as though returning / remnant" (I.45-50). Like the materials of wreckage and waste in Rich's and Harjo's poems, the buffalo as returning remnant is left over from the wasting of the buffalo. This buffalo is valued here, as buffalo were not in the historical context of the American plains. It is also revalued in the context of Israel/Palestine. This buffalo is, then, the material of the surplus, of the additional meaning created in juxtaposition. Back also attempts to write compassion across contexts by working the remains of violence into a generous extension of some version of poetic community. With the buffalo, Back takes an image of waste and makes it an image of generosity in its operation as witness across contexts.

The speaker first sees the buffalo in the Jerusalem Hills, "Here, where there were / never buffalo – but here / it is" (10). She invokes the absent category—there never were buffalo—before moving to the singular "it." This buffalo is not one of a general group, but a particular,

cross-contextual image, a remnant of one historical situation that is in excess—in surplus—of that historical meaning through its presence in another geographic and political context. The line of empty space that occurs before this “it is,” before this articulation of the buffalo’s being, functions as a pause, a hesitation, that indicates the buffalo’s complicated existence as it links two geographies and political contexts. The same hesitation (a blank space this time) and the same deictic “here” occur also in the section I quoted in the paragraph above. “Here it is” is a deictic indication of its presence in the speaker’s space and time. This presence is asserted against the pause of the complicated implications of the buffalo as the image that might be attached to a context in which it does not, in actuality, belong.

“Until we all see buffalo” (9) is the title of the prose-poetic introduction in which the pregnant speaker stops her car in the Jerusalem Hills and sees a buffalo. The buffalo becomes “mostly forgotten” (11) as life moves into the birth of the baby and the new millennium but is remembered “[w]hen the first riot erupts” in the Galilee, “carrying the weight of violence on its broad back, in its vast and silent eyes—and it allows me to write what I could not have otherwise” (12). It carries the weight of violence, but it is not a trope or a translation—a carrying across—of one suffering to another. The broadness of its back suggests the generosity of carrying the weight of multiple sufferings while it does not take the place of—become a symbol for—the sufferings that are with it. Its vast eyes likewise indicate the buffalo as an image of witnessing while their silence tells us that the buffalo will not speak for what it sees; it does not stand in for the violence it witnesses.

The buffalo’s presence in the North American context is literal, but its non-literal presence in Israel/Palestine is not metaphoric. Rather, the buffalo operates as an image linking the two contexts. We might consider the buffalo to be a sort of conceit, but it is a conceit that involves no

substitution. This buffalo is a conceit without metaphor, a conceit in which all terms stay separate, one context and another and an image that links them. Though neither context comes to stand for the other, they are held together in likeness through a common image. The image's presence makes them similar in a way that they are not (having to do with buffalo), not as a figure of speech but a figure of juxtaposition.

The image of the buffalo allows the speaker "to write what I could not have otherwise" (12). What she writes are seven sections detailing the image of the buffalo, the conflict and violence in Israel/Palestine, and the settlers' violence against buffalo and human in North America. In the first section, the speaker sees shot and killed a buffalo in her land that does not have buffalo. In the second, the buffalo is mentioned only in the oblique way the speaker—threatened by "doubt / in a place of stonesteedy / believers" (II. 10-12)—describes "something of uncertain shape, dragging a broken self" (II. 25-26) that is "always misnamed" (II. 12) but might be a buffalo, a god, "[t]he past I didn't choose / that is mine" (II. 1-2), or the speaker's own "mind clouded /down" (II. 5-6). Section three describes "the quarry / [that] was a heap of dead bodies" (III. 26-27) alongside the description of buffalo shot from trains. The fourth section offers two columns, side by side, one detailing the slaughter of the buffalo and the other giving the relationship between the buffalo and the indigenous peoples of the American prairies—"If it dies, / we die" (IV. 3-4, right column)—along with a list of names of those killed in a battle. The fifth section reflects the struggle with faith in the second section, as a lost soul is compared to a wandering buffalo. The penultimate section focuses on a hurt child, the buffalo appearing only at the end, "crouching low / before mourning houses" (VI. 52-53). The last section does not mention the buffalo but talks of the city of Jerusalem as "surrounded by the armies / of those who love her too much / love her weight her warmth her steadfast bulk immobile /behemoth"

(VII.30-33). In this too generous love, the city becomes like the wasted things in Rich and Harjo's poetry, and, in her description as "bulk immobile / behemoth," like the shot buffalo, the "heap" of section one, the "broad uncertain shape" of section two, the "giant beasts" of section four, the "breathing carcass" of section five.

In this oblique comparison, the poem approaches a symbolic register to the image of the buffalo. The poem records this approach as the ultimate erasure of the buffalo's presence—in the last section which has no buffalo—by this symbolic valence. Transformed into a symbol, the buffalo becomes like the too-loved Jerusalem in the overkill of destructive hunting. Yet, this final section transforms the buffalo so tentatively—its disappearance here seems to flow from its lesser role in the previous section and, moreover, the city, as a "bulk" or a "behemoth," is only very subtly buffalo-like—that it seems more like a recognition of the temptations for this transformation of buffalo into symbol than the actual doing of it.

Likewise, earlier, doubt is only hintingly imagined through the image of a buffalo:

doubt
in a place of stonesteady
believers. Always misnamed, he is
this: ...
He is what I dream,
the black ropes
that will not hold, the blood
that flows unnoticed through the dirt
stained darker smells of fresh
kill, he is the someone,
something of broad uncertain shape,
dragging a broken self
into these jagged hills, my always
foreign horizon (I. 2. 10-28).

That the shape of this "someone" or "something" is "uncertain" and dragging into an "always foreign horizon" suggests the tenuousness of the buffalo as a symbol for doubt in the face of suffering. This symbol is a "dream" with "ropes" that "will not hold." As the speaker constructs

the image, she simultaneously depicts its unravelling. Her doubt, “always misnamed,” is in this comparison, too, another misnaming.

The sequence later returns to the question of faith with a simile:

It is the soul
suddenly
wandering off
like a butterfly
or a buffalo (I.5. 1-5)

The comparison does not suggest likeness of being, but likeness of action: the soul wanders off like a butterfly or a buffalo, a comparison that breaks down in the contrasting alternative possibilities—a butterfly and a buffalo cannot be said to wander with much similarity. The simile seems to wander from its comparison into another line, a line disrupting an image of how the soul might move away from its body. The buffalo prevents any ease of comparison, complicating the idea of similarity as it offers it. That it does offer it, though, suggests the conceit without substitution, the comparison that does not use one term to explain another, but a combination of items which must all remain equally mutually constitutive, both expressing the other, and neither disappearing into the expression. The soul wanders like a butterfly or a buffalo—not like both, but not like only one or the other either. In the available options, the soul becomes something which we cannot imagine to wander in one fixed way. The materiality of the description is both evoked and unsettled: the soul wanders like a tangible entity, but the surplus description makes imagining a concrete wandering difficult and uncertain. Like the maps felt in the press of bodies in Rich’s poem or between the land, its language, and its interpretation in Harjo’s, this soul is situated in a space generated between other elements. This soul is depicted through alternative rather than combination. Yet, the buffalo here is a descriptive option whose additive function defies the grammar of its suggestion: though it is an “or,” its very givenness is already additive.

Moreover, in the alliteration, assonance, and doubled double letters in “butterfly” and “buffalo” that suggest connection moving into difference, an idea of the soul is generated through complicated interaction.

Interrupting the speaker’s lines are biblical quotations featuring buffalo^x, as though matched contexts—words of faith to call back faith—might create similarity between the soul and the buffalo. Yet, the words she might use “to call / the lost soul / back” (36-38), “furred words / lumbering forth ... are all wrong” (29-34). The quotations, in breaking through the speaker’s words, are not integrated in her project, but, like the buffalo, simply assert their presence.

Section four puts the buffalo in its actual context of late nineteenth-century America. It is here that the shared context of suffering between human and animal is made explicit in a two-columned poem. On the left side is a story of the slaughter of the buffalo and on the right is a story of the slaughter of the people, “*All dead at Adobe Walls battle*” (IV. 19). Until we get this context halfway through the seven-sectioned poem, it seems as though the image of the buffalo is associated with one context (the North American one) more essentially than the other (the Middle Eastern one), as representing, through its own slaughter, the colonisation of the land on which the buffalo lived and the suffering of that land’s first peoples. But the poetry fights against that synecdochal connection, not allowing the buffalo to stand as a part for the whole. This section takes the central image and breaks down the synecdochal connection, preventing the production of a symbol. Here, both human and animal suffering are presented: the buffalo cannot stand in for what is not absent.

At some points, the buffalo and human suffering are juxtaposed in a manner suggesting association built of likeness rather than nearness; that is, at some points, the buffalo seems close

to taking over as a symbol of human suffering. A father, who, travelling a “besieged road to bring / his soldier son home / drives into a daylight ambush death / rises from the roadside shadows / [...] / there is no bringing him back / there is no bringing them back / the buffalo” (44). The ‘him’ and ‘them’ shifts to become as much applicable to the buffalo as to the humans to whom the pronouns first refer. Yet, again, the buffalo does not stand in for the father or son, but they all stand together, side by side, all terms in play. In another juxtaposition, the killing of the buffalo and the human become entwined; a shooter “marks the lead cow” and “[b]ewildered / she drops to one foreleg then / to the other kneeling / in dust we are kneeling in dust / what do you / hear / what does the herd / hear / A rifle’s rupture of space / across river ravine / ruminants and the land / at last stampeding / as again / we take aim” (40-1). This “we” refers to both those kneeling in the dust and those taking aim, but not to the buffalo, which remains separate in the herd to hear the rifle. The buffalo begins beside the humans to indicate a similarity in violent conditions, but is moved aside as well to recognize difference.

Examining these poems as a kind of bestiary, a collection of moralized fables about actual or mythical animals, the speaker again addresses the buffalo’s role: “The air [is] thick with blood and dead / buffalo Bestiary with no moral” (I.4. 21). A bestiary featuring actual animals is most fictional in the moralizing narrative into which the animals are inserted. The removal of this moral takes the animal out of the symbolic realm, placing it—in removing the purpose of the context in which it exists—into a literal realm in which there is no final end offering a clear moral.

This buffalo as “returning remnant” “had wandered across / continents / white corded waters / into roped-off histories / onto forgotten minefields” (V. 5-9). The buffalo, in this role, becomes a kind of pervasive historical residue that might wander into new possibilities for

attentive compassion. Yet this residue might be wasted: “The scene should be framed and hung on walls as / is, as / from anywhere / in these hills -- / highpitch of air punctured-- / single shot / in perfect flight through will / pierce fur / flesh and he too / will fall/ another small / soon / indistinct / dark decomposing / heap / as ancient and pointless / as the rest” (I. 1. 58-74). To hang the scene as a picture “as is” would be to replicate the buffalo’s function in this poem. The buffalo’s function is to be; we are told that “it is.” The simple presence of the scene contrasts the pointless destruction that otherwise threatens it—that is, the scene says “it is” to counter a history in which it is not, a history that nearly obliterated this presence. At the same time, to frame the scene “as is” suggests this poem’s attempt to include the buffalo as an image but not as a trope; that is, the speaker recognizes the impossible desire to frame something without changing its meaning. This attempt for the buffalo to move “as is” is observable throughout the buffalo poems, and most particularly in the places where the image approaches a symbolic resonance that is immediately or simultaneously undermined.

The buffalo returns in the final section of part three of the collection, and also completes the collection in “Bringing the Buffalo Back Home: (October 2005, Adirondacks, NY).” In the earlier section, the speaker gives the image of the buffalo in a violent environment and a struggle for hope:

her curved back its
 furred arch pushing against the unforgiving
 sky pregnant threats in the air it was rounded
 like a woman’s lovely belly as though a baby could push
 out of her back into the day a different day unmaimed un
 named by fire or fear (III.9-8-13)

The pronoun changes that occur throughout the buffalo poems are evident here; the buffalo moves back and forth between a ‘her’ and an ‘it,’ a living being and an image. In a similar way, the image of pregnancy moves between threats in the air and the hump that is like a woman’s

belly, in the first case a figure of speech in which threats become pregnant and in the other an assertion of physical likeness between buffalo and human. The simile moves from the conceptual level to the physical level, from a colloquialism of threats to a cliché of hope—or at least to something that is like a standard image of hope: the buffalo is not an image of pregnancy, but an image of something that is like pregnancy. In this connection to pregnancy, the buffalo is an image of something like hope, but resists becoming a symbol of hope itself.

As the poem plays with the placing of the buffalo's figurative register, it also depicts an oscillation of the buffalo's presence. Though "[o]ne day she was gone disappeared from the page" (III.9. 2-3) the buffalo's presence is undone only to be found again. In this poem, when the buffalo disappears from the page, the speaker finds the buffalo in her heart as "only / my heart heard her stillness" (6-7). But this "moment of *beckoned listening*" passes (4) and the image returns to the page:

I didn't even notice until she was gone and I
kept calling as though in her name there was a moment but
not mine to keep now I write buffalo poems
in her absence (III.9. 21-4)

In holding a moment that can't be kept, the buffalo's name holds a memory. The speaker does keep the name (even from us, her readers), because these poems don't depict the image of the buffalo in the speaker's heart (she was gone); rather, they evoke the production of a poetic version of that personal image. The poetry's image of the buffalo is a memory of the image the speaker held as her own.^{xi}

In the poem ending the collection, the speaker returns to the idea that the buffalo is not a device which she uses but rather an agent within a moment which the speaker remembers and

writes. Earlier, the speaker corrects herself when she said she found the buffalo again: “I found her / no she / found me though” (III.9. 5-6). The speaker is not engaging in a fantasy in which she has no hand in the images of her own poetry. The buffalo presents herself to the speaker, but does not insert herself into the poem; it is in the buffalo’s absence that the speaker writes her buffalo poems. The buffalo image is, for the speaker, who finds herself (like Back) a citizen of two contested lands (the United States and Israel/Palestine), a part of the violent context with which she contends. The buffalo is self-asserting because it is an essential part of these contexts as the speaker experiences them and so is not incidental or additional, nor a different and separate version or perspective.

The speaker depicts the moment in which the buffalo became this image: “I first saw her there / she first stole / the image / broke open lies / shattered quartz / crenellated fear / spoke a quiet / hope kept / me company / until / one day / she was gone— / I had no choice: / alone / I brought her / home” (V. 33-48). The buffalo stole the image and the image broke open the lies, and thus, the speaker says, “[s]he / taught me to tell” (V. 135-6). Or, these lines could be read differently: the buffalo stole the image, the image broke open, and lies shattered. In the first reading, this image that is for the speaker a part of the scene of violence stole into her poetry and allowed her to write something that felt true about the violence she witnesses. In the second reading, the buffalo stole into her poetry, destroying its central image but also opening it, revealing its inner mechanisms in its shattered availability. These two possible alternatives are consistent with the moments of tension throughout the buffalo poems between the presentation of an image approaching various modes of symbolic force and the breaking down of that image.

The speaker, writing in the Adirondacks, NY, “brought my heart’s buffalo home” (V. 83). Since, in this poem, the speaker “saw her leave” (142), this moment is different than the

earlier one of sudden absence. She returns to the place “where her exile / my anger / took hold” (128-30). The speaker’s anger caused the buffalo’s exile, her displacement brought by the speaker’s need for its company in her heart. The buffalo brings the speaker through her crisis by teaching her to write these buffalo poems: “Home / already then a place / haunted / by what / is untold She / taught me to tell / and in the end / she lumbered off / ... / I saw her leave / My / solitary heart / did not weep / as I knew / this is exactly /as it should be” (V. 131-48). Her heart is now solitary, the buffalo has been brought back, and the collection ends. The buffalo is no longer “my heart’s buffalo”: though earlier, the image in the poem was a memory of the image in the speaker’s heart, it seems finally to be more like its shadow: a reflection causally attached to the heart’s image. The poem’s image is the heart’s image again, but in a different form. For the speaker, the image in the poem does not stand in for the image in her heart; as with the contexts with which the buffalo is associated, the presence of both is required for the poetic image to function through its presence rather than in the substitution of its presence for something absent, and the marshalling of its presence towards that absence.

Back’s use of an animal image to encounter two contexts of human suffering complicates the already difficult co-encountering of distinct situations of violence. The buffalo, as a part of one of these contexts, would seem, if operating as a symbol, to equate animal suffering with the suffering of people indigenous to North America. As a symbol, the buffalo would similarly equate the colonization of the United States with the conflict in Palestine/Israel. Such equation would occlude important difference and detail—ontological between human and animal and political and historical between North America and Israel/Palestine. Instead, Back’s buffalo functions as an image without equation. Her image is present alongside the separately depicted

details of each context of suffering and brings divergent elements into connection without joining them.

In Back's poems, the buffalo's presence works as a process of communication of the speaker's witness. This witness is not separate from the rest of the speaker's life: this witness is no less an element of her life than is the baby she carries as she begins the collection or the love for her husband which she records in a section of love poems (IV "What is Still Possible (6 Love Poems)"). While all three poets I have dealt with consider compassionate communities, Back's poems are not about bolstering community within (as in an inclusive United States) or between (as in an abstract transnational or global community of compassion and just leadership) groups and nations. Back's poems are concerned with the process of communicating this speaker's witness to readers. A poem is already a medium of communication, but the buffalo is that communicatory function made explicit.

The buffalo is an image that connects this speaker's compassion as it arises from the framework of her life with the poetic communication of that compassion. The speaker's heart's buffalo is not the buffalo that is in the poem. This poem's central image has meaning in relation to the speaker's personally significant memory for which it does not stand in but instead stands with. The poem's buffalo image signifies and is significant insofar as it is not, but acts in relation to, the speaker's heart's image. A readerly relationship is not at all formed with the speaker's buffalo, but rather with a poetic image that works in relation to the image in the speaker's heart. Likewise, the poem's image cannot be one from any reader's life, but might have significance for any reader in relation to the images he or she has held in heart. Not of the speaker and not of the reader, the poem's buffalo is a joining device, a creation of meaningful space between speaker and readers.

While the buffalo can be considered as an image of witness and an image of compassion, these aspects can be understood to be part of the buffalo as communication. Witness and compassion each involve communication in their concerns. Communication is always an implicit issue in any art, but this poem engaging concerns of witness—involving a relationship to testimony—and compassion—involving fellow-feeling or feeling in community—is particularly conscious about its own modes of signification and address. The image of the buffalo is what can be shared between speaker and reader. The image is compassionate as it is com-signifying: the image means along with the speaker (with what she has held to be meaningful in living her life) and it offers to mean along with the reader. This buffalo, allowing fellow-meaning, might be considered as an image facilitating compassion (insofar as I will not separate this fellow-meaning from a concomitant fellow-feeling). As in compassion, in which one does not feel the suffering of another, but feels one's own suffering in response, a reader encounters this speaker's personal meaning through its explicitly poeticized communication.

Earlier, I examined the buffalo image as a refusal to symbolize, an avoidance of becoming a rhetorical device that would displace a term in its construction. Though this image is in relationship to the image of a buffalo outside of the poem, the poetic image does not stand in for a referent. Consequently, there is wasted signification in the gap between the image in the world and the image in the poem, in the meaning that will not be carried over. At the same time, this poetic image offers surplus signification in its operation as (rather than standing in for) a process of communication. The image breaks open as an image and reveals itself to be a process. The poem is almost iconoclastic in its consistent break down of its central image at the same time as its meaning is dependent upon that very image. But, it is dependent on the image showing its own mechanisms, on being an image that does not communicate by covering over or

moving aside. This image does not deliver anything except itself as that which might hold open some signifying space. It only works because it is broken open.

The nearness between elements in “An Atlas of the Difficult World” is similar to the juxtapositional work of Back’s buffalo. The strategies are, however, finally significantly distinct. Rich’s tactic is metonymical; her act of witness has a logic of contiguity. The individuals in her poetry are brought into relation through a separately constituted whole. Her approach is a kind of binding; her images work like the girasol to bring together the elements of a nation. As in Back’s buffalo poems, Rich’s poetry works through the nearness of various elements, through placing things beside each other. Yet, while juxtaposition is the logic behind the image, the image itself works differently. Rich’s images function as wholes encompassing all possible elements. These images bring elements into proximity, but the images themselves consolidate the elements into one overarching framework. The individuals encompassed by the image of national belonging are gathered into belonging by symbols, but first produce symbols through the desire to belong to a national community; there is a co-constituting relationship in this symbolic production. Back’s poetry creates a relationship for her readers between contexts which are in personal relationship for her as her two homes: she makes a personal, coincidental relationship public and significant in the reality of a need for attentiveness and openness across contexts. Rich takes individuals in a nation, who share in reality the connection of living in the same country, by analyzing that relationship itself. What is it to be associated? How can we consider the association itself, that intangible surplus that is connectivity and shared significance? Rich emphasizes that this symbol’s significance rests on the juxtaposition of the particulars that bring it into being. Rich’s investigation is about what it is individuals create when they create a community. “An Atlas of

the Difficult World” considers how the elements of community operate and, more particularly, what kind of relationships the framework of national belonging can allow.

In contrast to the work of juxtaposition in Rich’s and Back’s poems, Harjo’s “The End” works metaphorically; the speaker’s act of witness has a logic of substitution. Any evil leader can be substituted by another, because the poem supplants the details of the leadership with the label of evil. The focus is on the general prevalence of suffering, not on its particularity, although—given the informative blurb about Pol Pot’s reign heading the poem—there is a sense that a witness would need to know the particulars in order to recognize the similarity. Enough information is provided for readers to understand that this speaker does know some particulars, though the poem does not bring readers to witness those particulars themselves. This poem does not depict compassion as a feeling but as an idea. While her poem, like Back’s, features a personal perspective opening up into wide relevance, the individual experience does not lead convincingly into the broader statements.

To return to that matrix of generosity and waste which I see operating in each of these collections, we can understand these three poets to write different forms of generous compassion—generous in its openness beyond borders. Rich’s girasol section suggests that it is in fact wasteful to consider generosity as something that might be wasted. With this understanding of generosity in mind, I offer these considerations in an effort to attend closely to some routes a compassionate impulse might take, to consider how, outside of a circumscribed instance, a compassionate project might approach a conglomeration of detail, of comparison, of coinciding context. I do not mean to privilege a certain mode of compassion over others. I am concerned, rather, with considering the implications to various ways of representing compassion.

I find Harjo's poem to be the least compelling in terms of depicting compassion and the most compelling in terms of exploring compassion's operation. It seems to me that she is not speaking about the abstract through a collection of particulars (as Rich does). Harjo starts with the abstract, indicates the necessity of particulars, but then leaves them out. The abstract is not tied to the particular, but tied to an idea (abstract itself) of the need for particularity. In "The End" the speaker's travel to Cambodia is invested with identification, a sense of shared suffering. The similarity of circumstances is denoted vaguely through the substitutability of one suffering with another. Without the inclusion of the details legitimating the comparison, this similarity rests at a general level that sits oddly with the importance placed on the particular places of witness. Yet, to speak in the same vocabulary as this poetry, this generosity of compassion—the sharing of the compassion for suffering close at hand with suffering far away—is not wasted. This generality obfuscates the poem's approach—in that the project of witnessing and compassionate attention is depicted as a matter of fact but not in terms of its prospects for or routes to accomplishment—but also creates the conditions to examine issues that accompany compassion as a value; how might one think through all the details of one's own and another place and find an "address" of compassion that speaks equally to both the near and far? How might one's compassion be tied to particularity while moving beyond the details of one's own experience? Does identification through similar experience contain compassion in its purview? How might one approach a balance between attention to difference and recognition of one's own location as a shaping force of one's perspective? Compassion can fall near to, be attended by, or confused with feelings, conditions, or values that either are not compassion or inhibit it: ignorance, pity, identification, empathy, condescension. Poems, like Harjo's, which consider

suffering across borders, investigate borders themselves, including what borders on the edges of compassion, and where these borders might lie.

Notes

ⁱ For Jakobson, “the metaphoric step” is “based on association by similarity” as compared to the metonymic “association by contiguity” (128). He calls metonymy and metaphor “two radically different tropes that are both artistic transformations—the former of contiguity and the latter of similarity” (129). Similarity works through “selection (the paradigmatic axis)” while contiguity works through “combination (the syntagmatic axis)” (130).

ⁱⁱ “The capacity of two words to replace one another is an instance of positional similarity, and, in addition, all these responses are linked to the stimulus by semantic similarity (or contrast). Metonymical responses ... combine and contrast the positional similarity with semantic contiguity” (Jakobson and Halle 77). See “Two Aspects of Language” for the use of “Combination” and “Selection” (60).

ⁱⁱⁱ While we might not immediately think of feeling as something we intend, the idea is particularly appropriate for considering poems which develop a sense of compassion as a mode of being. In this poetry, compassion is a feeling that one intends to promote in oneself.

^{iv} The idea of waste I propose in relation to compassion is not identical to the waste I note here in the poems. Compassion’s waste is the partial failure essential to its definition (a partial failure which is indeed its surplus). The waste of unnecessary harm and resultant suffering are what these poems counter. The images of material waste like wreckage and debris indicate suffering which is countered by the surplus of compassion.

^v Peter L. Berger in *Facing up to Modernity: Excursions in Society, Politics, and Religion* explains that “The broadest definition of patriotism would be *loving one’s own*: This is my place, these are my people, and in this place and with these people I am most myself” (118). Berger also provides discussion on the ethical capacities of patriotism in relation to the suspicion it garners as an ideological force (124-125). It is further noteworthy, in thinking about particularity and abstraction, that Berger defines patriotism through the relationship between its communal or face-to-face aspect and a sense of belonging in the abstract (120-1).

^{vi} The soul in section 5 of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, has material presence. But the speaker addresses his individual, already completed soul: “I believe in you, my Soul” (22.1). It is “peace and knowledge” of God (25.1-4) that produces the soul as well as its community with other souls: “And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own; / And that all the men ever born are also my brothers” (25.3-4). In this example, a belief in a transcendent whole creates wholeness in the individual, rather than individuals coming together to form a whole and a transcendent surplus through that communal spirit. In both cases, though, a communal sense arises from a shared belief in community. Despite this depiction of the tangible individual soul, the community of souls depends on God’s “promise,” “spirit,” and “love” (2,3,5).

^{vii} As I will demonstrate in a moment, this metonymical relation of individual to community is much the same as that between reader and poem. Poetic community does not exist simply because individuals read the same poem but might exist if that group believes the poem to address readers meaningfully as a group. That is, poetic community occurs if a poem is successful in structuring a belief in readers about how the poem wishes to affect them.

^{viii} The girasol’s standing in for more than the parts of the country as the additional binding element is evident in the flower’s naming. While “sunflower” would indicate a direct connection, girasol—“*gira-re* to turn + *sole* the sun” (OED)—shows the work of connection, the turning involved in building the relationship between the flower and what it faces.

^{ix} “1866 J. LINDLEY & T. MOORE *Treasury Bot.* I. 575/1 The name of Jerusalem Artichoke is considered to be a corruption of the Italian *Girasole Articocco*, or Sunflower Artichoke, under which name it is said to have been originally distributed from the Farnese garden at Rome soon after its introduction to Europe in 1617” (qtd. in OED, “artichoke”).

^x The two quotations are: “*canst thou bind the buffalo with his band / in the furrow? or will he harrow / the valleys after thee*” (12-5) and “*who / hath, as it were / the strength / of the buffalo?*” (41-4); from Job 39:10 and Numbers 24:22, respectively (101).

^{xi} We can compare this withholding to Harjo’s withholdings. Unlike Harjo’s poem, this withholding of the buffalo’s name seems mobilized by the poem’s logic: the speaker indicates a layered absence of the buffalo as it is for her the memory of what was a personal experience of the world, while for readers, it is the evocation of its presence, subsequent world-absence, and new memory-presence. For us, the buffalo itself was never present nor absent and withholding her name suggests that, even more for us than for the speaker, it is not ours to hold.

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Chapter 5

Reading Metonymically in Dionne Brand's *Inventory*

Dionne Brand's *Inventory* occasions an ethics of metonymical response. Though Brand lists numbers and facts of suffering, a reader is not primarily engaged in an epistemological project of information transmission. Rather, a reader is engaged through a condition of being, an ontology of reading—that is, a kind of way of being as a reader—that is shaped through the poem. A reader of this poem is, at a structural level, metonymically related to its speaker in the sense of contiguity. This poem positions readers as listening participants. As a listener, a reader is in a logical association with the speaker. The association is premised on this nearness rather than on a substitutability of reader as witness. *Inventory* does not present a list of suffering, but a speaker's experience of making such a list. The poem is not available to be read as an inventory of suffering alone; instead it puts readers into relationship with the speaker as a witness and as the inventory's creator. *Inventory*'s title makes the poem seem to be an accumulation of facts of suffering, but *Inventory* primarily focuses on how the speaker is affected by the suffering she witnesses. The poem explores suffering through the lens of the speaker's own responding feelings; it attends to response and how that response might be communicated.

In witness poetry, concerned as it is with social suffering and a social impetus for change, reception is of special import. We can first consider an emphatic relation between speaker and reader next to common ways of understanding the wider mode of lyric poetry. I do not consider witness poetry to be an isolated individual's thoughts and emotions which a reader might take on as his or her own.¹ The speakers I study speak in relation to readers, and not only in the incidental or implicit sense that literary art exists that it be read. This poetry positions its readers within

relations premised on their reading as themselves, as people bringing their individual lives to the reading. In this poetry, reception and relationship are central explorations.

Next, we can consider this relationship in the context of what might be called protest poetry, its common reading as a call to action, and, specifically for witness poetry, the particular action of the dissemination of witness. Often, the relationship between poetic witness and reader is understood through a vertical logic of metaphor: a reader identifies with the speaker, placing him or herself into that position and so into the knowledge of witness. As I suggest above, this inhabitation of the lyric “I” is a condition of the long history of reading that “I” as a vague and open position. But, the sense that readers become, in turn, witnesses within an ongoing chain of dissemination is also shaped by trauma studies’ influence on criticism surrounding witness poetry. This criticism pulls, in its focus, toward poetry’s role in promoting action; witness poetry becomes a conveyance for facts of suffering which might lead to protest. Carolyn Forché, writing of a space she calls “the social,” says, “The social is a place of resistance and struggle, where books are published, poems read, and protest disseminated” (142). The role of literature—and she is speaking particularly about poetry of witness and other literature that might be defined in a certain conception of the political—is to propagate protest. That is, witness poetry’s purpose is to spread ideas, but also to cause its ideas to happen again as action in a reader. While much witness poetry exists for which this reading is effective, I find many poems, such as *Inventory*, to structure readerly response as a collaboration that is not possible for a reader who reads as the speaker. ⁱⁱ

This conception of the readerly role, as one involving identification and reproduction, has a metaphoric logic in Roman Jakobson’s sense of similarity and substitution. The manner of reading I just outlined suggests a chain of witnesses in which each reader substitutes as the next

witness. In contrast, I understand the relationship between a reader and a speaker of witness poetry metonymically, with resulting connections based in contiguity rather than in similarity. When a reader identifies with a speaker, in reading *as* that speaker, there is no longer anyone to act as listener. In metonymic relation, identities are retained and witness poetry might be a collaboration through contiguity: a speaker implies a listener, and a reader enters the poem into this relationship. To overwrite the communicative aspect of witness poetry is to imagine a kind of verticality that is not neutral. An alignment of a reader with the speaker leaves little space for the straining of communication, the responsibilities of response, the translation between experience and its telling, and between telling and listening. I find reception, as a central concern in this form of testimony, to be built into witness poetry through speakers' conceptual and affective approaches to the signs of suffering others. These poems model, I argue, a contiguous mode of relation which suggests that responsibilities of reception are grounded in a metonymical approach.

Brand's *Inventory*—a long poem of witness to a global condition in which “we mean each other / harm” (42)—presents a woman inventorying the ongoing disasters and atrocities televised on the news. While the speaker witnesses the transmission of information through these news reports, the poem is not another mode of disseminating the events and statistics it references, but a space for their addition; *Inventory*, as an inventory, is a space in which “things, things add up” (52).ⁱⁱⁱ This poem makes available the juxtaposition of details, the spaces created between things put beside one another through the speaker's waiting through each “latest watchful hour” (23). What is for her an ongoing proliferation of suffering, requiring similarly ongoing attendance, is for the reader waiting through reading the list the speaker has created. To make an inventory is to take stock. Inventories list articles or goods, one's properties. Brand's

poem-as-inventory is less a list of global suffering and more a taking-stock of the speaker's responses to suffering. A reader is similarly positioned to take stock of his or her own responses as the speaker's responses to suffering add up over the course of the long poem. The list form is necessarily contiguous (one thing after another) but also depends on the paradigmatic organizing similarity of a category (all items could be exchanged for others, so long as they all add up to global suffering). Yet, the speaker emphasizes the process of addition, not the final sum. Much of the poem is actually about the speaker's experience of creating this list. This space of waiting and addition is the space of reception. A reader's role is in relation to the space of waiting, to the list's creation even more than to its figures. Waiting is the primary element of the relationship between reader and speaker. Waiting is attending to the relationship itself, the time of reading the poem in which the speaker and reader are connected.

Inventory's speaker "can't bear the waiting / the metal, metal, metal of waiting / she sits devoted, the pairing knife close/ to a harvest of veins / (29). The repetition of the "metal, metal, metal" draws out this description of waiting, engaging the reader in his or her own wait; the speaker's evocation of waiting becomes, in the reading process, the felt experience of another waiting. The speaker's waiting through the news "each hour, each night" (29) is materialized in the metal that signifies it and the repetition that performs it. As both are made of metal, the waiting and the knife are linked. The knife threatens, but the waiting is already happening. The speaker's wait through the news reports of ongoing suffering is her facing the threat of her own suffering in response, but the ongoing "metal of waiting" is the threat already made good. The speaker's compassionate attention is already to suffer in response to suffering; the waiting is not for response but is itself response. The knife is for "pairing" (joining together) rather than "paring" (to cut away). This re-labeling suggests that the self-threatening knife might also be a

tool for shaping the relationship between a reader's waiting and the waiting the speaker depicts.^{iv} As witness, the speaker feels "the loosening clasp of affinities" (29); *Inventory* promotes the connection the witness feels is wanting. Much as the speaker's waiting (watching the news "through the latest watchful hour" [23]) manifests in tangible, bodily pain, a reader's waiting (reading the long poem) comes through the manifestation of the poem's material conditions as language.

For Diana Brydon, the speaker's "reading of the news enacts a model for our reading of her work" (995). She understands this model to follow Gayatri Spivak's idea of "critical intimacy" in which one "employ[s] both passion and reason while seeking understanding. One must enter the poem with all one's faculties while simultaneously maintaining a critical distance from it" (Brydon 995). As the reading of the news is sometimes reported directly by a speaking "I" and sometimes indirectly by a narrated "she," it seems to me that the poem might indeed remind its readers about the various distances that are a part of intimacy. Yet, Brydon's suggestion about what the reader should enter the poem *with*, doesn't indicate *where* a reader does, in fact, enter this poem. *Inventory* involves a "you" that is sometimes present, sometimes absent, and sometimes seemingly another designation— along with "we," "she," and "I"— of the speaker.^v *Inventory*'s "she" addresses "you," creating an unusual situation in which either the indirect "she" can address the reader directly, or the implied narrator that describes the "she" speaks around the speaker to the reader, or the "she" is really all along the "I" that eventually takes over, or, again, that "you" does not always indicate a direct address.

Thus, *Inventory*'s shifting pronouns complicate how an individual reader is positioned in relationship to the poem; it becomes unclear how the speaker and an addressed or implied reader might be paired. Brydon argues that "the poet employ[s] the range of pronouns, from 'I' through

‘she’ and ‘you’ to ‘we,’ to address or denote aspects of herself and her readers interchangeably. These pronouns invite readers to enter the text in various relations of critical intimacy, finding their own relation to this ‘bristling list’” (1003). The problem I find with understanding the reader to be invited into all of these pronoun positions is that, if a reader situates him or herself inside the role of speaker, then the one to whom the speaker might be speaking has become absent. This reader takes over as speaker, precluding a dialogue in which he or she might respond as listener.

Moreover, these various pronouns, as I read them, often do not invite a reader’s entrance. While “you” is most customarily assumed to be an address to the reader,^{vi} in *Inventory*, to whom this “you” refers changes without warning; of all the rotating pronouns in the poem, I find it to be the most ambiguous. To provide a point of comparison, *Inventory*’s “we,” likewise, but more obviously, refers diversely. The “we” who are “doing the best we can with these people [;] they hate our freedom, / they want the abominable food from our mouths” (27) is not the same collective that appears a few pages later: “don’t pray it only makes things worse, I know, / think instead of what we might do / and why, why are only the men in the streets, / all over the world” (34). Similarly, if less immediately apparently, the “you” of “what confidences would she tell you then, / what would possibly be safe in your hands” (23) does not seem like the same “you” of whom the speaker asks “what sound does the world make there, / the sound you must have heard / before these disasters” (34) or the “you” in “where you wonder did such men, ruddy with health / cultivate such wicked knowledge / then you realize ... they’re traders, like anybody else these days, / in what’s obvious” (44). While in the first instance the reader seems addressed as the one receiving the confidences of the inventory, the second “you” is more compellingly

directed at those experiencing the disasters the speaker inventories, while the third is arguably the speaker speaking to herself.

An important place of investigation for this use of “you” comes in part three, at the shift from “she” to “I.” It is here we are told that the speaker has “written a letter” (34). Brydon understands this letter to be addressed to the reader: “She has written a letter to an imagined reader, ‘an account of her silence, / its destination all the streets / beginning with Al Kifah, Al Rashid’ (14). The ‘letter’ concretizes the notion of poetic address” (992). Yet, as the quotation indicates, the letter’s destination is these streets, not, it seems, a reader. It is after the speaker indicates that this letter provides “an account of her silence” that she speaks as an “I” (34). The letter is an “account” of the narration of a “she” rather than the direct speech of an “I” and the account seems to be an address to those at the destination of the letter, to those on streets where the speaker can ask about “the sound you must have heard / there before these disasters, the sound / you must keep” (34). The account of her silence invites the self-representation of those experiencing what she has witnessed. The only response to this exchange of her silence for a description of sound is more silence: this address to those who endure these disasters cannot be answered within the poem and the “sound you must have heard” is not imagined here. That is, the speaker does not imagine a direct relationship with those whose suffering the poem inventories. As the speaker denies the possibility that she will speak for another, she might now speak as an “I” without engaging a fantasy of direct relation.

As the letter’s address does not reach those to whom it is addressed, the “you” shifts at what appears to be the letter’s end, just before the speaker is again called “she.” This shift occurs at what I read as an invitation to the reader, creating now an account of the silence between speaker and reader: “if I say in this letter, I’m waiting / to step into another life, / will you come

then and find me” (35). The reader is invited^{vii} to “find” the speaker’s location of witness where she waits for “another life.” But finding her would not open up this other life. Rather, finding her would mean additional waiting:

all I can offer you now though is my brooding hand,
my sodden eyelashes and the like,
these humble and particular things I know,
my eyes pinned to your face
understand, I will keep you alive like this,
the desolate air between us is no match
for the brittle orchids we are destined to eat together (37)

The initial impulse in a poem about witnessing might be to imagine the witness’s eyes to be pinned to a face that she witnesses, one of the sufferers from her inventory. Yet, if the “you” here refers to the reader, then we are back to the violent waiting that has been part of the inventory throughout the poem. To “keep you alive this way” would be to prolong—to “stay”—this position of reader through the continuation of the poem. The reader continues to wait with the speaker as long as the speaker keeps open this connection, this pinned communication.

The speaker offers her own feeling body—the hand metonymical of one’s signature or writerly style, the wet eyelashes metonymical of sadness—in the writing of this letter. The speaker’s description of her response is truncated as the list of these “humble particularities” ends after two items in the vague “and the like,” suggesting that her response is not modelled for a reader to replicate. The reader, forced out of a stable role or mode of address, has been continually placed back into his or her own individual responsiveness. Yet, the “stay” in “Stay now, she’s written a letter” (34) makes apparent the reader’s role as one of waiting. This poem is the space of mutual waiting, waiting which manifests for the speaker as an inventory of witnessed suffering and for the reader as reception. The form reception takes within the poem makes clear the division of duties, within a logic of waiting, between speaker and reader: “take

this letter, put it on your tongue, / sleep while I keep watch, / know that I am your spy here, your terrorist, / find me” (37). The instruction given with the letter on the tongue to “sleep while I keep watch” demonstrates, through this distinction of actions (sleeping and watching), that the reader and speaker have different roles. Moreover, the speaker asks to be found: finding something or someone suggests an initial distance and a closure of that distance through discovery rather than assimilation.

To sleep under the watch of one’s spy and terrorist indicates that the speaker’s relation to the reader occurs within this waiting space of reception: the speaker is watching you to evoke your response to the terrible inventory she presents. Thus, the distance between the speaker and reader—the “desolate air between us”—is overcome by this “destin[y] to eat together”: the shared if dissimilarly inhabited space of the witness poem ensures that both the speaker and the engaged reader take in—as with the letter on the tongue—the suffering witnessed through the inventory. In this inventory, the space between speaker and reader is a space of addition. The air between “is no match” because the two, once there is this “between,” are in a relationship of addition or pairing.

Inventory repeats and reinvents actions of sharing and pairing throughout the poem. In this focus, the poem displays its rhetorical strategies. Sharing and pairing is the work of rhetoric: in simile and the various forms of metaphor, pairing through similarity (and maintained difference) produces meaning shared across connection. As the comparison is implied in the work of metaphor, the connection is condensed in its articulation. In metonymy especially, a whole cultural and/or contextual understanding lies behind the logic of the common association that allows one thing to take the place of another. *Inventory* makes visible the work of its metonymical associations through their multiple repetitions. As metonymical modes of relation

add up, the rhetorical work becomes visible. One association, working inside a larger relationship, opens up the work of that containing relationship. That is, in a metonymical display which feeds into a larger metonymical structure, we know something about the internal workings of that larger association. As one example, the wet eyelashes (metonymical of sadness) and brooding hands (metonymical of poetic authorship) the speaker offers reveal the formation of the connection between speaker and reader. The speaker's body stands in for her affective and writerly response to suffering. It is this bodily response as witness she offers to readers. In the other direction, when she offers the letter (a written version of her response to witness), it is directed to a reader's body, to be received by the tongue.^{viii}

Thus, a physical connection stands in for multiple aspects of poetic response and reception. This physical connection comes in the context of witness to physical suffering. The speaker constructs her relationship to suffering others through physical feeling (the pairing knife at her veins). We might consider these embodiments as I consider, in the previous chapter, Back's words of faith to bring back faith: the speaker articulates her positions in relation to sufferers (through her own bodily pain), readers (through her wet eyelashes as compassionate response and brooding hand as recording/cherishing), and poem (in its consistent materialization of language) in material terms that match what she witnesses (suffering bodies).^{ix} Though these images of materialization are an attempt to connect to the physical suffering the speaker witnesses, metonymical relationship also includes distance and difference in the attempt to connect like with like. The recurrent exploration of acts of sharing and pairing shows an investment in analyzing as the mode of witness the poem performs.

The "brooding hand" which the speaker offers along with her pinning eyes is as much a part of this pairing as is the shared internalization of bitter things. While the "sodden eyelashes"

offer a literal connection (the eyelashes being wetted by the tears that indicate sadness), the brooding hand holds symbolically the brooding the writer feels. Likewise, though, the “eyes pinned to your face” could only be pinned out of the emotional intensity of the person behind the look. Pinning indicates seeing but also establishes sight as a thing stuck to the other’s face. As a kind of facial decoration, this seeing invites further looking. The eyes pinned to the face are a declaration of ongoing connection as well as a marking of that connection; the looked-at reader is marked as in a relation of sight with the speaker as witness.

The images of eyes and brooding hands are repeated: “Days, moored to the freight of this life, / the ordnances of her brooding hands, the / abacus of her eyelids” (38). The speaker’s brooding hands as ordnances—as “implements of war”; “ammunition; missiles or bombs” (OED)—suggests violence in the hands’ occupation of writing an inventory and a letter. If witnessing is a self-violence in the open waiting (time counted on “the / abacus of her eyelids) of attention to suffering, then the creation of a record of these attentions allows for others to take into themselves—like the letter on the tongue—this inventory.

Yet, the dual meaning of brooding qualifies the aggressive or threatening occupation of these hands. While “dwell[ing] moodily upon a subject of thought” (OED) seems consistent with the idea of hands as ordnances of inventorying death and suffering, that which broods is also that which “cherishes (brood), hatches, or incubates” or, figuratively, that which “hovers closely around or overhangs (as a bird over her brood).” Brooding as a noun joins these two meanings: “A cherishing in the mind; moody mental contemplation.” We might consider, then, the written account of witnessing as a weapon of cherishing and protecting.

Brooding’s senses of dwelling on a subject and cherishing in the mind both connect it with waiting. Waiting, in this context, is ontological: waiting is a way of being in relation. Put

into relationship with a speaker depicting the space of waiting that is an inventory, the responsibilities of reception here fall not to the facts of suffering, but to a way of being in relation to those facts. *Inventory* elsewhere explores such an ontological mode in an encounter between strangers that is not founded in coming to know but, rather, in a moment of engagement, a shared moment of ongoing not-knowing, a temporary nearness in space rather than the accumulation of knowledge through a common future. Brand's speaker—in an interlude from inventorying instances of suffering—encounters a stranger in another version of waiting: a collaborative moment of seeing alongside.

While visiting Cairo, the speaker finds herself in meaningful relationship with a stranger. She meets a storeowner who calls her “‘Cousin,’ ‘that word’ that ‘is more than father sister brother / mother, clasping what is foreign whole’ (58, 59). Though the word ‘Cousin’ indicates a relation more genetically distant than ‘father sister brother / mother,’ this word ‘is more’ than the others here. The speaker resignifies the distance between herself and the storeowner as closeness operating through their mutual positioning as strangers. They share this word cousin: if I’m your cousin, you are my cousin too (whereas if I am, say, your mother, you are my daughter).

The knowledge of the stranger is restricted to the moment of encounter. She “‘wanted to go back’ (58) but “‘all the time nevertheless, / I left him to himself’ (59), to

the time
you know, when something falls so perfectly
from your hands
I needed nothing from the market
after that, no scarves, no perfume bottles,
no nuts, no directions to all the gates of Cairo,
no souvenirs of ancient Egypt
other than the time we’d spent in some life,
before and since,
this charm of ours as I’ve said before
it meets you sometimes
on a hot mountain road or in a cool silver shop,

its startling purposes,
its imperishable beckoning grace,
so unexpected,
so merciful (59-60).

The speaker needed to take away from it ‘no directions’ and ‘no souvenirs’—that is, no orienting of her future movement and no object of memory. She “left him to himself,” suggesting that the importance of the encounter was “the time ... when something falls so perfectly from your hands.” Taken with the earlier ‘clasping what is foreign whole’ in the work of the name ‘Cousin,’ it is the combined act of clasping into connection and letting that connection fall again from ‘your hands’ that gives this encounter its particular significance. The significance of this encounter is the experience of the moment itself; the truth of the nature of their relationship is not what is at stake in the moment and so need not be grasped. Indeed, the facts that could be ascertained about each other are so beyond the impact of the encounter that the man might have “never existed” (59). This time spent in ‘some life’ does not continue in the trajectory of their individual lives, but is something set aside, something let fall. ‘Since’ indicates a continuous action—not something ‘before’ causing something ‘after’ in a chain of events, but a continuous moment to which one cannot return or have again because it is part of an ongoing condition. This encounter evoking ‘some life, / before and since,’ approaches an ontological condition, bringing it into experiential or intellectual availability.

The name he calls her, “clasping what is foreign whole,” suggests a way of encountering the foreign that does not require that it be undone by being brought into the realm of connection through shared attributes, twined lives, growing knowledge. The “charm” of the encounter has the “startling purposes” of “imperishable beckoning grace”—“favour or goodwill, in contradistinction to right or obligation” (OED)—and it is this beckoning that lives beyond the encounter itself. Grace—not a right or obligation—is non-essential, not a logical or moral

necessity, but something superfluous or additional.^x Here, deriving from a charm whose purposes startle, grace is also without foreseeable implications. This grace occurs, then, outside of teleology. This moment has charm, not because the moment creates a relationship that will progress into the future, but because it is an encounter that won't be repeated into the linearity of a shared, ongoing association. While this non-teleological focus does not mean that the encounter is without connection to the future, the shift in emphasis from that future onto the present makes clear that the grace the speaker feels is not so much the cause of a future effect as it is the ground of the meaning of a moment. Though I argue that the grace of this moment is not based in linear development or accumulated knowledge, it is not unconcerned with temporality or epistemology. This grace is 'imperishable'—occurring before and since, not outside of considerations of time and continuation—and 'beckoning'—calling not for cause and effect, as grace is not concerned with obligation or necessity, but for a gerund of attraction suggestive of ongoing response.

There is in 'this time you know' and 'this charm of ours' a syllabic and sonorous replication of sound. Though the speaker says, "this charm of ours as I've said before," she hasn't, looking to the poem, actually said it before; it seems that she is instead repeating the time that you know into a new vocabulary. The time and the charm are made structurally related but not equivalent, as the change of pronoun from 'you' to 'ours' moves from 'speaking to' into the indication of something shared. The placement of 'know' and 'ours' offers a structural comparison of knowing with a condition of sharing. In their respective lines, knowing and sharing are differently associated. Knowing is related to time: knowing is within the spectrum of accumulation, of cause and effect (learning and coming to know), of linearity. The "ours"

invoking sharing is related to charm: the attraction of an experience of collaboration which comes to meet you with startling purposes, unplanned, and unknown.

The speaker rejects her impulse to extend the moment into the future:

I wanted to go back, take his hand, eat from it, but,
that was, would be, another life,
and all our rumours would collide and
take that moment away from us when
he called me 'Cousin,' when cousin
came from both our mouths
and was a warning and a lie, and
a soft meeting and a love (58)

In contrast to the earlier image of letting something fall from the hand, returning to eat from his hand would be a form of holding on through consumption or internalization. For the speaker to go back would be to bring that moment from 'another life' into an ongoing relationship. This move to return would be a push toward a future of knowing as the initiation of the process of getting to know one another. To act on this desire for knowledge would "take that moment away from us." As an ongoing relation, it would cease to be a connection existing before and since—rather than a moment that impacts all other temporalities, it would be part of a chain of moments connected across temporalities. The moment has its force in its separateness, in its special ontological character.

In that shared experience of asserting a genealogical relation—"when cousin / came from both our mouths"—the shared assertion is itself the experience of relation. The knowledge of the truth of that genetic relation is less important than the experience of relation more generally. But to go back would be to ignore the warning that the relation might be a lie. The experience of an ontological truth can impact the structuring of meaning at any point of one's existence while epistemological truth tests that truth against the other truths of one's life; it must fit into the structures of meaning already in existence or cause other knowledges to adjust to its factuality.

To go back would be to fit him into the trajectory of her life where the nature of the relation (cousins or not) might matter more than the experience of it. The experience itself is valuable in a way that is not about knowledge (he might have been her cousin or he might have never existed; she needs no memorializing object or directions for her future navigation) but it is an experience of grace (of more than what might be there in fact) that makes this encounter meaningful. That is, such an encounter is about meaning, without necessarily involving knowing.

The earlier attention to eating and hands repeats in the speaker's desire "to go back, take his hand, eat from it," but this time in a repudiation of the ongoing relation these actions suggest. The relationship between the speaker and reader is likewise shaped by a context of information, the facts which the speaker brings in her inventory. The speaker and reader do not know the information of witness in the sense of having lived these facts. The relationship structured between speaker and reader by facts of witness is outside of the sharing of these facts, the having or owning of them; the relationship is rather shaped by the shared attention to the information, in the waiting in relation to it. On the other hand, the speaker's desire in her connection to this stranger is to find the facts of this man's life and share in them as they impact the facts of her own life (if she finds him to be her cousin, she will have come to know herself as a cousin as well). The poem as a whole moves against this desire to grasp information, emphasizing instead ways of being in relation that are outside of an emphasis on knowing.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's account of the term 'beside' provides a definition useful in thinking about reading witness poetry. For Sedgwick, the beside

seems to offer some useful resistance to the ease with which beneath and beyond turn from spatial descriptors into implicit narratives of, respectively, origin and telos. Beside

is an interesting preposition also because there's nothing very dualistic about it; a number of elements may lie alongside one another, though not an infinity of them. (8)

The before and since in witness poetry is something like Sedgwick's "beside," a way of thinking outside of a transaction from the present into the future of a chain of witnesses, each passing the knowledge of suffering onto the next. *Inventory's* structure also operates in a way that resists origin and telos. I introduced this section set in Cairo as an interlude from the speaker's record of suffering. The poem is constructed of many sections of interlude. The poem as a whole can be read through each of these multiple smaller moments; the poem is arranged for continual deepening in its ongoing offering of different grounding possibilities for the reading of it. This section depicts grace (coming out of the collaborative moment) rather than witness, and these impulses extend to the rest of the poem. The section's impact is before and since its place in the poem. This moment is not one of crisis, but the speaker's witnessing of crisis maintains the structure of this moment: the grace of her witness throughout the long poem is the offer of her own, bodily, experiential response, her own suffering as collaboration, as the compassionate contiguity of feeling from nearby. Though "she sits devoted, the pairing knife close / to a harvest of veins" (29), it is from those all around her that "she'll gather the nerve endings / spilled on the streets" (30). Her own suffering is not the physical suffering of the killed or of the women from "battered kitchens" whose "passions" she also gathers (31), but the knife at her own veins symbolizes her own suffering in response. Her suffering is the "[s]omething else, more" of compassionate witnessing (56).

Brand's speaker says, "Something else, more happened there" (56) in the Cairo moment. She doesn't identify this 'more,' but recognizes its presence. The 'more' and 'else' that happened suggest an experience that, in its depth of meaning, cannot be immediately or easily reconciled

with past experiences or the future trajectory of currently held structures of understanding. In such a moment, then, one knows something through experience that one cannot know as facts or information. The speaker takes away no directions or souvenirs but rather the ‘startling purposes’ of an ‘imperishable beckoning grace’ that is both ‘unexpected’ and ‘merciful.’ If the moment’s difference from her current knowledge of the world (its unexpectedness) is a mercy, then this poem demonstrates value in a moment separate and competing with coherent understanding. This moment cannot be reconciled to the trajectory of her life, the structure of meaning of that life, through a linear chain of the memory of the past leading to the meaning of the present and the navigation of the future.

This one moment becomes here metonymical to the speaker’s life. This significant encounter informs the speaker’s life as a whole, before and since—that is, not as a juncture after which everything will change, but as an experience which impacts a whole way of understanding one’s way of being in the world. This ability to stand in for a mode of living does not come through its similarity to other moments of the speaker’s life, but through its dissimilarity. The before and since is another kind of pairing: this moment suddenly shares in the whole of the speaker’s life. But it can only share in this way through the recognition of its difference, its unexpectedness in relation to everything else. The before and since is another way of understanding waiting as well. The moment’s impact cannot be exhausted in the moment, but functions over an imperishable span of time.

Sara Murphy calls metonymy “the trope of deferral” (149) because it points from one thing to the next without ever creating a full picture. It is from within this deferral that Brand’s *Inventory* asks its readers to respond. In the deferral of a whole that might be grasped, a relationship is one of waiting rather than knowing, or of putting into conjunction various

elements to create shifting configurations of meaningfulness. This is not to say that response to witnessing should not be about its information but, rather, that this poem structures another kind of response for its reader, one which emphasizes a way of being over ways of disseminating knowledge. Metonymy is both contiguous and deferring: it connects and leaves waiting. Like a knife that pairs (combines) and pares (cuts), *Inventory*'s metonymical strategies bring together and separate a speaker and reader, a witness and witnessed, and a graceful experience in the larger context of a life.

Inventory undertakes two simultaneous tasks: it creates a list of suffering and it forms a communicative space through which the speaker connects with readers. The poem's title makes obvious this additive mode in relation to the poem as list of suffering, but it is also a factor in the function of the poem as poem, that is, in how it structures response for itself. The list of suffering is a space in which "things, things add up" (52); similarly, the poem is an additive space between speaker and reader. Addition and pairing are conceptually linked terms, suggesting as linked tasks forming an inventory of suffering and forming relationship with readers. The speaker's pairing knife, as materialized tool of emotional work, is operative in both additions. Adding to her list is a kind of self-adding as well: every statistic of suffering is attached by and to the speaker's compassionate attention through her bodily emotional response. From the other side, a reader's engagement with the list of suffering comes through the speaker's selection and communication. It is in the connection between these two tasks that we can best consider the poem's overall work.

In the connection of reader to global suffering, the poem's work can be read as creating a kind of global community.^{xi} While this reading of *Inventory* is certainly available, and could be further established through my reading of its additive mode, I will focus on the more specifically

enacted scale of a reading relationship. *Inventory* explores a psychic space between speaker and reader. One way in which a readerly relationship is modelled in the poem is through the moment between the speaker and the man in Cairo. Like this relationship depicted within the poem, the speaker-reader relationship is not one that extends beyond the moment of encounter (in that, the speaker and I, as reader, will not have an ongoing relationship that can have new moments outside of the encounter of the poem, even if I return to this moment through rereading or remembering). Rather than an idea of an ongoing community (which is similar to the idea of a chain of new witnesses), I see the poem forming a temporary association between speaker and reader. The poem's point, for me, is not to ask a reader to enact witness as part of a witnessing community, but to be affected by the compassion of another person as she communicates it. Rather than asking for an agreement to take on the task of witness the speaker performs, the poem makes space for readers to react personally to what another person feels.^{xii}

Inventory's last section works most explicitly within this relationship between speaker and reader. It offers the best demonstration of my argument about how the poem structures its reception through a relationship between speaker and reader. As the last section begins, the speaker acknowledges that "On reading this someone will say / God, is there no happiness then" (89). This "someone" responding "on reading this" is explicitly a future reader of this poem. The speaker here anticipates an expectation of the availability of certain forms of feeling in the poem. That is, the poem creates this expectation, structuring into the relationship it makes with its readers the idea that attention to happiness might be a part of that relationship. In a poem inventorying global suffering, it is not a given that readers would in fact understand a lack of happiness in the poem to suggest "no happiness" in general, or have a complaint that a poem with the topic of suffering would not incorporate happiness into its interests.

In raising the idea, the poem implicates itself in a more whole rendering of the world. Its concerns extend beyond suffering. The speaker's response (to her own statement ventriloquized as a reader's) brings the poem to depict experience more broadly, experience that "of course" (89) includes happiness. The speaker's affirmation that "of course" there is happiness initiates a new list. The presence of this list of happy things proposes a view of witnessing which aligns with Kelly Oliver's belief that "witnessing is the essential dynamic of all subjectivity, its constitutive event and process. While trauma undermines subjectivity and witnessing restores it, the process of witnessing is not reduced to the testimony to trauma. So, too, subjectivity is not reduced to the effects of trauma" (7). *Inventory* is about testimony and trauma, but it is also about ways of human relation and experience more broadly.

The speaker's question and response indicates a sense of responsibility, a need to answer to a reader. While recording suffering is the speaker's explicitly stated responsibility, this new list is the structure for and occasion of a responsibility less available on the surface of the poem and more specifically poetic. This responsibility is for the communicative space it structures and offers. The speaker assumes (and, in assuming, creates the conditions through which the assumption might be correct) that a reader will ask questions about what a lack of happiness in this inventory means for the world the poem engages, the world in which readers live. That is, this last section explicitly raises questions for the way the inventory of suffering is related to its readers as people.

Though the speaker earlier tells us "nothing personal is recorded here" (22), this last section is a personal account of how the world affects this speaker. Yet, her earlier claim alerts us to the fact that perhaps this personal sharing is not the point: this last section is not for us to better know the speaker and her love of music, "the whole of it" (95), or her affection for "one

woman / Marlene” (98). These personal facts are less important in what they tell us about the person offering them than they are in what they mean for the relationship between the speaker and the readers with whom she shares these details.^{xiii} The speaker’s responsibility to answer to a wish for happiness comes in relation to her poetic responsibility. This last section, in which the speaker’s attention returns again and again to her own creation of this list, most explicitly engages with *Inventory* as a poem. She first speaks of the list in the passive voice, as though it is self-generating: “were / the dancehalls mentioned before” (92); “the many times that rain is mentioned here” (96). Yet, the voice becomes active when she resists making the list: “ask them / about happiness, not me, why should / I know how to dance and sing in the middle of it all, / okay, okay this list is not so exhausted yet” (94). Though she decides to go on, the speaker’s interjections continue throughout, as if in conversation with the readers to whom she answers: “ask them / about happiness, not me” (94), “let’s leave” (96), “how can we” (96), “you have to” (97). While this section questions the poem’s turn to happiness at all, more significantly, it measures its overall role as a form of art in global witness. *Inventory* attends to its own creation in order to account for its poetic responsibility. Earlier, as she lists deaths, the speaker asks “why does that alliterate on its own, why / does she observe the budding of that consonant” (38). The speaker here denies agency over the aesthetics of the inventory, but in the final section engages the poetic form that structures the possibility and particular reception of the budding of alliteration and other attentions to language and style.

The poem’s communicative process itself is a part of the list. While rain is given as happy, so is “the many times that rain is mentioned here” (96). The poetic repetition is itself a thing of happiness. Even more explicitly about communication is the speaker’s thought on words: “some words can make you weep, / when they’re uttered, the light rap of their /

destinations, their thud as if on peace, as if on cloth, / on air, they break all places intended and known / soft travellers” (99). The emphasis on reception is apparent in “the light rap of their destinations,” a description of the words’ arrival which omits the moment they hit: the words don’t rap, their destinations do. The destinations themselves make a sound in anticipation of the “thud” the words will make. This poem contains its readers’ anticipation, the “rap” of our waiting through this reading, insofar as its poetic tactics are aligned toward the task of suggesting for us the sort of rap we will make, the sort of destinations it would like for us to be. The thud of the words themselves follows, “as if on peace, as if on cloth, / on air”: the effect of a reception of “some words” is first abstract, then tangible, and finally something in between, concrete, but invisible, permeable. The thud “on air” loses its “as if” as though the correct level of concreteness to describe the move of words from utter to thud has been reached. The description of reception as words hitting air is suggestive of the mode of being I find the poem to propose. A word received by air is not received into an abstract, conceptual realm of peace nor by cloth, a synonym of material (as woven fabric), that might, as particular example, stand in for the material realm. Materiality has throughout the poem been associated with reading (as waiting through the poem and listening to the speaker). These words are received, not in the abstract and not in the material conditions of the reading alone, but into the atmosphere through which we live. To be received by air is to be received into the very substance of existence, the invisible environment that contains our everyday experiences. This reception is one in which readers integrate these words into their being in the world.

These words break “all places intended and known” in this poem whose recipients are unknown and cannot be specifically intended. As it is in the Cairo section, mutual strangeness is important here. The speaker is not inventing an ideal reader or a particular life for these words to

impact. This is a relationship built entirely by this poetic moment for anyone entering into it, built by “some words” which work to suggest a manner for their own reception.^{xiv} The words’ “soft travelling” plays a role in this response. The offer of aesthetic pleasure builds a certain relationship with a reader. *Inventory*’s unpleasant facts are not delivered unpleasantly. *Inventory* is not a cacophonous breakdown of meaning, it is not particularly fragmented, it does not use unsettling language or evoke graphically upsetting images. This poem is not made difficult in the aesthetic ways prevalent in both modern and postmodern endeavours. Rather, *Inventory* is a list of suffering made beautiful in its telling. In relation to its subject matter, that beauty becomes particularly meaningful. The poem’s style is necessary for my point that *Inventory* solicits readers as listeners to a communication of compassion. Further, though, the poem tackles beauty as its own topic. In fact, the speaker’s list of happiness in the world is less about happiness, I argue, than it is about beauty. She never does say that these are happy things. Though introduced after a question about happiness, the list has only vague identifications of its topic, as in the vague pronoun reference in the line, “sleep is infinitely this” (93).

In contrast to this vagueness, the speaker discusses beauty specifically. In one item, men waiting “to go do some mindless work” are “willing the truck to arrive or meet / with catastrophe, let this be the morning of the end / of the world, they pray, /there’s something of a beauty there” (91). If this wish for catastrophe can be something of beauty, it is not clear why it should be included in a list dealing with happiness. Similarly, the speaker lists “the irregular weather of hurricanes, / tsunamis, floods, sunlight on any given day, / anywhere, however disastrous at least magnificent” (89). It is arguable that there is implicit here an idea that beauty or magnificence brings a sort of happiness. Yet, I’m not sure happy is the thing beauty makes us. The above examples of natural disaster and desire for catastrophe hardly seem to imply

happiness. More specifically, I would suggest that “beauty” or “magnificence” be aligned with the earlier invocation of grace as “imperishable beckoning.” If I were to account for the beauty of “the end” it would be in this sense of imperishable beckoning.^{xv} Beauty that, like grace, beckons imperishably^{xvi} is a condition of intrigue, or curiosity, or inclination, or seeking that can never be fulfilled or satisfied. The beauty is in the imperishable beckoning, a state aligning with that of waiting. This section of the poem is not to make you happy, or even, really to address a concern that happiness be present, but to beckon you into engagement. The state the poem creates for its readers is akin to this imperishable beckoning.

Yet, in the end, the speaker undermines this relationship and this beckoning. If this poem proposes an act of witness that broadens its scope to include more than trauma, the speaker finally reinscribes its borders. She expresses this limit to her witness as though it is an ethical enforcement. On the poem’s last page, the dates of “the bloodiest days in one year, / in one place” break into the list. Throughout the list as a whole, the speaker is frequently distracted back to suffering, and finally declares that “happiness is not the point really, it’s a marvel, / an accusation in our time” (100). The conclusion states a responsibility for ongoing attendance: “I have nothing soothing to tell you, / that’s not my job, / my job is to revise and revise this bristling list, / hourly” (100). The speaker replaces a grace-like imperishable beckoning with a “job,” something no longer outside of right or obligation. The nature of the responsibility to others has shifted to the task of this particular witness from one of an essential witnessing we, by virtue of existing in a shared air of possible reception, owe to each other. Like Harjo’s speaker, who, I argue in chapter three, asserted her witnessing as a special ability, *Inventory*’s speaker, in the face of the inclusivity of the witnessing so recently constructed, concludes with the particularity of her task. Readers do not share this job: if it is not her job to tell us soothing

things, we are the listening unsoothed. While we have always been aligned in such alternate points of a conversation—her writing her list, us reading it—our readerly role as destinations for the “soft travellers” of her words depended on a widened definition of witnessing. We are not witnessing suffering. We are witnessing a poem about a speaker watching the news about suffering. When the poem tried to deal with its own mediated position, its own distance, its own aesthetic being, it did so by proposing the effectiveness of a poem, its ability to draw readers in with its beauty, its aesthetic communicative powers. In this last page, the speaker undoes the work she has put into validating a poetic response to suffering. It is not her “job” to do what she was doing in this concluding section (which is not, on that note, all soothing, as we saw through its evocations of catastrophe and disaster). It is her job to “revise this bristling list,” to attend to suffering, to write its facts. At the last hour, the speaker backs away from the privilege she has accorded an ontological mode of witness and turns to an epistemological mode. This epistemological mode seems to me to be the easier of these two as ethical tasks. I do not disagree with there being an obligation to know the facts, to be politically aware, to be informed. Seeking out information which does not directly affect our own lives can be a moral action. Yet, more challenging, I think, is the suggestion that we must not simply witness the facts, but feel that witness, or live it.

This final assertion of the speaker’s “job” drastically restructures the relationship between speaker and reader. Now that her job is not to tell us something soothing, but to revise her list, there is a suggestion that her job is not to tell us anything at all. The speaker’s job is “to revise and revise this bristling list, / hourly.” As the poem ends here with this suggestion of the speaker’s task ongoing through time, a reader’s job is left unclear. The speaker’s task has been addition and pairing: the logic of the poem, and the logic of lists, suggests that her job would be

to add to this list, to continue tracking the world's suffering. To revise is not to add but to "improve"; "alter...after reconsideration"; "reread or relearn"; "see again or repeatedly" (OED). If the job is to maintain engagement with the list to continue to learn from it, ought not a reader to hold this job too? If the speaker instead refers to improving or altering the list, must she not be referring to its poetic elements rather than its factual ones? In this shift from adding to revising, the speaker moves into a solitary, non-communicative, non-witnessing position which clashes with the spirit of her statement here as well as everything about her act of witness which has come before. This position leaves readers unhinged from the poem and from a sense of responsibility or possibility for continuing engagement.

When I first read this conclusion, I felt betrayed by the poem. Yet, I assumed I was culpable for my feeling as the intended reaction to the poem's charge. Happiness might not be the point, but the speaker includes it anyway, includes it so that it might become "an accusation." Though the speaker accuses herself as well, it is the reading "someone" that makes her give this list in the first place. The reader is responsible for wanting happiness and further responsible for being soothed by finding it exists here, in this inventory meant to list suffering. And so, I assumed my emotional reaction to the end of the poem was a result of this accusation, of finding myself at fault for wanting to be distracted from my implication in a global condition of suffering. My reaction was just the one the poem had positioned me to feel, I thought.

Brydon likewise notes her struggle with this conclusion:

Even happiness, granted a section of its own, becomes, in the end, 'not the point really, it's a marvel, / an accusation in our time' (100). When I first read this line, I found it entirely bleak, seeing even the ability to enjoy happiness as suggesting insensitivity to the horrors recorded here. On reflection, however, it is the potential ambivalence in these lines that strikes me. Without abandoning that first interpretation, I can also see how it might be read otherwise. As a marvel, and a joy, happiness works as a potent accusation, presenting a powerful alternative to both the status quo and the poet's despair. (996)

Brydon's reading tries to make sense of this ending as an ethically effective suggestion. Yet, these lines cannot be read as an alternative to the status quo because the examples engaging happiness and beauty are not given as imagined possibilities but as actualities of the world as it is. The items of this list are as much the status quo as are the items of the inventory of suffering. Moreover, as I've mentioned, many of the items are not at all hopeful or contrary to despair, as the list deals more often with the beauty of a wish for the world to end and the magnificence of disaster, or with the qualified positivity of "barrios and slums, crazy, crazy places" where "happiness is a light post, a scar" (97) or "drunk recrimination" because "at least it's an examination/ of things past" (94) or "a wrecked and wretched boat" that "still has all the possibilities of moving" (92), than it does with anything obviously better or different from suffering.

This final accusation abandons one sense of responsibility (the poetic one) to turn to a more obvious sense of responsibility (mindfulness of suffering). But to build this relationship of responsibility with readers through the medium of a poem, an aesthetic use of language, only to accuse them of being affected by the beauty, the budding consonants, the soft travellers of words, is to betray that relationship, and to betray the work the poem has done. On the surface, it seems more ethical to return to a remembrance of suffering and the task of its witness. But, if the listing of facts were the primary task of this poem, there would be no reason for it to be a poem. Its deeper task is to do something with words and to do something with the communicative possibilities of a reading relationship.

We can consider the kind of responsibility which the speaker first structures in this poem, and from which she finally backs away, in relation to Mikhail Bakhtin's sense of responsibility in "Art and Accountability":

I have to answer with my own life for what I have experienced and understood in art, so that everything I have experienced and understood would not remain ineffectual in my life. But answer ability entails guilt, or liability to blame. It is not only mutual answerability that art and life must assume, but also mutual liability to blame. The poet must remember that it is his poetry which bears the guilt for the vulgar prose of life, whereas the man of everyday life ought to know that the fruitlessness of art is due to his willingness to be unexacting and to the unseriousness of the concerns in his life. The individual must become answerable through and through: all of his constituent moments must not only fit next to each other in the temporal sequence of his life, but must also interpenetrate each other in the unity of guilt and answerability. [...] Art and life are not one, but they must become united in myself—in the unity of answerability. (1-2)

The speaker^{xvii} answers with her own life by denying the artfulness of her art, by assuming that this artfulness entails guilt. This position is in contrast to the mutual answerability which Bakhtin suggests, in which the art must answer to the same ethical demands of the life, and the life to the demands of the art. This answerability means that if a life can meet with beauty—and a life really must, especially by the terms the speaker proposes for beauty, in which beauty can be a part even of catastrophe—then an art must likewise account for its own beauty, not dismiss it as a guilty soothing pleasure. The speaker has abandoned this difficult beauty for “the vulgar prose of life” which she determines to be ethical only insofar as it is concerned with suffering. An ethics concerned only with ethical failure (with the proofs that “we mean each other harm”) is likewise self-limiting. This kind of answerability to life is not exacting: though it seems utterly responsible, it is a responsibility that—following the hard rule that it is hardship that must be seen—does not demand active thought: the moral law is in place and one need only follow it. Of course we should attend to the suffering of others. A more difficult question is how to make that attention matter. I think this mattering is only possible through the inclusion of the fullness of life in our attentions.^{xviii}

The last page of the poem is centred by the speaker’s declaration that “there are atomic openings in my chest / to hold the wounded” (100). The heart of the page holds this idea of

holding the wounded. But the top of the page, its intellect, so to speak, has evacuated the reader from the poem which had up to that point been open to him or her. In this way, the poem ends up grounded in only the personal ethical accountability of its own speaker to do her job. Her words—separated from a social, communicative function and from the speaker’s life outside of this job—can only circle her own wound. If we all carry within us the woundedness of others, but cannot hold those wounds open to the wholeness of the life holding them, then this attention is a form of navel-gazing with a slightly raised point of vision. Witnessing one’s own painful openness is less compelling as an ethical dictum or a job than is the witnessing *Inventory* earlier invokes as an unsatisfiable inclination toward being in relation.

Notes

ⁱ Helen Vendler proposes this understanding of lyric poetry: “A lyric is meant to be spoken by its reader as if the reader were the one uttering the words. A lyric poem is a script for performance by its reader. It is, then the most universal of genres, because it presumes that the reader resembles the writer enough to step into the writer’s shoes and speak the lines the writer has written as though they were the reader’s own.” ; “we do not listen to him [the speaker]; we become him” in an “imaginative transformation of self” (qtd. in Izenberg 93n6). My objection to a universal application of such an understanding of lyric poetry is not new nor is it limited to witness poetry. In *Poetry’s Touch: On Lyric Address*, for instance, William Waters argues an alternative to “the prevailing critical approach to poetic address” that “address would be incidental to the real matter of a poem. Who (or what gets addressed, when and how, will say little about the work’s artistic or human concerns if all a poem’s hailings are equally void of effect and therefore essentially interchangeable” (3).

ⁱⁱ Sympathetic identification is prominently embedded in the current critical framework. Considering discourses of trauma and testimony, Ana Douglass and Thomas A. Vogler in *Witness & Memory: The Discourse of Trauma* read Shoshana Felman’s position on testimony as one based in identification: “As a performative act, the ‘original’ testimony will somehow transmit experience directly to its recipient rather than describing or representing it” (46). They similarly interpret her co-author Dori Laub: “Testimony to the experience of trauma ‘includes its hearer,’ who thus ‘comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself’” (57). Here, Laub’s modifier ‘partially’ takes the edge off Felman’s insistence on full reincarnation, and returns us to an entropic series” (46).

ⁱⁱⁱ In *On the Edge of Genre: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem*, Smaro Kamboureli describes such an “inscription of excess” as integral to the long poem (85). In an interview with Pauline Butling, Brand says that she prefers the long poem for this extra space: “I was starting to figure out how to do this fulsome and expressive thing and also this longer thing. But I wanted to figure out how I could do them both together. ... I just don’t like short poems. I don’t think they’re sufficient. I mean they can be, when people who can do it well do it well. But I wanted much more speech. ... There is so much space to fill up and spill over and over and out and out” (79).

^{iv} As Kamboureli notes, “The long poem ... makes itself felt through its discontinuities, its absences, and its deferrals by foregrounding both its writing process and our reading act” (xiv). This interest in “the materiality of language” (xiv) works, in relation to waiting here, with the long poem form, whose length makes the reading process indeed a kind of waiting. In this particular context, the materiality of language works to structure readers in relation to the speaker’s modelling of response. The speaker’s felt response to suffering is depicted as a physical pain of waiting. A reader is positioned to encounter the poem as an experience of waiting, a felt response reaching outside of the poem to individual readers.

^v Pauline Butling, interviewing Brand, says that “it’s very interesting as a writing position, to be addressing ‘you’ instead of speaking as ‘I,’ even though the ‘you’ may be the ‘I.’ And the ‘you’ can also include someone else” (80). Brand’s response suggests the care with which she uses the ‘you’ in her poetry: “Yes, I’m very wary about using the ‘you’ because it’s easy to sound accusatory. And that tone reveals that you’re not taking any responsibility in the poem. Somebody else is always doing something. So it’s very tricky to use it” (80).

^{vi} When I speak of “the reader” I do not mean a monolithic conception of readerly experience, but, rather, the reader position which the poem structures and into which individual readers enter.

^{vii} This invitation is conditional, offered only “if” the speaker were to say these things. Yet, the conditional form of this offer invokes the “before and since” which I discuss later in this chapter: the offer is being made only potentially but, in being included in the poem, the speaker has already said what she says she might say. This offer, then, seems always to be in process, always potentially about to be offered and already offered. Like the state of waiting, this offer is less something that can ever be enacted than it is a mode of relation to the reader.

^{viii} Elaine Scarry in *The Body in Pain* contends that “at particular moments when there is within a society a crisis of belief [...] the sheer material factualness of the human body will be borrowed to lend that cultural construct the aura of ‘realness’ and ‘certainty’” (14). Indeed, in the discourse of witnessing and trauma, Ana Douglass and Thomas A. Vogler discuss the “turn towards interest in and evocation of ‘the body as referent’ (David Harvey’s phrase), as a category with a material basis for anchoring important aspects of ‘the truth’ of human existence and identity” (13). Douglass and Vogler describe this interest in the body as the material which might visibly divulge signs of experience as the promise of “a new and more authentic ‘grounding’ of our epistemological and ontological intellectual activities and of our very Being. It energized new directions in the arts, and as the visible—or representable—site of trauma it proved an increasingly important signifier in all areas of the discourse of witness” (13). *Inventory* evokes suffering bodies much less than it does the speaker’s body. This poem invokes a kind of grounding through the body as trope, but engages it, not to suggest that it makes suffering visible, but to assert a relationship between speaker and reader. The speaker asserts her own body and acts toward an imagined reader’s body in a poem positioning a reader into awareness of his or her lived response.

^{ix} Note that the materializations in this poem are different from the sense of suffering’s traces often understood to exist within witness poetry. As I show in my first chapter, there is in the discourse surrounding poetry representing the experience of atrocity or violence an idea that another’s suffering is touchable in the texture of poetry. This idea—paradoxically—combines with the conception that suffering cannot be adequately communicated, creating the sense that poetry overcomes its own (lacking) words to materialize the suffering it otherwise could not adequately express. To engage with Renu Bora’s definitions of texture and texture, critics sometimes take the “surface resonance” (98) of the poetry (the texture of fragmented lines and harsh sounds) as the “stuffiness” (99) of the poet’s material and historical experience (the texture of suffering). In contrast, I see Brand’s poem to make use of a connection between tangibility and emotion. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explores this connection in *Touching Feeling*. Sedgwick (also citing Bora in this introduction) indicates that her title “records the intuition that a particular intimacy seems to subsist between textures and emotions. But the same double meaning, tactile plus emotional, is already there in the single word ‘touching’; equally it’s internal to the word ‘feeling.’” I am also encouraged in this association by the dubious epithet “touchy-feely,” with its implication that even to talk about affect virtually amounts to cutaneous contact” (17).

^x I read *Inventory*’s conception of grace to be outside of any religious tradition. Theology enters the poem, but by way of the speaker’s lack of faith. The speaker posits actions of belief as non-action: “don’t pray it only makes things worse, I know, / think instead of what we might do” (34). She wishes to wake up to “the discredited physics of Christianity and Islam” (70) and

discusses her own atheism: “when I tell them I’m an atheist they see / an opportunity for conversion / they want some single story, I don’t have any other, / they offer me the immured peace / of Christianity, / and an address in Pennsylvania to send money, / they always win, these soothing ladies, / I haven’t the courage to tell them we’re fucked, / and they, unfortunately, will have a reason for that” (84). Yet, in relation to non-belief, the speaker asserts, “That’s not a revolution you want, ever, to win, / the theory of nothing, theories of nothing in return” (48). The speaker’s recoil from theories of nothing suggest to me, as I will come to explain, the relation of her secular grace to meaningfulness, to a theory of what constitutes a significant way of living. Michael D. Snediker reads grace in Emily Dickinson’s “I got so I could take his name—” similarly: “Grace, theologically, does exceed its original moment, but Dickinson’s grace as [Allen] Tate and [R.P.] Blackmur note, is not straightforwardly theological. If anything, the poem’s ambition is to replicate the interminability of theological grace, in the absence of that theology’s faith” (122). Brand’s “imperishable beckoning grace” is interminable, I will argue, as it is integral to a moment whose effects might come to occur “before and since.”

^{xi} Brydon understands Brand’s poem to create “global intimacies” and “affective citizenship,” terms which her article develops in relation to other current theories of intimacy in a global setting: “The implication of each in the other poses human relations in terms of complex entanglements that twine and cut in multiple directions. . . . Edouard Glissant’s ‘poetics of relation’ and Kamau Brathwaite’s ‘tidalectics’ (Brathwaite, Dalleo, Reckin) move closer to characterizing the emotional geographies of Brand’s social philosophy. These Caribbean-based theories mesh well with current theorizations of ‘the new hybrid intercultures of the oceanic zone’ (Ogborn), global flows (Appadurai), and rhizomatics (Deleuze and Guattari), and with the recent renewal of interest in affect (Brennan), especially subaltern affect (Beasley-Murray and Moreiras), and to some extent, in trauma theory (Johnson)” (998).

^{xii} This distinction might seem unnecessary. Wouldn’t a reader feeling a part of this witnessing community after reading this poem necessarily be affected by the speaker? Wouldn’t a reader being affected by the speaker feel a kind of community with other imagined readers feeling similarly affected? Yet, a poem depicting suffering has the potential to draw readers into a sense of duty to witness that comes precisely from this acknowledgement of duty, from an idea of moral conduct more than from emotion. Or, this desire to be part of such a community might come less from compassion than from the guilt of feeling implicated in these facts of suffering. In this poem titled as an inventory, it is possible to minimize the role of the speaker outside of her witnessing relationship to suffering others. My reading emphasizes the import of the speaker as a depicted person and of the poetic relationship into which readers are positioned. I do not wish to negate the possibility of a wider community, but I am concerned with considering particularly the means by which this poem might go about creating that community.

^{xiii} Brydon similarly understands the poem to privilege relationality: “*Inventory* shifts the terrain from the personal (with its focus on the autonomous individual as separate from others) to the intimate (that is, to the co-constitutions of subjectivity, image, word, and world and to a self developing through relation). Two models of autonomy are at stake here: the first developing from the concept of the individual as primary and the second from definitions of autonomy as always already relational. Unlike the personal, intimacy requires openness to others” (997)

^{xiv} A poetic moment built by words for whoever will enter suggests, as does my discussion, in my second chapter, of a similar readerly space in Rich’s “An Atlas of the Difficult World,” Allen Grossman’s argument about “the laws of the instrument of representation as the principle of life”

(117) in Walt Whitman's "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand." For Grossman, Whitman's poem is a "revision of the fundamental logic of representation" (116): "*In effect, the story of the love of the person who is known by reason of representation (because he or she appears) will be already written as the history of representation itself. Why? Because the story of love always has the same structure as the representations which manifest the lover, so that the healing of the story of love consists of the overcoming of the structure of representation*" (117). Brand's poem reaches here for a reader as a "companion" who "utters the laws of his own making" (117).

^{xv} James Berger examines what I see in Brand's poem as an imperishable beckoning of catastrophe in his work on post-apocalypse. Berger explains that "Modernity is often said to be preoccupied by a sense of crisis, viewing as imminent, perhaps even longing for, some conclusive catastrophe. This sense has not disappeared, but in the late twentieth century it exists together with another sense, that the conclusive catastrophe has already occurred" (XIII). He finds in art, theory, and entertainment an idea that "the world is poised to end and is so suffused with moral rotteness and technological, political, and economic chaos and/or regimentation that it should end and must end because in some crucial sense it *has* ended" (7). After the end, though, "the world, impossibly, continues" (6). The end beckons as impossible solution: "The apocalypse as eschaton is . . . the vehicle for clearing away the world as it is and making possible the post-apocalyptic paradise or wasteland" (6). This is the sense of beauty as imperishable beckoning I see in this moment in *Inventory*: the desire for a flawed world to end and the hope that the end will bring something better, whether nothingness or perfection or at least even the end of hope. This connection between beauty and catastrophe has particular purpose in a witness poem examining a world in which "we mean each other harm;" Berger suggests, "[a]pocalyptic and post-apocalyptic representations serve varied psychological and political purposes. Most prevalently, they put forward a total critique of any existing social order" (7). My reading of the connection between beauty and catastrophe through Berger resonates with some earlier lines in *Inventory*: "she's never liked twilight, you know, / when it comes, it only confirms / we've failed at everything / again, / it only arrives to insist, / what a waste, / it says, I at least end things, I / understand perfection, deep / at its source it isn't power, / nothing so small, so edible / there, it is immaculate possibility" (79).

^{xvi} Elaine Scarry describes a long tradition of understanding beauty as a beckoning: "Not Homer alone but Plato, Aquinas, Plotinus, Pseudo-Dionysius, Dante, and many others repeatedly describe beauty as a 'greeting.' At the moment one comes into the presence of something beautiful, it greets you. It lifts away from the neutral background as though coming forward to welcome you—as though the object were designed to 'fit' your perception. In its etymology, 'welcome' means that one comes with the well-wishes or consent of the person or thing already standing on that ground. It is as though the welcoming thing has entered into, and consented to, your being in its midst. Your arrival seems contractual, not just something you want, but something the world you are joining wants" (25-6). She also suggests this beckoning as imperishable: "Something beautiful fills the mind yet invites the search for something beyond itself, something larger or something of the same scale with which it needs to be brought into relation" (29).

^{xvii} Bakhtin speaks of the poet and I of the speaker. The speaker indicates herself as the author of the text we read (the inventory/poem), so this distinction does not seem to me to be an issue.

Moreover, though Bakhtin speaks of the union in one individual of the artist and the person, we can, I think, consider this same union of person and art-receiver.

^{xviii} I don't mean an impossible always-attention to everything. Rather, I am suggesting that a relationship to the world and other people limited to its flaws and their suffering cannot be the highest form of attention to which to aspire. Rectifying injustice depends on a fuller idea of what a person is than simply one who is vulnerable to suffering. While no one can be entirely open all of the time, it seems imperative to me that the ways and times in which one is open to another's happiness, or the beauty of art or experience of the world, or the profundity of another person's complexity, or the mundane details of daily life be included in considerations of ethical attention and relationship.

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Chapter 6

Signing Skeletons

In this final chapter, I take a step back to consider relational spaces structuring witness poems. In poetry dealing with social suffering and human vulnerability, I find an artistic and ethical concern with structure and connectivity expressed through recurring images of skeletons and ossuaries. In “Bone Dreams,” Seamus Heaney’s speaker encounters a bone that turns into a bone-woman who turns into part of a national landscape. In *Ossuaries*, Dionne Brand portrays a woman’s struggle through a painful life in which her own bodily structure is metaphorically dismantled into the ossuary of a global system of human misuse of humans. Antjie Krog’s collection *Down to My Last Skin* suggests the speaker’s stripped condition, with the poem “Country of grief and grace” depicting the “decrowned skeletons” of apartheid (c. 9). What is the significance of the rhetorical skeleton? If these skeletons and bone-houses stand in for a concept of structure, how do these images shift in valence between the synecdochal (personal) and the metaphoric (societal) operations?

In my first chapter, I consider the work of carrying in relation to a metonymical action that brings what is already nearby into closer proximity. Compassionate witnessing involves achieving a balance between carrying and holding. Carrying, as it displaces and recontextualizes, can make that which is carried vulnerable, if not necessarily to wound or attack, at least to the liability of alteration. Carrying into new meaning involves translation’s transmutability. Art necessarily involves such carrying. I find this poetry to address art’s carrying by considering its relation to holding. Witness poetry provides a particular set of relationships (within the poem, between poet and poem, and between readers and poem) inside of which persons, events, and contexts are held in compassionate attention. While carrying involves moving through

relationships, holding involves relational space, a space having to do with relationship as such. Though never fully separable (metonymy does carry its elements closer together), carrying and holding are structurally nearly analogous to metaphor and metonymy. We can also consider carrying as the work of a symbol and holding as the indexical connection between art and the contexts of its creation. I will suggest further in this chapter the pair of relation and commemoration as another expression of carrying and holding. The versatility of this conceptual pair allows me to consider multiply the relational structures of witness poetry.

To study witness is primarily to study these relational structures. Kelly Oliver, discussing witnessing, suggests that “a particular notion of vision” posits an “abyss of empty space that vision must span in order to reconcile subject and object” (11-12). “Space, however,” Oliver points out, “is not an empty void. It is full of air, light, and the circulation of various forms of electrical, thermal, mechanical, and chemical energies that sustain us and connect us to each other and the world” (12). In fact, “the gaps or spaces between us open up the very possibility of communication and communion” (221). She interprets witness in terms of relationships shaped physically, socially, and conceptually:

seeing is not just a matter of matter, but also a matter of the circulation of ideas, language, and images. Vision is the result of a process of relationships between bodies in the world, between images, traditions, institutions, laws, myths. What we see is the product of the process of coming to vision that is invisible yet can be interpreted and elaborated in its performance and effects. Vision is the result of the circulation of biosocial energy. (222)

For Oliver, witnessing involves the invisible space of relationship, a communicative space of connectivity. This architecture of connection allows for the range of intimacy that Lauren Berlant says “poses a question of scale that links the instability of individual lives to the trajectories of the collective” (283). As compassion is a mode of being that works across particular feelings and contexts, witness, as a mode of reading, works across different scales. Witness involves an

interpretation of the implication of individuals and communities; that is, witness examines the connections between scales of significance.

Through images of skeletons, the poetry I arrange in the following investigates structure as it pertains to witnessing relationships and the intersections of individual and community. We might often imagine a connection as a straight line between two elements, but there is no reason for that line to be straight, or singular. Skeletons are the contiguity of bones (the knee-bone is connected to the thigh bone), but the skeletal structure is not linear. Tracing the points of connection in a skeleton involves backtracking, retracing, moving sideways and in circles. This multiple and non-teleological connectivity emphasizes connectivity itself. Witnessing in the poetry I study here is not a chain leading somewhere, but an investigation of the mess of proximate relationships in any context. A skeleton, as emblematic of human mortality, suggests vulnerability while it also functions as the durable record of human life. This memorializing role is one aspect of witness. As the invisible structure of the individual human body, a skeleton made visible and touchable also suggests intimacy and proximate relationship. Yet, dissociated from the memory of a particular person, skeletons become generic, stripped of the visual qualities that mark personal distinction. Witness poetry's skeletal images suggest a complex structure to relation and commemoration as established by acts of witness.

In Heaney's "Bone Dreams," the speaker finds an individual bone which becomes a "Bone-house" (II. 1) of the languages of a land's history (II, III).¹ Through this history and in the speaker's embrace, the bone becomes a skeleton-woman and, simultaneously, a part of the landscape. The bone is the material remnant of an individual human, the signifier of a linguistic cultural history, and a point of access for the speaker to the contemporary geography. Within

these multiple significations, “Bone Dreams” creates a reciprocal relationship between the speaker/holder and the held/witnessed:

I hold my lady’s head
like a crystal
and ossify myself
by gazing (IV. 7-10)

Gazing at this skull, the speaker too becomes as bone, but “to ossify” is also “to become rigid or fixed” (OED); to ossify himself is a commitment to the gaze that creates the ossification. This feedback loop suggests witness as a self-perpetuating holding. Heaney presents this witness as a mutual relationship in which “we end up / cradling each other” (V. 1-2). In this cradling, witness and witnessed are both held and holding.

After finding a dead mole the speaker
was told, ‘Blow,
blow back the fur on his head.
Those little points
were the eyes. ...’ (VI. 9-12)

As above, where gazing ossified the speaker into a common condition of holding, in blowing back the fur to see the mole’s eyes, the mole holds the speaker’s gaze. Though the dead mole cannot see, the speaker blows life into the mole just as he touches life into the bone so that his actions might be interactions. Yet, as much as the speaker’s witnessing comes alive through his direct experience with a remnant of the past (the bone) and this newly dead (the mole), the seeming directness of touch and sight is explicitly attached to concerns of speaking, even beyond the poem’s exploration of the bone as a connection to a site holding a symbolic archive of language, the “Bone-house” (2.1) of linguistic use and change over time. In both cases, bone and mole, the speaker has the solitary responsibility for communication. He gazes at the “crystal” of

the skull for its meaning. He blows back the fur in a kind of oral witness, a communication of sight. Though he physically animates the bone-lady and the mole, neither are agents. This aspect of the poem implicitly indicates the essential privilege and responsibility of the speaking witness. We understand the bone as it functions in proximity to the speaker; it is this relationship that shapes the bone into a bone-woman. Yet, at the same time, the vulnerability of engagement is depicted here as mutual; that which is depicted is made vulnerable, but the speaker is made vulnerable to that which he witnesses. As Heaney's Medusa-like bone-woman ossifies her witness, art's objects can make vulnerable as they are also made vulnerable in being opened to public gaze.

The polyphony in Krog's account of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission makes clear an aspect of making art out of social suffering: that, implicitly or explicitly, the artist's voice is the arranging or creating force. Krog's mixed-genre narrative *Country of My Skull* holds, in this collection of voices,ⁱⁱ intersections of individual and communal scales. While the title points to the dominant or overarching perspective of the artist, the text indicates its structure as skeletal, not in the sense of bare bones, but in the sense of exposed connectivity. This text focuses on the multiplicity and tangling of relationship. Meira Cook argues of *Country of My Skull*, "the title of [Krog's] memoir implies that what occurs between the covers of this book has taken place primarily within the confines of the narrator's skull" (np). Cook critiques this focus as "claustrophobic" and "narcissistic" (np). The title suggests to me quite the contrary, an interrogation of art's structure as it relates to witness.

"Country of grief and grace" (included in *Country of My Skull* as well as in Krog's collection *Down to My Last Skin*) depicts the speaker "seizing the surge of language by its soft bare skull" (b. 8). Language is linked consistently in this poem to communication. This seizing

seems preventative, a stop to the surge of words. Indeed, seizure suggests a violent, appropriative holding and the malleability of the “soft bare skull” constructs communication as vulnerable. Skull images hold Krog’s concern with the relationship of her literary art and her witness; she explores the seizure and violent shaping involved in turning her country’s suffering into poetry.

Cook finds in *Country of My Skull* Krog’s “fear that she will not find an adequate literary structure for these traumatic narratives” (np). I see a similar concern with structure and communication in “Country of grief and grace” when the speaker asserts

a moment

a line which says: from this point onwards

it is going to sound differently

because all our words lie next to one another on the table now

(h. 19-22)

The change in sound is premised on moving “onwards” toward a future from the stationary proximity of words that “lie next to one another.” The sense here is not of motion (carrying) toward significance; rather, the significance is in the proximity itself. The reshaped sound is one in which words are contiguous; the violence of seizure is replaced by metonymical proximity.

This proximity develops over the course of the poem. At its start, the connective space must be travelled:

how long does it take

for a voice

to reach another

[line break]

in this country held bleeding between us (a. 12-15)

Again, the travelling is depicted in temporal terms, but this initial investigation of communication also posits a distance over which a voice must reach, a space created by the

bleeding country and demonstrated visually by the line break. Held between, the country occupies a vulnerable position; like the visible skeleton, there is here an externalization of relationships that should be foundational. But by the end of the poem, the country moves inside its citizens: “because of you / this country no longer lies / between us but within” (f. 1-3). Like the mutual cradling in Heaney's “Bone Dreams,” the speaker, holding her country “in the cradle of my skull” (f. 7), moves toward a less vulnerable intimacy. Voice is metonymical of the body and reaches out of the body to communicate across space. The country becomes akin to a shared voice as it is held inside but communicated outward to connect individuals.

In Brand's *Ossuaries*, questions of vulnerability arise through voice and perspective. *Ossuaries*' sections alternate perspective between the first and third person. The speaker/character, then, sometimes speaks for herself but is at other times the subject of an implied narration, as the perspective of a character must implicitly include a narrator, someone to see and tell. The speaker witnesses her own condition while at other times a different narrator-speaker witnesses this witness. This shifting perspective in a poem concerned with ethical witnessing raises questions about how this poem holds its story. Are the character and narrator contiguously or hierarchically arranged? With what sort of representation of this speaker's suffering is the reader in relationship? *Ossuaries* contains a structural engagement of issues of speaking and being spoken for.

Brand's long poem examines the interrelation of an imprisoning social structure, the vulnerable structures of individual bodies, and the structure of witness. The first pages of *Ossuaries* detail Yasmine's experience of a life in which her “every waking was incarcerated” (10). The poem examines societal structures, “the invisible architecture” in which Yasmine and her friends “tried to be calm” (12). Yasmine describes vulnerability as her acceptance of

guardlessness: “I must confess, I must, that early on / it was nothing to me, believe me, / you could dip your dingy hand in my chest” (47). The social holding as incarceration is linked to the opened body that holds the intimate intrusion. Yasmine experiences a sense of the generalization of her person, depicted through the stripping of her body to its depersonalized structure:

here I am,
down to the last organ and happy to be there,
tired with it, exhausted to be there, bone dry
without walls, without embrasures, no height at all
scatter bones, losing all relation to myself,
reified, common really, common the powdery skulls (48).

Through the poem’s depiction of social and bodily structures, relation emerges as a central concern. The dismantling of the skeletal structure is a loss of self-relation. Though “here I am” asserts presence, the lack of walls and scattered bones indicate displacement, as does the division implicit in the disjunct between “*here* I am” and “happy to be *there*.” Yasmine’s deictic self-assertion is countered by the lack of representation within a system of relationships.

As in Krog’s “Country of grief and grace” the relational system Brand's Yasmine articulates is connected to communication; for Yasmine, “each bone has its lost dialect now, / untranslatable though I had so many languages” (50). A wandering character with many literal languages, Yasmine feels speechless at this foundational level in her dislocation from community: “the crates of bones I’ve become, good / I was waiting to throw my limbs on the pile, / the mounds of disarticulated femurs and radii” (49). While this disarticulation refers to the disjointed body, it also suggests a speaker who finds herself speechless and is articulated (structurally) in the third person.

At the same time, the vulnerably-displayed bones speak a language, testifying to the violence of a society that breaks down its internal relationships:

who would mistake these wounds,

who call these declarations nothing,
these tender anatomies
love should meet them, nothing short,
these broken heads and propitiatory arms,
clean love should meet them (85).

As in Krog's "Country of grief and grace," voice here moves across the same connective space as does affect: "these declarations" and "clean love" both communicate. In *Witnessing*, Oliver suggests the need to "train ourselves to be more attuned to affective energy in our relationships," energy "which can move between people" as "we constantly negotiate affective energy transfers" (14). The "declarations" of "these wounds" are calling for "nothing short" of the space of communication across which loving affect can "meet" the disarticulated. Witness in Brand's poem is being attuned to connective, affective energies and to the space of relationship through which these energies pass. In Yasmine's perspective, witness is attention to the relationships existing in a global network of suffering. Each section of Brand's collection is titled as a numbered "Ossuary"; while this title gives a sense of the structural focus I have been considering, "ossuary" can also signify figuratively as "a mental or spiritual charnel house" (OED). In *Ossuaries*, witnessing is the creation of commemorative relationships, the holding of memorial within oneself. Considering an exhibition of Jacob Lawrence's war paintings, Yasmine says:

if we could return through this war, any war,
as if it were we who needed redemption,
instead of this big world, our ossuary
so brightly clad, almost heroic, almost dead,
the celebratory waiting, the waiting,
the smell of wounds (82)

The witnessing relationship between viewer and commemorative artwork is one expressed as "celebratory waiting." As both "a calling to remembrance" and "public celebration" (OED), "commemoration" captures the making public involved in celebration as well as the individual

mental state of waiting. Commemoration involves bringing affective relationships to public attention and the personal time of remembering one's place in them. Commemoration is temporally bidirectional, combining reflection and waiting as I discuss them in my introduction. Commemoration's reflections propel future relationship like the "celebratory waiting" which Brand's poem connects to artistic witness.

In *Ossuaries*, Yasmine's witness is commemorative representation, much like the painting to which it alludes. The poem expresses responsibilities of relationship and representation in terms of intimacy and vulnerability. These terms are associated with the skeletal in *Ossuaries*' last lines:

so here we lie in our bare arms,
here the ribs for a good basket, a cage,
the imperishable mandible, the rhetorical metatarsals
the hip's alertness, the skull's electricity
firing, the lit cigarette tip of the backbone
leans for its toxic caresses
here we lie in folds, collected stones
in the museum of spectacles,
our limbs displayed, fract and soluble
were this a painting it would combust canvases,
this lunate pebble, this splintered phalanx,
I can hardly hold their sincere explosions (124)

The "ribs for a good basket" sound like a container that holds safe; the condition of lying "in our bare arms" takes on an intimate quality. But these ribs are also "a cage" that recalls the vulnerable lives Brand's Yasmine describes in terms of imprisonment. The condition of being within is ambiguous in this passage. Yasmine's assertion that "here we lie in folds" adds to the uncertain valence of these images of being inside. Folds could mean the ground, pens for domestic animals, or the bent and entwined bodies of the vulnerable. As "the dwelling-place" that is the surface of the earth (OED), "folds" indicates a multiple and global foundation of relationality. In contrast, lying in animal pens suggests the earlier-invoked images of an

imprisoning depersonalization. These meanings come together in the bending together of their own bodies, an intimate entwining premised on mutual vulnerability to “toxic caresses.”

The “we” in these folds are the “collected stones / in the museum of spectacles.” It is only a conditional scenario—“were this a painting”— in which they would break the representational form of spectacle by “combust[ing] canvases.” That these people leading vulnerable lives would explode their structures if those structures were artistic suggests that it is outside of the painting, in actuality, that their vulnerability is made spectacle. Replicating the shifting speaker position at the level of the poem as a whole, Yasmine shifts perspectives from the inside (“we”) to a position of external witness (“their”) and, as witness, Yasmine “can hardly hold their sincere explosions.” Yasmine’s hardly holding suggests that “they” continue to carry their own meaning, in excess of how they are represented. The lack of final punctuation leaves their “sincere explosions” unheld, and leaves readers with questions of what varieties of holding, hardly holding, and not holding occur in witness and in artistic witness.

To hold a meaning (to contain it) is different from carrying a meaning (into something else). Witness as holding indicates what might be the cage of artistic form as well as the commemoration, the “celebratory waiting,” that is the making of the self into a spiritual ossuary. Carrying is associated with index; it involves the relationship of world to poem. Holding has to do with symbol; it attends to meaning as it exists in art’s structures and pertains to art taken as an explicit topic. I have discussed witnessing as a mode of reading in which the metaphoric is considered as it exists in metonymic proximities across registers of meaning. Likewise, relationships depicted (indexical connections in the world) and constructed (inherent to an art-object, like that between reader and speaker) are in flux as they exist together on different registers. The heuristic, metonymic, indexical, syntagmatic elements I have discussed in each

chapter are always in relationship to the hermeneutic, metaphoric, symbolic, paradigmatic elements.

I find a useful comparison to the skeletal images in Heaney's, Brand's, and Krog's work in Jan Švankmajer's 1970 short film *Kostnice (The Ossuary)*. As Jan Uhde explains in "The Bare Bones of Horror," *Kostnice* documents the Sedlec Ossuary. In 1870, František Rint completed his decade-long project: using the ossuary's thousands of skeletons to create "fascinating displays of shapes and objects, including skull pyramids, crosses, a monstrance and a chandelier containing every bone of the human body" (np). While *Kostnice* is not, as is witness poetry, engaged with suffering,ⁱⁱⁱ it does address artistic response to human vulnerability. As I note that suffering is in my first chapter, human remains too are often met with a special respect. The use of human bones as decoration raises questions regarding art's relationship to human life and death. As the official website states, "The Sedlec Ossuary is artistically decorated by more than 40.000 human skeletons" (np); Rint "was appointed to place the bones in order" (np). As these decorations speak to art's role in organizing experience into comprehensible forms, the arrangements of these bones operate as reflections on human meaning. But putting "bones in order" signifies differently than does making bones into decorations or "fascinating artistic works" (np). The solemnity attached to human remains makes the decorations in *Kostnice* particularly suited to an interrogation of the process of turning life (or death) into art.

I have been considering witness poetry's skeletal images as they signify an interest in relationship. Through Švankmajer's film, I move with this concern for artistic exploration of relationship—primarily between speakers as witnesses and those they witness—into a related consideration of the relationship between poetry and poets as witnesses. In the film, the poem is made analogous to the crypt; Jacques Prévert's poem, sung over the images of bones made art,

brings to the fore the question of the artist's role in making art. My study of skeletons and crypts as relational images is also a study of encryption as it pertains to indexical relationships between artists and their art.

The film is initially concerned with movement into relationship. The opening scene moves down a road of interlocked stones. Contrasting this forward motion, the camera focuses on the circling of bicycle pedals. Of course, this circling is also in forward motion itself and is the cause of that motion. When the ossuary eventually appears, its relationship to viewers has been determined as multi-connected: the contiguity of the road's stones, the implied bi-directionality of a road, the forward momentum of the bike, the causal circularity of the pedals. The camera brings us into the ossuary, but only through erratic flicking between shots, and after a revolving shot of the stationary church. The disruptions to direction require viewers to resituate themselves in relation to the connections between the images depicted, to consider the linear as it derives from the circular or the static as it exists unnoticeably in the rapidly shifting. The camera moves similarly inside the ossuary; as Uhde explains, "The film-maker employs elaborate, contrast-rich editing, alternating static images and leisurely camera pans with bursts of rapid-montage, swish-pans and tilts" (np). In these techniques, Švankmajer foregrounds relationship.

The opening scenes also invoke relationship texturally. Many shots begin from afar and zoom into textured detail, demonstrating the shift in significance existing at different degrees of proximity. The film's images of collection work similarly. Before entering the ossuary, the film shows buttons in jars, piles of shells, and doll pieces. These collections suggest the interaction of fragmentation and collectivity and foreshadow the collection of human bones. These initial collections prime viewers to consider the individual elements in the collective, each bone in the ossuary as a fragment of an individual and as recombined into an artistic collectivity. In the

shifting relationships of direction and focus, *Kostnice* privileges the intersections and recombinations of registers of meaning.

Švankmajer's inclusion of Jacques Prévert's poem "Pour faire le portrait d'un oiseau" ("To Paint the Portrait of a Bird") connects artistic creation to the film's concern with considering relationship. As the title suggests, the poem provides instructions for creating a work of art. To make a painting of a bird, "[p]aint first a cage / with the door open" (1-2). The creator's agency is in making this structure. In contrast, for the bird to arrive, one must "say nothing / don't move" (14-15) and "wait / wait years if need be" (20-21). The creator has control over the cage—the arrangement that holds the subject—but not over whether its subject exists within it. In relation to the bone-ornaments with which this poem is paired, these instructions suggest how to navigate art that is also witness to human vulnerability. For witness-art, the carrying over of meaning occurs through the indexical witnessing that connects the artwork to the world. It is in the relationship between carrying (from world to poem) and holding (the awareness of art's structures) that something meaningful exists. If the bird sings, the painted cage holds artistic expression and spirit:

wait until the bird decides to sing
If the bird does not sing
that's a bad sign
A sign the painting is no good
but if it sings that's a good sign
a sign you can sign (40-45)

"Sign" here is a mark of significance as well as the mark of the artist.^{iv} In *Kostnice*, Rint's signature is built out of bones into the ossuary wall. This official signature is juxtaposed with vandals' signatures on the bones themselves. *Kostnice* suggests that the two sorts of signing—authoritative and subversive—are aligned: both are the signing of a name to another's body. Art

that expresses an intimacy with another's vulnerability risks exploitation. The artist's signature indicates that he speaks through the material remnants of others' deaths.

It is the indexical relationship between artist and creation that is potentially concealed or encrypted in art. This cause and effect connection is implicit in the fact of art (an art-object exists because someone made it). But the precise nature of this relationship may be less obvious. In poems dedicated to a family member, the poet's relationship to his or her poem is to some extent incorporated openly into that poem. In the creation of a painting in Prévert's poem and in Rint's bone-decorations, the relationships between the art and the artist are hidden or rearranged. In the poem, the painted-out cage is the relationship between bird (the spirit of the art) and artist. The cage is the artist's way of holding the bird. As a sign of that relation, the cage indexically links the painting to the painter's waiting for the bird to arrive. Painted out, the conditions of artistic production are erased; the cage that depicted the artist's waiting relationship to the art's meaningfulness is no longer clearly available in the painting. The painter's signature, and the conditions under which he could sign the painting, becomes, then, of significance beyond marking the painting as his own, or, rather, marking the painting as his own becomes significant for how the painting might mean. In witness-art, this relationship has ethical significance. It is the artist's relationship to witness that underpins and shapes an artwork's function as witness. A primary task of reading witness poetry, then, is to establish the poet's relationship to witness insofar as this relationship is evidenced within the poem.

Rint's signature, made of rearranged human bones, is not encrypted (except literally, in that it is located within a crypt). His name, coded by bones, is made consistent with the art it signs; his name as sign of the indexical connection between art and artist is complicated by the closeness of its relationship with the art it signs. On the other hand, the bones themselves retain

their indexical connections to the bodies they demonstrate had lived. This memorializing connection is made prominent. Yet, while they are these durable remains of human existence, these bones are also generic; they lack the individuality of living humans. Further, the skeletons are rearranged out of the human shape. The skeletons' direct connections to human life—as remnants of it—are disrupted. Rint's role is putting “in order” the human remnants in an ossuary. In this new order, what relation do his creations bear to human life? If this relation is commemorative, as is suggested by the context of the ossuary, how does that memorializing relation alter when the bones shape the artist's name?

In this project, I have been considering poetry whose speakers exist within the same contexts as the poets writing them. While I have been careful to distinguish speaker from poet, in witness poetry the two are often closely related. As I have argued that compassionate witness is a mode of reading and being in the world, that these speakers model such a disposition, and that I, as a reader, model it again, it would be incongruous to ignore the relationship between poet and poem. I will examine this relationship here through ideas of signature and encryption. The poet's signature is the carrier of his or her identity. As the signifier of witness outside of the poem, this signature is the indexical connection between a poem and its contexts. A strong likeness between poet and speaker lends itself to a total identification between the two. Yet, to read the speaker as the poet is to carry away a poem's hermeneutic meaning. In contrast, I find the poetry in my corpus to hold the relationship between speaker and poet at a distance that allows for the interplay of the metaphoric and metonymic, the symbolic and indexical, the hermeneutic and the heuristic.

One method by which my poets sign their witness is through dedication. Balakian's dedication of the poem “The Oriental Rug” to his daughter inscribes himself within his poem as

living poet and as a father. His speaker works within a context of intergenerational memory and inheritance of suffering. Similarly, the map in Harjo's poem is passed on from generation to generation; her dedication of "A Map to the Next World" to her daughter positions her poem as an actual inheritance. These dedications put the poets into indexical relation with their poems. As "daughter" implies relation to a parent, the inclusion of daughters' names is an implicit inscription of the poet; these family relationships are central to the context of witness of suffering to which later generations become newly connected. These poems function literally to communicate inside of these family relationships at the same time as they are addressed to unknown readers. That is, readers are put into a relationship with the poem that is explicitly different from the way the poem is already in relation to the dedicatee. This is not to say that the poem is not for unknown readers (it is not a private document), but that the poem emphasizes that there exist various levels of intimacy through which the poem will be engaged. A reader's position is filtered through the announcement that the poem tells a family story and makes family connections through or across the suffering it engages.

Rich's hermeneutic dedications involve a more distanced intimacy. The section "(Dedications)" in "An Atlas of a Difficult World" addresses the poem to various imagined readers and to a series of "you"s that can designate any reader. These dedications form a hermeneutic framework of relationships rather than a heuristic connection between particular elements. In contrast, the section directly before "(Dedications)" is "(For M.)" (XII). The poem for M. involves the intimacy of a dedication to a particular person but presents for readers a sign rather than a name; readers lack the full name or other identifying information for the person who presumably exists outside of the poem. The dedication encodes a message, indicating intimacy but leaving readers outside of it.

This poem for M. is concerned with signs. M., the mark within the poem, stands for a person keen to identify or record: “impatient to mark what’s possible, impatient to mark / what’s lost” (XII. 11-12). The dedication is, through M.’s characteristics, associated with witness as marking. M.’s marking privileges the indexical or actual, the tied to life, as her “back arched against all icons, simulations, dead letters” (XII. 13). This resistance to the not actual suggests the poem’s connection to M. to indicate actual relationship, that this mark forms a living, not a dead or simulated, letter. Before the poem’s hermeneutic dedications, then, is this heuristic (in that it is a sign that points us to the real person), particularized mark of Rich’s actual relationship. In the poem for M., readers find a sign of intimacy from which we are partially excluded (we can still read the poem, we just cannot fully know at whom it is aimed). We are made aware of this actual intimacy that is indicated in the poem but not delivered to us. In contrast, in “(Dedications),” all readers are presumed to be in intimate relation with the poem, even though the poem does not know who they are. These different forms of intimacy demonstrate the intersections of the heuristic and hermeneutic as I consider them in my second chapter in terms of intimate and distanced knowledge.

Brand’s *Inventory* brings readers into intimate relation with the personal and public memory of a person. Brand dedicates one section of *Inventory*’s fourth part to activist Marlene Green.^v The speaker wishes for the dead woman to return to tell her mourners how to

mount demonstrations against
 your death,
 will you send word
 in letters, in goldenrod leaflets ...
 till then Marlene,
 we will fix petals of you to our eyes (62)

This mourning witnesses Marlene, through the “petals of you,” but also witnesses the world through Marlene. To “fix” what amounts to rose-coloured glasses “to our eyes” suggests that it is

through Marlene that “we” will see. Marlene is also a synecdoche for her social and political achievements, so that witnessing Marlene is also witnessing the world as she has left her mark on it. This section draws readers into a view of the world that is shaped by Marlene’s achievements. The section begins, “We should carry you” (62) and indeed carries Marlene into poetic relationship through which to “demonstrate[e] against / your death.” While the speaker asks Marlene to “send word” “in letters,” in “leaflets,” the poem itself is a way of sending word. The poem holds Marlene within commemorative relationship achieved through the carrying of Marlene from actual relationship into poetic mourning.

Brand’s work more broadly is concerned with mourning. In *Ossuaries*, Yasmine notes the “branded bones” (36) of those living in “the waiting rooms of existence” (38) and for whom “to love is an impediment to this hard business / of living” (34). Branded bones are marked not only by the destruction this long poem witnesses, but by that witness. The poem touches on the intimate engagement of that doubled vulnerability (to suffer and to be shown suffering) in the later suggestion that

it’s always in the lyric
the harsh fast threatening gobble,
the clipped sharp knifing, it’s always,
in the lyric (108)

The extended lyric of the long poem is not outside of the “presumptive cruelties” (108) that are “always in the lyric” but also “always, in the lyric” (108): always existing, and existing in the poetry. The separation in the second iteration of the phrase indicates that art’s intrusions are a reaction to and also a part of the cruelties already existing. The violence that is always in the lyric matches the temporality of the bones: the branding of poetry (labelling violence in the

world, holding its own violence) matches the longevity of branded bones as memorializing objects. The attunement to loving affect and the waiting of commemoration I discussed earlier are shown here in connection to the violence implicit in branded bones. In relation to the shifting of Yasmine's voice between "she" and "I," we can think of these branded bones as a kind of author-inscription in the "speaking for" in which such a poem partakes. Imagining Yasmine's life, the poem puts forward a character's suffering in relation to actual suffering in the world, but not a suffering that is the poet's own, as is the case in much witness poetry. One of the "criteria for inclusion" in Carolyn Forché's *Against Forgetting* is that "poets must have personally endured such conditions" (30). In the panel discussion following her essay "The Poetry of Witness" in *The Writer in Politics* Forché argues that "we can read [witness poetry] as evidence of the wound—as what happened to the language when these things happened to the poet and the poet's world" (152). I discuss in my first chapter arguments against understanding poetry through this indexical connection between words and wound, but witness poetry certainly raises the question of the nature of the connection between suffering and witness and between poet and poem. What happens when witness poetry represents not the poet's wound, but that of another person, or a wound imagined?

I find the last poem in Back's collection to include an encryption of the poet's name that helps me to respond to this question. The alliteration in "Bringing the Buffalo Back Home" calls a reader's attention to this title in which the inclusion of the poet's name in the carrying home of the buffalo is suggestive of the poet's self-insertion. I read this line as "I brought the buffalo Back" in relation to the account of this bringing back home:

kept
me company
until
one day

she was gone—
I had no choice:
alone
I brought her
home (40-48)

If Back is alone (the buffalo “was gone”), the buffalo can only come home into—as a part of—Back herself. Thus, when the speaker says the buffalo has returned—“I brought the buffalo back / home” (III.9. 1-2)—what could we imagine it saying but an ambiguous “I’m back?” The section “After five years of writing buffalo poems” suggests this relationship between Back and the buffalo, as the buffalo, described in relation to a pregnant woman, becomes aligned retrospectively with the pregnant speaker of the collection’s first section. The significant consideration in witness poetry is perhaps not whether the witness poem has traces of a poet’s actual suffering, but instead that the poem contains artistic indications of its relationship to its creation and its contexts. That is, what I find significant is the manner in which a poem shows its particular intimacy or distance to the suffering it engages. Deciding whether Back primarily presents her own suffering (living in a violent context) or the suffering of others (depicting those more subject to violence than herself as well as depicting another context—American colonization—through which she has not lived) seems less pressing than considering how her poem works through the idiosyncratic collision of violent contexts in one person’s life. Not only witness poetry, but all poetry has indexical connections to the world; any poem is created in relation to and because of elements of a poet’s life or a poem’s social, historical, and geographic location. In witness poetry, the markers of those connections are of significance not only to how the poem means but how it offers itself for ongoing connections. The forms of witness established or depicted shape the relational forms it might establish with readers, through whom the poem finds its continuing connections to the world.

In my third chapter, I discuss the subtle differences between the image of the buffalo in Back's poems and the image of the buffalo in the speaker's heart, suggesting that the work of the image depends upon making that work evident. We can also note the distinction between the buffalo in the speaker's heart and the buffalo in the poet's heart. The buffalo image exists outside of the poem as Back's lived witness in the United States and Israel. It is Back's life that carries the contexts held together in the poetry.

This chapter has pursued two related topics: 1) skeletons and ossuaries indicating a concern with relationship and connection and 2) the encryption of poetic signature. Both topics are indicative of a larger concern with relationship. Not all the poetry I investigate in this project has a preoccupation with the skeletal, but the coincidence of encryption and crypt does draw out the relationship between carrying and holding that is established in all the examples I consider. Cryptic poems make of speakers and ask of readers to be ossuaries, holding-containers of compassion and commemoration. Compassion is a memorializing attentiveness. Commemoration includes the potential for that memory to be communal. Remembering together (com-memoration) seems a particularly appropriate response to suffering along with another (com-passion). My consideration of compassion as a mode of being seems to emphasize the scale of the individual but it is ultimately compassion across individuals for which I reach in this project. Art is communal in form; witness art investigates that form as an invitation (or exhortation) for communal compassion.

Notes

ⁱThe history Heaney explores is the diversity of the cultural past tied to the geographic location. As Henry Hart writes, Heaney's poetry sits often "at the midpoint between Irish and English literary traditions, Catholic and Protestant camps, Mediterranean and Norse mythologies" (393).

ⁱⁱMeira Cook lists the multiple forms included in *Country of My Skull* (np).

ⁱⁱⁱThe film is, though, socially engaged. Uhde provides the political context for *Kostnice*:

Švankmajer filmed this extraordinary exhibit as a black-and-white 10-minute short soon after Czechoslovakia was invaded by the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact in August 1968. After a few brief months of the Prague Spring, the collective aspiration that the Communist regime might finally be liberalised and acquire a "human face" was shattered. The post-invasion regime, installed in the fall of 1969, became known especially for its repression of culture. (np)

Though "[t]he film was commissioned as a 'cultural documentary,' a form popular with the authorities and considered relatively safe politically" (np), the original soundtrack—"banal, pedestrian, Party-line comments of the tour guide [which] deliberately counterpointed with the riot of skeletal imagery." (np)—was rejected as "ideologically unacceptable and the film-maker was forced to replace the commentary; he chose piano music with a female vocalist singing (in Czech) the surrealist poem by Jacques Prévert, 'Pour faire le portrait d'un oiseau' ('To Paint the Portrait of a Bird')" (np).

^{iv}This pun works in English as it does in the original French.

^vSocial and political activist Marlene Green died in 2002. Brand writes that, "[b]eginning with her founding of the Black Education Project in the late 60s, Green's work became a lightning rod for black activism. Her organization was the nexus from which organizing emanated— advocacy and protests against racism in schools, in policing, in the workplace and in civic life" (np).

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Chapter 7

Conclusion

My discomfort in my first chapter with the assumption that a witness poem holds indexical traces of a poet's suffering brings me, in my last chapter, to a search for traces of a poet's signing, or signs of the relationship between poet and poem. The poem's relationships shape the ways in which I as a reader might connect to it. In my introduction, I provide an anecdote in which I, witnessing a suffering person, turned away from his vulnerability and from the violence I felt in looking at his inability to control its visibility. Witness poetry has helped me to consider how I might respond to others' vulnerability, to engage and live the discomfort of what feels like intimate intrusion. Through this poetry, I have gained insight into relational structures of witness. The witness poems in this project display and make studies of their own positions to what they witness. They also position readers contiguously through their metonymical modellings. This poetry, making clear to me my role and responsibilities as a reader, a particular kind of witness, has led me to a more confident navigation of other positions I come to occupy along the continuum of intimate and distanced relations to others.

In what ways do my feelings in relation to another's suffering matter? In what ways might they matter differently when these feelings come in relation to another's feelings (here, a poet's) about another's suffering? How do my responses matter differently when I feel them myself, discuss them with an intimate, or communicate them as critic? Poetry, and art more broadly, has the potential to occasion both personal reflection and public commemoration. In this project, I am not concerned only with feeling a response but also with considering how that feeling signifies in its sharing. How do my feelings, once communicated, operate within community, as shared meaning, as a material that builds (or does not) relationships? In reading

witness poetry as it is concerned with reflection and with waiting through an ongoing unraveling of meaning, my purpose is to witness (if only in hope) those feelings evoked by my study into the future and into other lives. The poetry I study here privileges its connections to actual readers and the personal individuality of their reading activity. This poetry moreover largely responds to actual events and actual suffering. Relationships lie in these poems like waiting-rooms, as the anticipations of actual readers and the future connections their own responses make.

In this project, I am not only a private reader, but also a public critic. As a critic, how does one sign one's work? How is one inserted into a network of thoughts and how is this insertion different from how an artist is inserted through his or her work, or how a reader is invisibly and fleetingly inserted in an act of reading? For me, this critical work is only the act of following through with reading as far as I am able. I work through for myself in these pages the ideas and questions the poems raise in me, ideas and questions that have also been raised for me in the living of my life. A critical work that did not connect in this intimate way with my life would not have answered any such questions for me.

This project examining art as witness is also about art as with-ness. How is art with us in our living? How am I with art as critic? Art's intimate impingements, its capacity to make us feel things, come in partnership with its distancing: art has us respond to it as it responds already to something in the world. What kind of feeling together with another does art allow? In engaging art, one enters into a pre-existing conversation or set of observations. Being a critic is being a reader in community. I make solid my reading, rendering it available for others as they read with their own questions. Much of this project has been about a poem's place in community, but it is also about my place in a community as I construct it around witness poetry and compassion.

Making my own readings available for proximity to readings by others is a way of feeling together or along with other people; as a feeling together about suffering, I mean for this project to be an expression of compassion. Compassion and art each involve holding and carrying. Compassion, coming out of variously distanced or intimate knowledges of others' suffering, takes the holding open of one's own feelings to the carrying of learning, the self-change that arrives with more intimate attention to another's experience. Differently, but, in this project, pertinently to compassion, holding involves attention to art as art, to the internal relationships it creates amongst what it depicts. Art's carrying involves attention to these constructed relations as they are connected to and as they construct actual relations between art and world. Holding and carrying are pieces of the same movement, a movement I consider in terms of the cradling that comes up more than once in the poetry I include in these chapters. I imagine this cradling as the rocking one uses in cradling a baby; this rocking moves between stationary holding and the changeful motion of carrying. Like the soothing to which I compare it, this rocking is the easing into a position in relation to a poem, one's life, and the larger world of other lives, or a relation between one's life and another's. Or, to try again, this holding and carrying is like the speaker's walking into witness in "An Atlas of the Difficult World": "These are not the roads / you knew me by" (l. 75-6) but "this is where I live now" (l. 60). Compassionate relation is the opening of new roads between where one knows and is known and where one's life might expand into new engagement.

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