

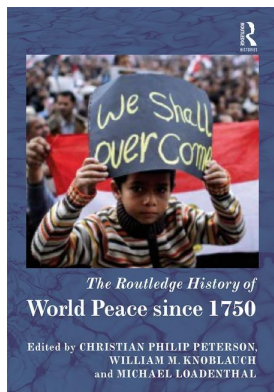
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FROM FATHER BERRIGAN TO BLACK LIVES MATTER

Literary representations of peace activism since 1945

Carolyn Dekker

Since 1945, peace activism, both as directed against wars and against nuclear armament, has left deep marks on American culture and policy; literature helped facilitate these momentous cultural and political happenings. Many scholars would here make an important distinction between the work of anti-nuclear activists to further positive peace and the work of anti-war activists to further the mere negative peace, particularly of a cease fire or the withdrawal of American forces from a war zone. The breadth of the activist careers treated in this chapter, including those of the Berrigan brothers, who rose to prominence for resisting the Vietnam War and lived out a long activist trajectory that came to include anti-nuclear work, cautions against such a reductive view of anti-war work.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, nuclear literature, including John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, speculative fiction such as *On the Beach* (both as an internationally bestselling Australian novel and a Hollywood film), and Jonathan Schell's work of speculative journalism, *The Fate of the Earth*, made strong contributions to the anti-nuclear cause, while Tim O'Brien and an entire generation of Vietnam War writers helped shape cultural memories of that war in ways favorable to the anti-war cause. Indeed, to produce a canon of twentieth century anti-war literature, one need only reach for a list of war literature. The poets have weighed in, and war is a disagreeable business.

But what of the literature that represents—and perhaps even enacts—peace activism? This list is harder to generate, as literature about activism occupies far less cultural prominence than war stories, even though it may be a more challenging literature to write and write well. This essay explores some of the imaginative resources available to peace activists in the form of depictions of peace activism in American literature. Though novels command the greatest market share and the greatest cultural capital among genres of American literature, I argue that the conflict-driven and linear structure of the traditional novel renders it a form ill-suited to activist literature. Instead, poetry, nonfiction, and drama may offer more expansive possibilities. To support this claim, in the pages that follow I examine Rebecca Solnit's book on the anti-nuclear movement; poetry and drama from the anti-war movement by Father Daniel Berrigan, and recent poetry emerging in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Peace writers have long recognized the challenge of advancing their aims in a literary landscape that developed with war writing in mind. The danger in using language to work

for peace, as Daniel Berrigan wrote in his autobiography *To Dwell in Peace*, is that “we arrogate the metaphors and vocabulary of warmaking and call it peacemaking.”¹ The rhythms of the peace struggle and the steady pace of the career activist are not easily suited to that favorite American genre, the novel. Attempts to write peace-activism novels encounter a disjunct of meaning and message, where the bloodlust for an explosive climax that inheres in traditional plotting undermines peaceful messages. Thus it is that poetry, nonfiction, and drama may all be more suited to the literature of peace activism.

The American literary canon may hate war, but it is in love with war literature. Indeed, war literature towers in the American literary canon in part because it makes for exciting storytelling that benefits from the high moral stakes and heart-pounding suspense of the battlefield even as it decries the inhumane placement of human beings within its lines. Consider that the very terms that students are taught to use to describe the plotting of a story are words of war. Plots consist of a *conflict* with multiple instances of rising *action* reaching a climax and finally a resolution, just as an armed conflict may consist of many smaller actions. By all the standards that have been inculcated in readers beginning with our earliest literary educations, well-plotted fiction enacts a small war. The struggle for peace, the cessation or aversion of conflict, is in its very impulse anti-climactic.

With notable exceptions such as Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*, Edwidge Danticat’s *Krik! Krik!*, and Uwem Akpan’s *Say You’re One of Them*, the most highly lauded works of war literature have been written by persons who were closely involved in conflict. The above authors stand in the shadow of literature by more famous witnesses—Hemingway the ambulance driver, Heller the bombardier, Vonnegut the POW, O’Brien the grunt. The reception of successful war fiction rests partially upon the authority of the authors’ true-life war experience. Thus, even while it decries war, our culture’s valuation of war literature (and higher estimation of war literature by veterans) underscores the ways in which American culture continues to value and mythologize war as a site for confronting the real.

That one of America’s greatest (anti) war writers produced perhaps the least successful work of his career in a novel about peace activism suggests the challenges of building a plot from the fabric of the activist life. The work in question, Tim O’Brien’s *The Nuclear Age* (1985) is memorably creaky; among his works, only *Tomcat in Love* (1998) and *Northern Lights* (1975)—both also venture afield from war literature—command fewer Amazon sales. In a review in which she clearly struggles to reconcile her admiration for *Going after Cacciato* (1978) with her disappointment with *The Nuclear Age*, Grace Paley concludes, “I wish the novel could have been either more surreal or less. It falls into an untranscending middle which muffles the important cry of ‘Doom, doom.’”²

As he will later do in the short story of near-draft dodging in “On the Rainy River,” O’Brien in *The Nuclear Age* returns to the life-crossroads of the draft notice, and imagines an alternate life that begins with a refusal to serve in Vietnam. Instead of shipping out to Vietnam as nearly every other O’Brien protagonist does, William Cowling receives his draft notice and goes underground. Dreams of nuclear destruction have haunted Cowling from boyhood, and these fears inspire him to help form a Weather Underground-like militant activist cell. Ultimately, upon his return to above-ground civilian life, the same fears inspire him to imprison his wife and daughter in his house while he digs a fall-out shelter in his back yard that is little more than a grave, to wire it with dynamite, and carry them into it. If, as Cowling’s undergraduate protest placard says, “The bombs are real,” then isn’t mad fear the only sane response?³ The book asks us: How can we all go on living our ordinary lives?

As Paley notes, however, the book's important message is muted. Perhaps because of his belief in the inevitability of nuclear destruction, Cowling is a man of incredibly weak character, never able to be fully "in or out," as his long-time lover, Sarah, is always demanding.⁴ He drifts across the roles in the nuclear world, from radical peace activist to peripheral member of a terrorist cell to a purveyor of uranium. He harbors a stolen nuclear warhead in his garden shed, and later, in a twisted civil defense exercise, he finally holds his family hostage in a shelter/grave. After his life of Hamlet-like inaction, placing his wife Bobbi and daughter Melinda in the hole is a final act of being all-in and decisive, though he cannot quite bring himself to use the dynamite to seal them all inside, safe in death.

When Melinda wakes and gets her hands on the firing device in the novel's final pages, he at last takes action. He is "willing to risk it," steps towards her, disarms her, and holds her tight.⁵ This potentially explosive, revelatory climactic moment feels maudlin and forced, and ultimately uses Cowling's nuclear fears to discuss not what it looks like to devote a life to peace work, but instead places atomic anxiety in service to an extended metaphor: The nuclear family as a hostage to cold war fear and/or male aggression as it tends towards family annihilation.

The true trigger for locking up Bobbi and Melinda is not apocalyptic threat but a threat to Cowling's nuclear family. When Bobbi goes on a trip and takes her diaphragm with her, Cowling begins digging his hole and imprisons her in the house. After he anesthetizes his family to carry them to the hole, his mind reels through this list: "I can see it, as always, the imprints in rock, the wall shadows at Hiroshima, leaves and grass and the Statue of Liberty and Bobbi's diaphragm."⁶ With this lazy evocation of the popular image of "wall shadows at Hiroshima," O'Brien undermines the work's commitment to the nuclear question by treating the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima as mere metaphor, deployed to explain the supposed magnitude of the impact of Bobbi's infidelity. The nuclear threat, despite O'Brien's attempts to make it central, is superfluous to the novel's true concern in the instability of the family and of any identity rooted in family. Here is (to borrow Paley's phrase) the "trough of private, individualistic complaint" into which O'Brien's attempt to write a political novel about peace activism falls; if a fiction writer of O'Brien's caliber—one of the living masters of anti-war writing—cannot pull off the peace-activism novel, that the problem may lie not with the writer but with the genre.

What would it look like to write literature that tries to enact a peaceful vision for the world? Rebecca Solnit's memoir, *Savage Dreams*, which is partially about anti-nuclear actions at the Nevada Test Site and partially about land and water issues in Yosemite, provides a model for a different type of plotting. The book, published in 1994, opens in 1990 and stretches until 1992, with digressive memories of Solnit's prior visits to the test site in 1987–1989 and to hundreds of years of prior human history in the region. Her story of activism has two conclusions: The Nevada half of the book ends with her brother, artist and activist David Solnit, sitting on his porch in 1992 and predicting the 1996 Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, and the afterword to the 1999 edition concludes by surveying the continued dangers of nuclear arms, testing and waste, and the continued activities of activists mentioned in the book.

This new afterword is an act of regrouping and taking stock rather than truly concluding or celebrating the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. This treaty, signed by the United States in 1996 (though not yet ratified by the Senate), was a global ban on nuclear explosives testing that has been signed by all nuclear capable states save India, Pakistan, and North Korea. Instead of dwelling upon this significant victory, Solnit notes the challenges

of opposing continued weapons testing that is now even further out of the public eye, carried on through sub-critical explosions and computer modeling thanks to “technological refinements [that] make it possible for nations to violate the spirit and sometimes the letter of the treaty.”⁷ Solnit calls the activities at the test site “rehearsing the end of the world,” an apt description considering Nevada’s relationship to the above-ground testing practiced there from 1951–1963, but one that becomes ever harder to visualize, if it is no less true, after 1996.⁸ When the testing moratorium that preceded the test ban treaty went into effect in 1992, Solnit described the protesters’ gathering at the test site that fall as a “time to imagine where we would go next.”⁹ That activism needed to continue, then, was never in doubt.

Here is the inherent difficulty of writing activist fiction: Even large policy achievements cannot provide moments of climax or victory in Solnit’s narrative so long as nuclear weapons persist. Smaller moments of protest action—inursions, pursuits, and eventual arrests by security forces in helicopters or long-suffering local sheriffs—also do not function as rising action or climaxes within her text. Her narration slides away from such moments, downplaying potential thrills or suspense. One year at the test site, she is chatting with a photographer friend who reminds her, “You know, you really need to cross that line pretty soon if you’re going to get arrested.”¹⁰ To trespass and be arrested is here so mundane an action that Solnit nearly forgets to perform it. After portraying the arrest, Solnit embarks on a long discussion of plastic handcuffs before describing the holding pen in a passage that blurs the line between this arrest and others: “This was the part of the dance where we threw ourselves into the arms of the authorities and then hovered suspended”; women “usually tried to organize” or “would sing and dance for hours.”¹¹ Events in Solnit’s narrative are forever dissolving into the conditional tense of “would sing” and “usually” and “sometimes,” moving out of the narrative present into the conditional present tense of habitual action. She sacrifices narrative immediacy in favor of reinforcing the repetitive, persistent nature of activist life.

Solnit is conscious that she cuts against audience expectations by giving no account of activism as a thrilling caper. She writes, “So many Americans seem to think that activism is an aberrant necessity brought on by a unique crisis, and then throw themselves into it with an unsustainable energy brought on by the belief that once they realize some goal or other, they can go home and be apolitical again.”¹² The anti-nuclear movement is connected with both the broader peace movement and the environmental movement, and so may be particularly vulnerable to public perceptions shaped by works such as Edward Abbey’s novel, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. Abbey’s activists offer environmentalist catharsis in their exuberant acts of sabotage and vandalism, felling and burning billboards that interrupt the beauty of the landscape and destroying construction equipment that makes incursions into remote areas of the Southwest. George Washington Hayduke, in particular, enjoys the status of counter-cultural hero among those who compost, hike, and recycle, but wish they were Greenpeace activists. Hayduke disappears in a hail of bullets at the end of the *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. Meanwhile Doug Peacock, the friend of Abbey who inspired the character, has quietly lived on for four decades and forged a career as a naturalist, writer, and filmmaker still active in the fight against climate change.

Against potential models like Hayduke, Solnit holds her brother, David Solnit, up as the pattern of a true activist with whom she shared a “beautiful symbiosis.” She wrote pamphlets and paid his bail while he had the patience to attend interminable meetings in which anarchists pursued discussions to the point of full consensus. Of David, she says, “I always

admired my brother for the steady nonchalance with which he approached his work, recognizing that political engagement was a normal and permanent state.”¹³ Just as a life of political engagement approached in this manner resists the structure of crisis/climax followed by resolution (and return to apoliticism), so does her book.

In her attention to the spring and autumn actions at the Nevada test site, Solnit draws upon a long tradition in environmental writing, from *Walden* to *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, of utilizing seasonal time to compress multiple years of action or observation into a single narrative arc that makes one round of seasons. This pastoral emphasis on circular time reinforces the idea that the activist life is not a timeline; it is an unending and seasonal cycle. Appropriately, the book’s final chapter is called “Full Circle” and ends with the image of the activists joining Havasupai elders in an enormous circle dance.

Though activist lives and stories persistently resist the linear climax narrative, the pressure to make linear narratives about activism also appears in discussions of Daniel Berrigan. A Catholic priest and poet who was a prominent figure in the Peace movement from the Vietnam era until his death in April of 2016, Berrigan is most remembered for being one of the Catonsville Nine, a group who on May 17, 1968 entered a draft board office in Catonsville, Maryland, removed draft files, and burned them in the street with homemade napalm. The nine were tried and convicted in October 1968 while as many as 1,500 supporters marched and gathered outside the courthouse.¹⁴ Berrigan’s fame only grew as he went underground rather than submitting to his prison term, making sudden appearances at churches and peace rallies, evading capture for several months and earning himself a spot on the FBI’s Most Wanted List.

In an often-recirculated interview clip of Berrigan, NBC’s Chris Wallace observed: “Back in the Vietnam days, the Berrigan brothers were big. You attracted tens of thousands of people. Now you’re not as big. You do not attract the same attention.” Asked if that was hard for him, Berrigan responded, “No, I don’t think we ever felt our conscience was tied to the other end of a TV cord. I think we’ve tried for a number of years to do what was right, because it was right.” Given Solnit’s perspective, it seems that what is enacted here is not just Berrigan’s sharp wit and understated commitment to activism over “a number of years”—almost fifty of them, in the end—but also an attempt by Wallace to fit Berrigan’s life into a narrative consisting of all that led to that single, headline-grabbing moment of protest in 1968, his months underground after his sentencing, and decades of diminuendo. As journalist Jeremy Scahill points out, this 1981 interview took place just one year after Berrigan helped found Ploughshares, an anti-nuclear organization that persists today.¹⁵

Berrigan was as prolific an author as he was an activist. Of his more than thirty books, his editor Michael True considers three from the Vietnam era, *Prison Poems* (1973); a book of essays called *No Bars to Manhood* (1970), and the play *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* (1970), as his most enduring.¹⁶ All three genres provide a field in which Berrigan contested the meaning of protest actions, his subsequent imprisonment, and writings.

The Trial of the Catonsville Nine is a particularly useful text for theorizing the relationship between activism and writing. Like *Savage Dreams*, it is suggestive of a structure and aesthetic for activist literature. To assess the actions of the Catonsville Nine in historical context, consider the 2013 remarks of another of the Nine, George Mische: “The seeming infatuation with our event robbed the rightful place in history for the hundreds of people who, by the government’s 1992 admission, raided nearly 300 draft boards across the country between 1968 and 1972.”¹⁷ The incident in Maryland was just one protest in a long string of committed actions by hundreds of activists; the Nine were by no means the largest group

of participants, nor those who succeeded in destroying the most draft files. Their fame and legacy, then, flow from the eyebrow-raising sight of a pair of Catholic priests undertaking such actions as well as Berrigan's skill at crafting a public narrative.

Berrigan wrote the play *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* "somewhat in the manner of the new 'factual theater'"—basing it upon the 1,200 page transcript of the trial.¹⁸ By hewing so closely to official documents, the play succeeds in condensing those documents into an accessible public reading and performance material. Because Berrigan rendered the testimony and dialogue as blank verse, and claims to have only added words to the transcript where necessary for clarity, his role as playwright resembles that of an editor or a composer of blackout or found poetry, with the composition of the dialogue carried out during the trial. The play's plot was set even earlier, as the activists planned and carried out their protest.

The outcome of the trial is never in question for a reader of the play. The play's main thrust, then, is not "What happens?" but "What does it mean?" It provides an iterative meditation on the meaning of the actions of the Catonsville Nine and other prior protests, including the Baltimore Four. These four activists, including Berrigan's brother Philip, poured blood on the files of a Baltimore draft office in October of 1967. As the different defendants come forward during the play, they interpret these actions in slightly different ways. According to Philip Berrigan, "We attempted to anoint these files / with the Christian symbol of life and purification / which is blood."¹⁹ Thomas Lewis, who was there with him, describes it differently, with a greater emphasis on death and waste, as "a strong indictment of those records" because

Blood in biblical terms
and in contemporary terms
is a symbol of reconciliation
related to the blood
that is being wasted in Vietnam
not only American blood
but the blood of the Vietnamese.²⁰

Finally, George Mische, who did not participate in the actions of the Baltimore Four, proclaims their influence upon him as such:

The President cannot legally
take us into a war
We should never have let him
He should be on trial here today
In the peace movement
One of the most powerful things I knew of
was Philip Berrigan's first trial
for the blood-pouring
A six-year sentence
for pouring blood on files
Men walk our streets
spilling blood continuously
and they walk free.²¹

In explaining how the actions of the Baltimore Four inspired his own actions, Mische leans less than Berrigan and Lewis do upon blood in the Christian context of sacrifice and redemption and instead interprets the spilled blood as a metaphor for wartime violence, one that invites a comparison between the magnitude of the civil disobedience crimes of Philip Berrigan and the war crimes of President Johnson. Philip Berrigan's six-year sentence becomes, in Mische's hands, not a vindication of his criminality (as the counter-demonstrators outside the courtroom during the trial of the Catonsville Nine would have it) but a reproach to the justice system.

Mische's argument transforming the meaning of Berrigan's prison sentence for anti-war activism is similar to the transformation Martin Luther King, Jr. describes several years before in *Why We Can't Wait* (1964). Within the civil rights movement, King reflects, non-violent activism transformed the meaning of going to prison from a "disgrace" and assault on African American manhood to a "badge of honor" for protesters. According to King, the non-violent activist in prison says to society, "Punish me. I do not deserve it. But because I do not deserve it, I will accept it so that the world will know that I am right and you are wrong."²² Mische's message is similar. He compares Philip Berrigan's prison sentence in the name of peace activities to state-sanctioned violence and pits the respectability of a clergy member of conscience against that of the society that imprisons him.

As each witness in *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* speaks, the symbols in the protests they describe are interpreted anew and put to new rhetorical use. Through this interest in the iterations and free play of meaning, Berrigan's play about peace activism flourishes its literary-ness even as it clearly advances arguments for the anti-war cause. Characters play with the meaning of the elements of the Catonsville protest: Why draft files? Why fire? Why Napalm? Mary Moylan provides a powerful explanation for the protesters' use of Napalm on the draft files:

As a nurse
 my profession is
 to preserve life
 to prevent disease
 To a nurse
 the effect of napalm on human beings
 is apparent
 I think of children and women
 bombed by napalm
 burned alive by a substance
 which does not roll off
 It is a jelly
 It adheres
 It continues burning
 This is inhuman absolutely
 To pour napalm
 on pieces of paper
 is certainly preferable
 to using napalm on human beings
 By pouring napalm

on draft files
 I wish to celebrate life
 not to engage in a dance of death.²³

Moylan dryly observes that her expertise as a nurse qualifies her to speak of the effect of napalm on human beings; thus even in her framing of her testimony she critiques the way military policymakers and the public have seen the substance. It should not take training as a nurse to know that the use of napalm on children, women, or any human beings is wrong. Her last word, this surprising reframing of the disturbing stateside use of napalm as a celebration of life, makes her activism more approachable to an American public for whom any act of protest, let alone one using blood or flame, can seem unapproachably radical. The literature thus becomes a place to contest the meaning of the protest actions and to educate the public on how to view those actions.

In a section of *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* introduced under the heading of “Evidence for the Prosecution” but sometimes circulated as a poem called “The Boxes of Paper Ash,” Berrigan makes a humanitarian case for his actions, writing:

The boxes of paper ash
 the size of infant caskets
 were rolled in on a dolly
 heaped there like cordwood
 or children after a usual
 air strike on Hanoi.²⁴

In contrast to other defendants such as Tom Lewis, who emphasized that burning draft files might be a way to save young American men from the draft (“The young men / whose files we destroyed / have not yet been drafted may not be drafted / may not be sent to Vietnam for cannon fodder”²⁵), both Moylan and Berrigan downplay the importance of the files by emphasizing that they are only paper. To Moylan, burning paper is “certainly preferable” to burning children. For Berrigan, the destroyed draft files, entombed in little “boxes . . . the size of infant caskets” become symbols of burned children’s bodies, calling into question a moral universe in which the burning of children is acceptable and the burning of paper is not.

Adrienne Rich took up the same image in a 1968 poem, quoting Berrigan in both her epigraph and her title, “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children,” a poem about the use of language (problematic though it is) in liberty struggles from Joan d’Arc to Frederick Douglass to Berrigan and herself. She concludes, “There are flames of napalm in Catonsville, Maryland. I know it hurts to burn. The typewriter is overheated, my mouth is burning. I cannot touch you and this is the oppressor’s language.”²⁶ Esoteric as Rich’s concerns with the oppressor’s language may seem—especially when the oppressed may wield it so skillfully (“Frederick Douglass wrote an English purer than Milton’s,” she avows)—Berrigan shared them, criticizing as “obscene” the patriotic and militaristic language, and even the aggression lurking in the hearts of peacemakers. In an essay, “The Speech Defines the Style” (1970), Berrigan writes:

A major portion of public speech, embracing as it does death for its method, recommending destruction and division as invaluable social tools, is in the strictest

classical sense, obscene speech . . . And all the while, such speech, seduced and seducing, drowns the simple, lucid words by which man once reached outward to his brother, forged his art, reflected on his experience, made love.²⁷

He recommends instead speech characterized by “modesty and loyalty, the springs in the desert; all the hidden efforts of men to live with human difference, to bear with crisis, to bind up wounds, to be patient and long-suffering.”²⁸ Fiercely polemical and challenging to the “good order” (“Our apologies good friends / for the fracture of good order the burning of paper / instead of children”²⁹) as it is, Berrigan’s work and Solnit’s strives towards this rare, alternative aesthetic, one that is connection-seeking and reflective, rather than “embracing death for its method.”

Daniel Berrigan’s legacy echoes in the words of Sister Megan Rice, who, along with two other activists representing the Ploughshares organization the Berrigans helped found, splashed blood and painted anti-war slogans on buildings at the Y-12 National Security Complex in Oak Ridge, Tennessee (a location well known for enriching uranium) in 2012. When she was released from prison at age 85 after serving two years for trespassing, Rice anticipated participating in further actions and perhaps paying a steep price for it. She told the *New York Times*, “It would be an honor. Good Lord, what would be better than to die in prison for the antinuclear cause?”³⁰ Rice’s willingness to use her octogenarian body as a public-relations time bomb to be deployed against the nuclear weapons industry seems equal parts pragmatism and idealism—the essential and unlikely mix needed for maintaining a commitment to direct activism in all seasons.

Conclusion

How can such commitment be nourished and sustained? This question is increasingly pressing to liberal activist movements today as they prepare for four years under a Trump administration. Part of the answer will be art. Audre Lorde wrote in “Poetry is Not a Luxury” of poetry as a light by which to examine our lives and “within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action.”³¹ Lorde’s words ring powerfully as today’s Black Lives Matter movement responds to what one of its lead organizers, Melina Abdullah, refers to as “wartime conditions” faced by the African American community.³² With a diffuse leadership drawn from female, often queer, academics and performance artists, it follows that the texts emerging from this movement are not oratory or sermons but poems, spoken word, and music.

The Black Lives Matter slogan was first coined by Oakland activist Alicia Garza in July 2013 as a response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting of Trayvon Martin. The neighborhood watch volunteer pursued and killed the unarmed black teen on February 26, 2012 as he walked home from purchasing a snack at a convenience store in Sanford, Florida. The event sparked widespread national outrage. Garza later worked with Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi to found an organization of the same name. The true catalyst for the movement, however, came on August 9, 2014, when Ferguson, Missouri police officer Darren Wilson killed an unarmed eighteen-year-old named Mike Brown. Brown was black, like 97 percent of Ferguson, while Wilson was white, like 95 percent of the Ferguson police force. Police left Brown’s body lying in the street for four and a half hours and later destroyed community efforts to memorialize Brown on the site of his death. The town erupted in protests—some orderly and some destructive—that carried on through the

fall and attracted hundreds of activists from across the United States, including over 500 who came as part of a “freedom ride” organized through the Black Lives Matter organization.³³

The prominent slogan “Black Lives Matter” has since been claimed by various organizations and in many cases by protest organizers and participants claiming no organizational affiliations at all. African American studies scholar Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor has defined Black Lives Matter as a slogan, a movement, and “a ‘mood’ that exists and . . . expresses itself in the demonstrations against police brutality or murder.”³⁴ This decentralized, local, and spontaneous nature of the movement makes the cultural activism of poets and writers all the more important to its coherence and identity.

Poet Danez Smith offers a caveat that applies to other poets whose work is closely associated with the movement: Their interest in racial justice predates Black Lives Matter as a hashtag, slogan, organization, or movement, and Black Lives Matter is not the only organization working on this issue.³⁵ Nonetheless, poets and poet-leaders associated with or adjacent to the movement are contributing to the Black Lives Matter “mood” that Taylor identifies in poetry that moves nimbly through personal, political, and historical registers to keep the memory of the dead, articulate that systemic injustice *is* violence, and connect today’s violence to longer histories of violence and oppression. In multiple poetry performances, Seattle-based lawyer and organizer Nikkita Oliver has provided an eloquent explanation to the meaning of the movement’s slogan: “When I say black lives matter / I am . . . [trying to] remind myself that my life matters too.”³⁶

In a poem called “Short Film” consisting of sections “not an elegy for Trayvon Martin,” “not an elegy for Mike Brown,” “not an elegy for Renisha McBride,” “not an ode for John Crawford (a bop),” Danez Smith simultaneously refuses and performs the work of elegy.³⁷ The section on Brown opens:

I am sick of writing this poem
but bring the boy. his new name
his same old body. ordinary, black
dead thing. bring him & we will mourn³⁸

Here Smith protests the constant need for such memorials by proclaiming their weariness and then piling up one “not an elegy” after another. In an open letter to white poets published in November of 2014, Smith called upon white “partners in verse” to make art that works toward an end to racialized violence. The letter begins, “I come to you out of ink, of breath, of patience, & almost emptied of any belief that there is anything in this country that doesn’t seek to end me . . .”³⁹ Despite the clear weariness with the task, Smith nonetheless continues to perform the work of protest and elegy, including a new long work called *summer, somewhere* recently published in excerpt by *Poetry* magazine. In it, Smith imagines a summery paradise, somewhere murdered black youth can rest “in peace whole all summer.”⁴⁰

Singer Jamila Woods drew upon Audre Lorde’s insistence that “poetry is not a luxury” when she accompanied Smith, Oliver, and white hip hop artist Macklemore in his piece, “White Privilege II” and addressed more than two million Americans watching *The Late Show* in February 2016 with the words, “Your silence is a luxury. Hip-hop is not a luxury.” Today, as ever, the poetry of life and peace is not a luxury, but is a vitalizing force for those who seek to forge sustainable communities of activism. Ours is a moment for persistent energy, endurance, and iteration.

Notes

- 1 Daniel Berrigan, *To Dwell in Peace* (New York: Harper Collins, 1988), 164.
- 2 Grace Paley, "Digging a Shelter and a Grave," *New York Times Book Review* 17 November 1985: 7.
- 3 Tim O'Brien, *The Nuclear Age* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 74.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 119.
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- 24 *Ibid.*, 89.
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