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‘No pictures of you anywhere … You were alive’: Poetic (In)visibility as a Ground for Political Plurality

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Abstract:
This paper argues that in social circumstances deformed by persistent anti-black racisms, invisibility does not necessarily constitute a failure of recognition or acknowledgment by others. Rather, it comes forth as a protective shield, to resist reductive and objectifying forms of seeing that often result in violence. But such invisibility has its limits. In this paper, I read *Incendiary Art* (2017) by Patricia Smith, a collection of poems set in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement in the US, to interrogate both the limits of such protective invisibility, and the responsibility of the reader to acknowledge the potential violence of their own gaze. I examine the emancipatory political value of the poetic as showing a way towards a transformative engagement with others as ‘who’ they are, and subsequently towards a mutual co-constitution that is at the very heart of actualising a democratic political plurality.

Keywords: Glissant; poetics; political invisibility; otherness; plurality; Patricia Smith.

Introduction

Political visibility has long been a cornerstone of emancipatory democratic politics, serving as a pivotal ‘phenomenological and ecological element in which the thresholds of the social are shaped and drawn’ (Birghenti 2010: 167). Movements for social justice crucially strive to provide visibility to marginalised and underrepresented persons or groups, and to confront the stark realities of political invisibility; deeply rooted as it is in historical patterns of inequality and disenfranchisement resulting from the systemic failure of appropriate recognition or acknowledgement of some persons by politically dominant or hegemonic groups.

However, what happens when visibility itself constitutes such a failure? Consider, for instance, the problem of anti-black racisms in Global North contexts. The relentless and often state-sanctioned everyday violence that black individuals endure has been characterised by many as a systemic and infrastructural breakdown within the realm of visibility (Silva 2017; Rankine 2015). It is precisely in this context that a social movement like Black Lives Matter (BLM) has catalysed, beginning in the United States, into a threshold-breaking movement for the right to be visible as black without the persistent threat of violence. As Nicholas Mirzoeff writes in a poignant analysis of the movement:

> To appear is to matter, in the sense of Black Lives Matter, to be grievable, to be a person that counts for something. And it is to claim the right to look, in the sense that I see you and you see me, and together we decide what there is to say as a result. It’s about seeing what there is to be seen … and then giving the visible a sayable name. People inevitably appear to each other unevenly – the social movement process is about finding ways for people to learn how to treat each other equally in circumstances where they are not equal, whether in material terms, or those of relative privilege (Mirzoeff 2017: 18).

Mirzoeff invokes Hannah Arendt's term, 'the space of appearance' – the space where politics happens – to delineate the importance of a movement like BLM in rearticulating black visibility in the face of widespread politically sanctioned racisms. Against the backdrop of the BLM in the United States, and following Mirzoeff, this paper elaborates on a poetic response to the paradox inherent in a politics of visibility. Through a close reading of a collection of poems, *Incendiary Art* by Patricia Smith (2017), I explore a constitutive tension between invisibility as absence from the 'space of appearance' and as a protective shield from reductive, objectifying and disenfranchising modes of being seen in this space, marked as it is by complex legacies of systemic racism. As dimensions of political participation, visibility and invisibility name a fundamentally intersubjective dynamic. I am interested in examining the place of this dynamic in the space of the political, which, to follow Hannah Arendt's terms, is necessarily constituted by a plurality of distinctive perspectives (not just a multiplicity in terms of numbers or a diversity of qualities) that are disclosed only in interaction (Arendt 1998). Crucially, in the Arendtian sense of *inter*-action, thinking about the political dimension of invisibility implies putting into question dominant practices of seeing and visibilising. It raises the questions, what does it mean to be a viewing subject, and what does it mean to be visible to another? What does it mean to be the object of and/or subjected to a discriminating gaze?

In this paper, I take up this complex intersubjective dynamic in terms of a poetics of (in)visibility, implying that political participation is contingent upon an ethical and fundamentally poetic or aesthetic responsibility on the part of the interlocuter in the interaction. Where to be visible is to be seen by others in a 'space of appearance', a poetics of (in)visibility demands an acknowledgement of the socio-historical mechanisms that structure one's modes of seeing. The poetic dimension of invisibility goes beyond mere absence; it serves as a marker delineating the boundaries of our own perceptual frameworks, thereby placing an ethical demand on participants. The poetic, I argue, can give form, not simply to that which is invisible, but to a complex transformative dynamic wherein one can begin to productively engage with the limits of one's own structures of seeing.

Theoretical Context

This paper is an offshoot of a larger research project at the intersection of literary studies and philosophical aesthetics wherein I develop a pragmatist reader-response framework, locating poetry's politicality in the intersubjective dynamic between readers and poems (Nadkarni 2022). This dynamic, I argue, is characterised by complex modalities of understanding, as readers engage with the multilayered difficulties that poems often present through their formal, syntactic and semantic opacities. I examine the political dimensions of such understanding, arguing that the politicality of poetry lies in facilitating and making widely accessible transformative forms of understanding that can contribute to the actualisation of a decolonial and anti-identitarian political plurality.

At the core of the framework is the concept of 'poetic understanding': a transformative quality of understanding that is a necessarily dynamic, contingent, non-hierarchical and anti-identitarian process of transformation and co-constitution of selves. The concept of poetic understanding builds upon a juxtaposition between two indispensable yet avowedly different approaches to the phenomenological and relational grounds of political plurality on a global stage: Hannah Arendt (1998) and Édouard Glissant (1997; 2010). I take up, in

particular, Arendt's distinction, between 'who' one is and 'what' one is (Arendt 1998: 175–76; Loidolt 2018: 253). According to Arendt, 'who' one is emerges only in interaction, and cannot be objectively described or reified (as the 'what' can be). There is no 'who', no 'I', without the 'we', and no 'we' without the interaction of distinctive 'I's. Crucially, this is not the 'we' of the collective or any 'identity' in the sense of 'what' people might be. Arendt shows us a 'we' of constant communication and deliberation that 'discloses the distinctiveness of singular world accesses' (Loidolt: 179). As such, in a political plurality, there is only the *inter*subject: no subject without the interaction, the space of appearance, or the freedom to truly come into being as a 'who'. On Arendt's account – especially as it is interpreted by Loidolt – 'who' we are as individuals, as distinctive perspectives, is constituted in and only in the ways in which we take up the voices of others, and in the ways others take up our own. It is this mutual co-constitution that is at the very core of a phenomenology of political plurality.

However, to understand what it means to actualise plurality in a world built on racial and colonial hierarchy, a world that places so much emphasis on 'what' we are, requires a move beyond Arendt's conceptualisation of plurality. I thus turn to Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* to argue that a political plurality cannot be actualised without accounting for those socio-political hierarchies that prefix our interactions (Kripp 2020). Glissant's approach is crucial to my argument not only for its decolonial commitment to plurality, but for the indispensable role it carves for the poetic in actualising an anti-racist and anti-identitarian political plurality in circumstances rife with racial hierarchies. Glissant's concept of opacity plays a particularly important role in the present analysis, articulating a way of characterising the appearance of another from beyond the limits of one's own capacity to understand them, necessitating a concerted engagement with another's 'right not to be understood' (Britton 1999: 19–20). This is especially pertinent in circumstances where the other in question might be in a systemically marginalised position, wherein the very act of seeing another might appear as an act of aggression because 'it constructs the Other as a [a mere] *object* of knowledge' (ibid.).[1] Opacity, in Glissant's terms, functions as an active strategy of resistance against the reductive and objectifying forms of knowability that typically operate in relations between the 'West' and the 'non-West'. Yet, it is more than simply a matter of resistance in terms of opposition. Recognition of another's opacity simultaneously stimulates a transformative engagement with others. A poetics of relation, according to Glissant, requires a recognition of the other's difference as irreducible to one's own norms, with the presupposition that each of us encounters the density (the opacity) of the other. In Glissant's words, 'the more the Other resists in his thickness or his [*sic*] fluidity, the more expressive his reality becomes, and the more fruitful the relation becomes' (2010: 24).

Critical race scholars like Denise Ferreira Da Silva (2017), Saidiya Hartman (1997), Christina Sharpe (2016), Hortense Spillers (1987; 2003), Paul Taylor (2013), among others, have consistently drawn attention to the intertwining discursive systems that define race relations in ways that render black people as other, as objectifiable, or in Hortense Spillers' terms, 'fungible' (1987), as if knowable only in terms of 'what' they are. In the context of critical emancipatory struggles to challenge these structures, Glissant's concept of opacity offers an invaluable intervention. More narrowly, in the particular context of this paper, it is the concept of opacity that addresses what actualising political plurality means in contexts where structural inequalities might detrimentally impact the ways in which we take up the voices and presences of others. In short, I draw a connection between the Glissantian concept of opacity and the poetic (or aesthetic) dimension of invisibility.

Incendiary Art by Patricia Smith

The question of what it takes to actualise an egalitarian 'space of appearance' in societies fundamentally rooted in racial hierarchy frames my reading of *Incendiary Art*. *Incendiary* is at its core a post BLM book in which Smith takes a scathing look at the continued histories of violence against black people in the United States. It is on the one hand a poetic visibilising of black death, which, as Sharpe observes, is a 'predictable and constitutive aspect of [American] democracy' (2016: 7).[2] Which is to say that black deaths are not an anomaly, a collection of aberrant crimes, singular acts of terrorism, or 'individual instances of *prejudice*' (Yancy 2005: 1); rather they are inscribed in the very 'necropolitical' framework of American democracy, policy and governance (Mbembe 2003: 27).

Yet, on the other hand, alongside a poetic historicising of America's pernicious racism, *Incendiary* emphasises that visibilising death comes at the cost of livingness itself. Following McKittrick, I take the term 'livingness' here to mean not just an individual life, but the composite of world-making activities of a community, including knowledge and memory-making practices, habituations, cultural styles and expressions that are fundamentally infused by 'state-sanctioned racial violence' (McKittrick 2021: 14). While from the outset the poems set the 'protective' conditions that necessitate invisibility for those seen as black and thus marked as a 'visible' threat to be eliminated, they also show that where invisibility is such a dire necessity 'black livingness' itself is lost, is absented from political participation (McKittrick 2016: 10). The poems in the book thus compel the following question: how to write a livingness that, as a visibility, is ever threatened with annihilation?

The poems catalogue the relentlessness of black death in the US, the alarming frequency of police shootings of black youth and the impact on the lives in their wake that continue in a state of vulnerability and fear. The memory of Emmett Till's[3] murder in Mississippi in 1955 recurs throughout the collection. It is an invocation, not only to Till, but to the violence against him, engraved in the collective memory of a community as an ever-present reality.

> *Lord, they kilt that chile more than one time*. (Smith 2017: 5)

Significant events in America's history that have to do both with racist violence and large-scale protests for racial justice – the MOVE bombardments in Philadelphia 1985, the Tulsa race massacre in 1921, and the civil unrests in Birmingham 1963, Chicago 1968, Los Angeles 1992 and Ferguson 2014 – are documented through the collection under the heading of 'Incendiary Art'. Near the end of the book, we come across the thirty-five-page long poem, 'Sagas of the Accidental Saint', that records narratives of unarmed black people who have 'accidentally' died in police custody, murdered because of what Christina Sharpe describes as 'familiar narratives of danger or disaster that attach to our always already weaponised Black bodies (the weapon is Blackness)' (Sharpe 2016: 16–17). Through winding, overcrowded narratives in multiple voices, *Incendiary* performs what Sharpe calls 'wake work', labouring with 'the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding' (13). As wake work, the book is preoccupied not just with death, the factual toll of antiblack violence, but equally with the grit of everyday life, the poetics of living in the wake. As Sharpe observes, an understanding of life 'in the wake' is gained not from the spectacular but 'from the kinds of knowledge from and of the everyday' (12), from that which goes on in excess of and is ungraspable by any documentary explanation. The poems in *Incendiary* speak in a multitude of voices and

perspectives, and in so doing they evince the struggle to disclose each unique perspective in situations where others in the interaction have always had ready access to diminishing these perspectives by blurring them into one (kind of) voice, running from them, or silencing them altogether. I read *Incendiary* as a book about reclaiming and disclosing afresh the 'who'ness of those systemically reduced to 'what' they are and taking on the struggle for appropriate social acknowledgement. An acknowledgement that – I will go on to show – cannot be possible without the self-critical and solidary participation of its readers.

Resisting Transparency

The book's opening poem, 'That Chile Emmett in That Casket' (Smith 2017: 1), sets the conditions that necessitate invisibility for those who are seen as black, and who are consequently marked as a 'visible' threat to be eliminated. The poem, a kind of ekphrastic, launches off with an invocation to the iconic photograph of Emmett Till in the casket …

Photo, Jet magazine, Sept. 15, 1955

… not as a distant past memory, but an ever-present reality for the black community. The photograph is everywhere, 'sometimes … tacked, flush against plaster with a pearl hatpin', sometimes placed 'in the shadowbox, propped on one ripped edge', sometimes found 'in pleather wallets right next to the thought of cash' (5). Not just a memory, it is equally a caution, a stark reminder of the ubiquitous danger of being seen as black.

or when, as Mama said, you *showed your ass* by sassin' or back talking,
the page would be pulled down, pulled out, unfolded, smoothed flat,

and you had to look. *Look, boy.* And they made sure you kept looking
while your daddy shook his head, mumbling *This why you got to act*

right 'round white folk … (5)

While the lines quoted above make visible the pernicious continuity of the racist violence that structures the lives of black people in the US, they are as much an imaging of invisibility as a protective shield. Something that will keep you alive. As the book goes on, every poem builds upon the conviction that Emmett Till is *not* an example of someone who didn't 'act right'; he is an example of what could happen at any time to any person who is seen as black. This is elaborated throughout the book, especially in one of the final poems of the book, the long poem 'Sagas of the Accidental Saint', in which the lines race through scenarios – even the most insignificant ones – that end up in homicide: 'dares to glare/when someone shoves', 'leaves ajar a door she should have closed', 'walks too close behind', 'he laughs too loud', 'droops his pants', 'moves all wrong', 'frightens everyone with his physique' (74).

He stumbles, trips, he trips a wire, he sees

too much, she needs too much, he feels too much,
her skin's too mud, his skin's too light, he fights
too dirty, fights for breath … (77)

In each of these scenarios, visibility is lethal and just being alive is an affront. How, in Smith's words, dare 'they stride into the line/of gunfire, tease the trigger, crave the shot,/just living through their days as if they're not about to die' (Smith 2017: 73–74). Yet, even if invisibility is a protective shield, we come to see that it offers no guarantees. What is more,

where invisibility is such a dire necessity, livingness itself is lost, is missed in more ways than one. Back to the opening poem:

> there weren't any pictures of *you* in the house, pinned high on the wall,
> folded up tight up against the Lord, toted like talisman in wallet or purse.
>
> You'd searched, woe climbing like river in your chest. But there were
> no pictures of you anywhere. You sparked no moral. You were alive.

I would like to recall here Katherine McKittrick's question to decolonial and anti-racist scholars and writers:

> [If] blackness originates and emerges in violence and death, black futures are foreclosed by the dead and dying asterisks … How then do we think and write and share as decolonial scholars and foster a commitment to acknowledging violence and undoing its persistent frame, rather than simply analytically reprising violence? (McKittrick 2014: 18)

McKittrick argues that the task at hand is to write without repeating violence; to read 'the mathematics of these violences as possibilities that are iterations of black life that cannot be contained by black death'; to write 'black absented presences'; to shift 'our analytical frame away from the lone site of the suffering body and toward co-relational texts, practices, and narratives that emphasize black life'; to create unceasingly a space for 'black livingness' (2016: 10). McKittrick's words voice an aspiration as well as an imperative, to which *Incendiary* is in many ways an attestation:

> black lives
> matter
> most when they are in
> motion, the hurtle and reverb
> matter … (46)

Yet, the book seems to trouble McKittrick's proposition: how to write a life, a livingness, that as a visibility is ever threatened with annihilation? How to present persons upon whose absence, 'not mattering', or otherwise purely subjugated presence the whole of a supposedly democratic society is conscripted? How to write a presence that is not de facto unequal(ised) (Gordon 2018: 20)? Drawing on Glissant, I propose that where these lives are in fact written, they are written as opacities. Underneath the overwhelming presence of death and mourning, presences of particular lives, persons and perspectives are actively absented. They are concealed, made incomprehensible, disguised, made opaque. Where they exist as livingness, they do so beyond the limits of absolute knowability. Against the transparency of death, the persons speaking/voiced in the book live, thrive, as opacities. Opacity, as illustrated in these poems, posits a critical intervention in the intersubjective dynamics of visibility and invisibility, suggesting that to alter the structural ground of black visibility in a systemically racist context requires transforming our very perceptual structures, and the way in which this visibility is taken up.

Formal opacity

There are several forms that living opacity takes throughout *Incendiary.* Literal invisibility, mentioned above, is but one of them. As Glissant would note, opacity is never a matter of a simple opposition between visibility and invisibility. It is rather a complex and agential negotiation from within existing systems of relation and representation. When there is nowhere

to hide, opacity 'has to be produced as an unintelligible presence *within* the visible presence' (Britton 1999: 24–25). Throughout *Incendiary*, poetic form is a powerful mechanism to aid in the facilitation of such complex unintelligibility.

Let's take for example, the poem 'Black, Poured Directly into the Wound' (Smith 2017: 33–34). The poem is in the form of a (double) 'Golden Shovel', a form proposed by the poet Terrance Hayes in early 2017 as homage to the influential twentieth-century African American poet Gwendolyn Brooks in the year of her birth centenary.[4] In golden shovel verses, the 'last words of each line … are, in order, words from a line or lines taken often, but not invariably, from a Brooks poem' (Share 2017). Patricia Smith's poem is a double shovel, where the last words in each line read vertically down, and the first word of each in reverse forms Brooks' complete poem, 'The Last Quatrain of The Ballad of Emmett Till'; the latter quoted below in full.

(after the murder,
after the burial)

Emmett's mother is a pretty-faced thing;
the tint of pulled taffy.
She sits in a red room,
drinking black coffee.
She kisses her killed boy.
And she is sorry.
Chaos in windy grays
through a red prairie. (Brooks 1987: 340)

As such, in Smith's poem, Brooks' voice appears as a living presence made opaque through poetic form. 'Black, Poured … ' is comprised of long looming enjambed lines, thirty-eight in total (corresponding to the number of words in Brooks' 'Last Quatrain … '). The lines of nearly even lengths, divided into stanzas of 10–10–10–8, reveal an odd, almost foreboding neatness that contrasts sharply with the unpredictable, jolting rhythms of the speech they contain. Mamie Till's feelings, given voice in the original so minimally, are heard in Smith's poem again, but louder this time; the loudness characterised by deliberate sprung stress, an accentual verse heightened by sonic devices such as alliterations and consonantal echoes: 'red yesterdays refuse to rename her any kind of mother'; and through an overemphasis on verbs and action words, even where there are none to be had: 'Windy hues goldened her skin'. Against the sixty-odd years between Brooks' original and Smith's 'golden shovel', the silencing of Mamie Till's language and testimony are broken by the assertion: '*Sit still … 'til they remember how your boy was killed*' (Smith 2017: 33). Against the historical continuity of black death and mourning, comes the affirmation of Emmett's mother's life, through an appeal to black creativity – albeit concealed, radically transformed, perhaps almost beyond recognition. Brooks' poetic legacy is reinvigorated in the poem, appearing as an affirmation of life uncontained by death or by subjugation.

Brooks' original can already be read as an opacity, where the traditional ballad metre is formally destabilised, purposefully denormativised. As Karen J. Ford notes, the ballad, which already 'had a distinguished lineage in African American culture by association with spirituals, gospel songs, and the blues' provided Brooks with a way to tell the stories of black lives in an accessible and affectively powerful way (Ford 2010: 373).[5] Yet, her later work reflects a relentless questioning of and radicalisation of the form to convey the more revolutionary ideals propelled by the civil rights movement that picked up momentum in the 1960s. Several instances of racist violence – including the murder of Emmett Till – prompted in Brooks' work an allied radicalisation of the ballad form. In retrospect, one can see that Brooks was beginning

to question the efficacy of the form to convey the particularity of the kind of racist violence experienced by black people. However, instead of abandoning the form altogether, Brooks' ballads reveal how 'the very inadequacy of those generic conventions actually aids in representing the complexities of racial violence' (Ford 2010: 377; Mootry 1987).

Smith's poem, likewise, could be read as a reinvigoration and critical reinterpretation of the ballad tradition, pushing the form further still beyond recognition and classifiability.[6] The poem, in forming an alliance with the ballad tradition and more specifically with Brooks' ballad quatrain, not only keeps experience of violence against the black community from being historically silenced, but also accentuates the livingness-as-opacity of the tradition. In this complex movement, two kinds of livingness are presented as opacities: poetic lineage, and the lives of the poem's characters. Form is wielded like a weapon to safeguard the particularity and complexity of black life. On the one hand the formal tradition itself is contorted to the point of unrecognisability. On the other, in appearing and sounding as it does, it directs readers to attend to it, to feel with it. As a result, when we read the poem, we do not see only violence and grief. We glimpse a living tradition of creativity and radical self-representation. We see and hear along with the voices of Emmett's mother and others around her, the voice of Brooks coming through once, twice, in reverse, back and forth protecting the mother and the absent 'black roomful of boy' (Smith 2017: 33) from the transparenting stare of the other.

Let me elaborate on the generative opacity of poetic form in Smith's work with another example: the poem 'Elegy' (114–123), perhaps the most personal poem in the book, dedicated to Smith's father who was shot in a house robbery. The poem is complex in form, and long; a tripled sestina.[7] In reading the poem, its dense jagged syntax, I, the reader, find myself at every moment beyond the periphery of understanding. This isn't the 'definitive my-father-is-dead poem' (Smith and Jones 2018) and it would be reductive to simply read it as that. The fact of his death launches the first stanza, while the remaining seventeen dwell on the living: his life, the speaker's, the mother's and that of so many others who were part of that livingness. The final envoi switches tense, and her father is there, an opaque presence right there in her life, as we readers encounter 'a past that is not past' (Sharpe 2016: 13). Where the speaker's livingness overflows what she or anyone can understand of her loss, the form (sestina) and genre (elegy) come forth to protect that livingness from the reader's gaze, the reader's knowability. In effect, this is an elegy only insofar as I, the reader, insist on the father's death. The genre itself, in its presence, is distorted, or as Laura Vrana puts it, 'denormativized': 'Inherited forms, rhyme, and metrical patterns' are pitched into unresolvable alliterative and syntactic contradictions (Vrana 2020: 36). As a reader, I cannot reduce Smith's experience to a 'past' loss, and nor can I fully know the life that goes on living. Where I look at the lives and experiences in the poem, the trip and twirl of elegy and sestina pull my attention elsewhere. As if decoding the form would disclose the poem to me. The warping of the elegy genre itself forecloses that knowability, however, and a formalist reading can only take me this far, even as in its warp the boundaries of the form-genre are expanded to make room for livingness. In Vrana's words again: this poem and precisely all the others in the book '[bar] readers from arriving at tidy conclusions about progression from distant mourning to intimate loss' (40).

'When black, men drown'

Now, what exactly is barred, and how? I'd like to turn to another example. Section II of *Incendiary*, 'When Black Men Drown Their Daughters' (51–69), takes us through a searing

account of 'the various ways men fail their daughters, both literally and figuratively' (Gonzales and Smith 2019). Two familiar news stories launch the section:

> In February 2010, Shamshiddin Abdur-Raheem abducted his 3-month-old daughter Zara … drove to a bridge on the Garden State Parkway in New Jersey and threw her out of the passenger-side window of his car. She drowned in the Raritan River, more than 100 feet below.
>
> In November 2011, also in New Jersey, Arthur Morgan III picked up his 2-year-old daughter Tierra for a trip to the movies. Later, Tierra was found facedown in a frigid stream beneath a park over pass, strapped into a car seat which had been weighed down with a car jack. (Smith 2017: 53)

As news stories in a white-dominated media, these are disquieting but familiar, transparent narratives, hackneyed identitarian representations of black and brown men prone to random acts of brutality and violence. The section is divided further into five parts, or so the numbers indicate. Part 1, 'The Five Stages of Drowning', plunges readers into the drown, the gush, 'downdowndown' (53), as it courts the grotesque horror of drowning, and the horror of the crime.

> Zara's new clockwork staggers with it while Daddy,
> grizzle and wild-eye, lobs her like trash over
> the rusting rail. Inside the sack, the wriggling child
> cannot translate fly, plummet, descend. (53)

Part 2, 'Sentencing', catalogues the scene of the fathers' sentencing, the decisive confirmation of their status as criminals. But deep within the 'news' is a glimmer of something unfathomable in the genre of the news story: Abdur-Raheem wondering 'what his daughter would have looked like, and what she could have done' (59). Arthur Morgan III bemoaning 'the end of his relationship with the child's mother, but never [apologizing] for murdering Tierra' (ibid.).

> She cooed contentedly through her doomed days, spelling *Daddy*
> with plump, jelly-glopped fingers, and that's how he knew
> she'd be the utterly perfect fix for her mother's ass now. (60)

Something starts to happen here that gradually begins to change the overfamiliar trope of blackness as a spectacle for non-black consumption. The more a reader becomes invested in the fathers' criminality, the more they are pushed out of the story, while the story itself hurtles into experiential territories that resist any definitive knowability. In turning to the fathers' perspectives, the author creates a rift, and the disinclined reader who has read reports of the crime starts to become *other* to the story and is carefully led beyond the boundary of understanding. The ensuing poem titled 'Why the Verdict Just Don't Sound Right; or, The Bobbing Baby Blues' (61) comes as a surprise, a confrontation, a doubt. It brings forth an unknowable tune 'no one could carry … because it was just so damned heavy'. Surely, the men were found guilty and sentenced and charged accordingly. But,

> Even court-scrubbed and cuffed, their hands stank
> of flung daughters. The last thing both men heard
> was one blue note, dangerously off-key, as it unreeled
> up, cracking and saturnine from the river's throat. (61)

Will we ever know what this one note was? Even if we grasp the melody, the music of this poem, there is the single unreeled note, 'dangerously off-key', no more graspable to readers than it is to the men themselves. There appear to be five numbered parts to the section, but they spiral and overflow. 'Why the Verdict … ' is neither subsumed under part 2, nor under 3; it is a suspension, a space beyond where a reader can go, albeit in plain sight. Similarly, the poem

titled 'When Black Men Drown Their Daughters' (66–67) comes after part 5 but is not marked as an additional part 6. The logical transparency of numbers is interrupted here and the transparency of the label 'criminal' clouds over. Meanwhile, the compositional choice – the use of a comma as a medial caesura – derails any judgement that readers may be moving towards.

> When black, men drown.

A few lines later:

> When black men drown, their daughters turn to their mothers …

The caesurae in these lines frustrate readers' understanding that may just be replete with bias. They render what one may have known of these men as 'criminals' into an opacity and take off in a different direction towards a different outcome. The men are no longer comprehensible either as criminals or as victims. 'Who' they are is now an opacity, through which a reader is compelled to recognise their *otherness* to this story and attend to the ways in which they take it up, see Abdur-Raheem and Morgan III. In this way, the poem confronts readers with the historical structures of racism that underwrite black visibility.

Subsequently, one can no longer simply judge Abdur-Raheem and Morgan III as criminals or social failures, as 'what' they are, without implicating oneself as 'what' one is in the interaction: 'the one who saw them as'. In this realisation of one's own positionality lies the beginnings of a poetic understanding and the impetus to change something. We might begin to realise that if there is still hope for reparation, for an interaction where we can both be disclosed to each other as 'whos', it lies in the other's necessary opacity; in their shielding themselves from another's potentially 'reductive' stare. The poem compels this realisation by visibilising the other as an opacity, by setting up a difficulty, an obstacle to access in its form and semantics. The formal set-up, the way the words are arranged on the page, the diced rhyme schemes, the impenetrable alliterations, frame an interaction that is stripped of its hierarchical unequalness. They elucidate for the reader the labour required to get to the story, with perhaps little hope of actually getting there. Form, again, acts as the generator of opacity, and poses a limit to one's understanding, one's modes of seeing, and the way one takes up the visible presence of another. It figures as a screen to safeguard the particularity of the other's personhood. For a reader then, the task is not to crack it open, no matter how well-versed they may be with the tools of formalist analysis. Rather, it is to understand the relation that is set up, where attending to the ways in which the words appear to us is a fundamental pathway of navigating through and engaging with non-understanding, with the limits of one's own capacity to understand.

Unknowable livingness, transformative past-futures

I have shown above how understanding 'who' the other is within a context of systemic marginalisation and subjugation involves respecting the other's right not to be known. Simultaneously, it prompts an introspective examination of one's own processes of perception. I would now like to turn to the transformative potential of this process. I'm interested in how my engagement as 'other', with the opacity of the other, can potentially actualise futures where livingness can become present beyond the racialised hierarchised paradigm of objectification. Where any encounter in a racialised system is at the risk of unfolding into disaster – a threat of obliteration not just of 'whos' but a literal obliteration, death – and where any we-relation, any disclosure of 'who' I am and 'who' you are, and in fact the space of interaction itself, is

rendered precarious. In what follows, I position myself as an exemplar, an exemplary reader, who is other to the specific contexts of Smith's writing. However, it's crucial to emphasise that this doesn't imply that the poems in the book are primarily predicated on the address to an *other* reader, who might even be a white reader. On the contrary, I work with the premise that readers fundamentally occupy a position of otherness in relation to the texts they encounter. Furthermore, I contend that the complex opacity the poems set up resists any form of complete identification with the voices within the text, regardless of the reader's identity. In this set-up, identity is regarded not as a static fixity, but as an amalgamation of historical patterns of recognition, always open to mutual transformation.

I would thus like to return to McKittrick's question again, now as a reader with a decolonial anti-racist commitment, located outside of the contexts of Smith's writing. How can I 'foster a commitment to acknowledging the violence and undoing its persistent frame, rather than simply analytically reprising' it (McKittrick 2014: 18)? How can I respect the boundary the poems in the book set out for me, especially where I am aware that in crossing it, I may be reinscribing and reinforcing the very violence that has forced these lives into invisibility? Where I, as other, recognise the pernicious unequalness of transparency, how can I engage with the voices in the poems as opacities? As a reader in solidarity, how can I join in creating/fostering a space for livingness in a genuinely intersubjective way? I want to suggest, following Glissant, that for persons to appear as 'whos' opacity becomes a necessity not simply as a strategy of resistance or resilience, but also as a boundary for me *as* other. I want to suggest that poetic (non)understanding can complement the sharing of opacities, turning it into an emancipatory force, an empowerment, a basis of a life with others, and of a 'we' in relation. I would like to suggest that if *Incendiary* is in fact invested in the hope of alternative futures where other outcomes are possible – futures where every encounter need not be laced with the threat of obliteration – the onus of its realisation is placed upon the reader. Only where one's own processes of seeing are transformed in a respectful engagement with the other's irreducible difference, does it become possible to foster that space of freedom where we can be disclosed to each other as 'who' we are.

With this in mind, I would like to turn first to an instance in recent US poetic history where we witnessed a reader's gaze that arguably resulted in the objectification and obliteration of another's particularity: Kenneth Goldsmith's 'The Body of Michael Brown'. In this poem, Goldsmith offered an altered appropriation of the Saint Louis autopsy report for Michael Brown, the teenager killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, in the summer of 2014 (Swaine 2014). Goldsmith – a conceptual poet at the helm of the 'Uncreative Writing' movement[8] – read the poem at *Interrupt 3* (2015), a conference held at Brown University aimed at discussing 'text and/or/as image, art and/or/as language, with a particular investment in digitally mediated language art' (IRQ3 2015). For the performance, Goldsmith took Brown's autopsy report, which was on public record and freely available on the internet, and repurposed it into a poem. He 'altered the text for poetic effect … translated into plain English many obscure medical terms that would have stopped the flow … narrativized it in ways that made the text less didactic and more literary', while claiming not to have added 'a single word or sentiment that did not pre-exist in the original text' (cf. Steinhauer 2015). In so doing, Goldsmith made a problematic move that was not simply an 'uncreative' exposure of the mutability of language, but one that neglected the very (political) intersubjectivity of the act of appropriation.[9] In crafting his performance, he seemed to have forgotten America's history of racial violence, and the precise historical burden of racialised objectification within the structures and infrastructures of racial discrimination. To quote P.E. Garcia, for 'Goldsmith to

stand on stage, and not be aware that his body – his white male body, a body that is a symbol loaded with a history of oppression, of literal dominance and ownership of black bodies – is a part of the performance, then he has failed to notice something drastically important about the 'contextualization' of this work' (Garcia 2015).

In Smith's *Incendiary*, among the few Michael Brown poems, we can find one that some have read as being a direct response to Goldsmith (Farmer 2018). The poem 'No Wound of Exit' (Smith 2017: 35–37) invokes Brown's autopsy report, but with an essential difference. The objectifying transparency of the report is first and foremost placed in a historical context. Italicised excerpts of the report are juxtaposed with the historical violence of living as black, being seen as black and 'fungible': a text that is *not-poem*.

> *There are no fractures, deformities or amputations. The external genitalia present descended testicles and an unremarkable penis. The buttocks are atraumatic, and the anus is intact.*
>
> Once, a buyer would gingerly handle the penis of a potential purchase,
> foraging for heft, for hints of tree trunk, for a commercial cotton foreskin,
> for its ability to spew a slick black seed.
>
> But dead cancels commerce. (36)

In contrast to Goldsmith's contextless appropriation of the autopsy report – contextless, in Goldsmith's terms, because the report is after all just a 'text' out there for anyone to read – the poem above jolts the reader with a presentation of a brief history of the objectifying gaze. It offers not just one instance of looking at another's text/another as text, nor is it just about the objectification of one person (dead or alive). Rather, it names a history of lives made transparent, objectifiable in 'the afterlife of slavery' (Hartman 2007: 6). Does a reader then not feel suddenly discomfited by their own gaze? Do they not become *other* too in this instance, confronted by the violence of looking at another as object? Perhaps such a juxtaposition is precisely what it takes for a reader to recognise their own (structurally violent) otherness to the story. The poem confronts the reader, as the other, with the imperative to check one's own structures of perception, respect the other's demand not to be seen as object, and listen instead to life/livingness in the face of atrocity.

> A black boy's lungs collapsing.
> A mother picking up a phone.
> The same sound. (37)

In the poems that follow, we hear in first-person the voices of those who lost their lives to racist violence, those who were misrepresented, or those who lived in oblivion: Dick Rowland, 'Incendiary Art: Tulsa, 1921' (38–39); 'Mammy Two-Shoes, Rightful Owner of Tom' (42); 'the mothers of the lost' (73). From here on, once confronted by the violence of my own gaze, I may be able to shift register, listen, be open to the possibility of 'why the verdict just don't sound right' (61), recognise the jarringly off-key note as the possibility of music continuing beyond recognition. The voices that speak in *Incendiary* are living, really living, where they are opaque to the gaze of the other.

Conclusion: Solidarity in Otherness

Only with an acknowledgement of the opacity of the voices present in the book, predicated on a recognition of a reader's own limited (and also irreducible) otherness in their interaction with these presences, can an emancipatory transformation become possible.[10] The interaction itself

can become a space where the discriminatory structures that mark and foreclose relation can be changed, and where a genuine political plurality can be actualised. A space of freedom (to appear as *whos*) can begin to take shape between us. While Smith actively deploys strategies in form, sound, and narrative choice to activate the poems' intersubjective dimension and guide readers in the process of recognition, it is in the pragmatist dimension of this intersubjectivity that the space for a non-hierarchical, anti-racist and non-identitarian community of experience can begin to take shape.

I have argued over the course of this paper that in its poetic, or in general aesthetic dimension, invisibility necessitates a recognition of and engagement with one's own limited otherness in an interaction. Invisibility here is not mere absence from political participation. On the contrary, it is a generative shield that calls for an ethical transformation in the very structure and infrastructures of visibility. I read the poems in *Incendiary Art* by Patricia Smith as an 'other' reader, compelled – by poetic form and syntax – to engage with the structural limits, the entrenched socio-political inequalities that structure my own modes of seeing, only beyond which black livingness and political participation are truly possible. The poems show readers ways to engage with this limit, not as an obstacle to be overcome, but as fundamental to the actualisation of a non-hierarchical and anti-identitarian political intersubjectivity, where 'who' I am and 'who' you are (as opposed to 'what' we are) come to be disclosed to each other in interaction. The poems in *Incendiary*, I argued, show how an engagement with another's opacity together with a recognition of one's own limits can challenge negatively racialised difference, offering significant lessons for questions of solidarity, allyship, and mutual understanding in fundamentally unjust social situations. In a broader sense I suggested, following Glissant, that the poems show us a mode of political participation where a genuine plurality of relation in interaction, divested of discriminatory and hierarchising mechanics, can be actualised.

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Notes

1. To further quote Glissant, 'if we look at the process of "understanding" beings and ideas as it operates in Western society, we find that it is founded on an insistence on this kind of transparency. In order to "understand" and therefore accept you, I must reduce your density to this scale of conceptual measurement which gives me a basis for comparisons and perhaps for judgements' (cited Britton 19–20). Opacity, in this context comes forth as a fundamental right 'not to be understood' (Britton 20).
2. See also Rankine (2015). In Rankine's words: 'Dead blacks are a part of normal life here… Anti-black racism is in the culture. It's in our laws, in our advertisements, in our friendships, in our segregated cities, in our schools, in our Congress, in our scientific experiments, in our language, on the Internet, in our bodies no matter our race, in our communities and, perhaps most devastatingly, in our justice system'.
3. In August 1955, Emmett Till, a fourteen year old boy from Chicago was kidnapped from his uncle's home in Mississippi, tortured and murdered for allegedly whistling at a white woman. The murderers were acquitted during the trial, and Emmett's mother conducted an open casket funeral so the 'world could see' the real consequences of racist violence. Emmett's murder and unfair trial provoked outrage among black people across the United States and became a catalyst for the civil rights movement that swept up the nation only a few months later (D. S. Anderson 2015; Hassan 2021).

4. Gwendolyn Brooks (1917 – 2000) was an influential American poet, and the first black author to win the Pulitzer Prize. For a brief biography of Brooks, see 'Gwendolyn Brooks' (Poetry Foundation). As Dora Malech observes, '[Hayes'] 'Golden Shovel' form is a kind of reverse-acrostic variation; rather than arranging letters at the beginnings of lines to spell a word or phrase down the left-hand margin, as in a traditional acrostic, his form places whole words at the *ends* of lines, where they trace out a pre-existing poem*'*. See Malech (2016).
5. It is interesting to note that common metre, itself a traditional (Western) form for hymns, is repurposed and made new by the black diaspora and church. Particularly interesting is the formal pressure exerted on this folk metre when the reality of racial violence is introduced in a form traditionally reserved for the 'safe space' of spiritual community and the church.
6. Meanwhile, the musicality of Smith's poetry and the musical influences on her writing have been well documented. See Alleyne (2018) and Fanelli (2022).
7. Typically, a sestina consists of six stanzas of six lines each, usually in blank or unrhymed verse. The form is characterised thus not by metre, but by a pattern of word repetition, where the final words of each line of the first stanza appear in a set changing order in the other five: 'abcdef, faebdc, cfdabe, ecbfad, deacfb, bdfeca'. Following these, the conclusion or envoi of the poem is a three-line stanza, in which all six words appear, two in each line, one in the middle, the other at the end. See 'Sestina' (Encyclopedia Brittanica). In Smith's poem, the sestina is tripled: eighteen stanzas of eighteen lines each, with an envoi of nine lines. As Lillian Bertram analyses: 'Smith's amplified version begins like this: ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQR /RAQBPCODNEMFLGKHJI and continues in kind' (Bertram 2018).
8. 'Uncreative Writing' is a Twenty First century movement in conceptual poetry defined by its appropriation and repurposing of texts available on the internet, moving large chunks of text from one context to another (Goldsmith 2011; Kaufmann 2017).
9. Goldsmith's 'Uncreative Writing' centralises the mutability of language, and appropriation as its primary poetic mode. In this process, the following words/modes take centre-stage: copying, remixing, reusing, repurposing, recopying, reframing, repeating, regurgitating, sampling. See Chesley (2012) and Sheppard (2016).
10. One could also recall here Simone de Beauvoir's working with the Hegelian recognition theory. De Beauvoir highlights the reciprocity in seeing others as ambiguously subject-object, and having myself seen as ambiguously subject-object. According to De Beauvoir, the subject-object dialectic is not a problem in itself. It is something that we are, and it is what makes us ambiguous beings (to each other). The problem arises when/if you're recognised *only* as an object (Card 2003; E. Anderson 2019).

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