

AWP ▪ The Writer's Chronicle | Metres First Edit | 5,965 words

Black Lives Matter & The Poetics of Justice

by Philip Metres

At a speech for Black writers in 1976, June Jordan said, “As I think about anyone or anything—whether history or literature or my father or political organizations or a poem or a film—as I seek to evaluate the potentiality, the life-supportive commitment/possibilities of anyone or any thing, the decisive question is, always, *where is the love?*”¹

Jordan’s words offer a clarion call, in times of necessary and rightful rage, to locate where love pulses at the heart of our practice of art and activism. It rhymes with Cornel West’s notion that “justice is what love looks like in public.”² What if we aim as writers to create works that make love public—that is to say, that honor the fundamental dignity of all people, and name and dismantle the oppressive systems of power?

To explore how writers and writing can contribute to the struggle for justice and liberation necessitates flipping the (white) script that limits the purpose of writing to making something beautiful and pointless. This essay performs a thought experiment that unwrites some of my academic training in an aesthetic regime of white taste and write toward the vibrant tradition of literature as a key cultural contributor to movements for social change. In particular, I want to create space here for a range of poetry particularly by Black poets that contribute to the Movement for Black Lives. I highlight how poets participate in the visionary aspects, as well as the struggles, of social movements. Poets are both challenged by and can challenge the pieties of social movements. Finally, I write this as an invitation for those who share a passion for both writing and social justice, but have not quite found a way to bring them together.

Background and the Question of Audience

I’d like to begin my sharing about myself as a way of self-positioning. Because I was born to an Arab American father, a veteran of the Vietnam War, I knew the impact of war. My father held in his body and psyche its mysteries, and I never knew if his bouts of depression and anger were related to that experience. I never knew where the war ended and my father began. When I was a college student, the 1991 Persian

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Gulf War broke my heart and blew up my worldview. My fellow citizens cheered a killing spree that was depicted like a video game, censoring and erasing the bloodshed. The liberal illusions I had about my country were could not bear what I learned about US empire at home and abroad—of its indigenous genocide, of enslavement and oppression of Black people.

As a writer, I wanted to resist those forces of empire and white supremacy, to take part in efforts to make the world a more just and peaceful place. My writing and activism focused on war resistance—through my graduate work and my critical book, *Behind the Lines: War Resistance Poetry on the American Homefront*—as well as my own poetry. In *Behind the Lines*, I sought to track the interactions between poets and the peace movement, seeking models for how a poet can contribute to the work of resistance and making change. Looking back, I was swimming upstream against not only a society thirsty for war, but also a poetry world that spurned political poems.

In creative writing workshops, whether in undergrad or grad school, I found my work occasionally greeted with puzzlement. The very idea that poems could be political was outside of the mainstream workshop view.³ I wrestled with the resistance to my own poems that were trying to do something other than confess or ironize or lament. Ideology, of course, is not just a province of politics, but pervades our educational system—even in the liberal bastions of literary study and creative writing. Poets whose work announced itself as partisan or political was often dismissed as being unlyrical, unnuanced, self-righteous, rhetorically clumsy.

To be sure, my study of war resistance poetry did involve reading quite a bit of “bad” poetry—that is to say, poems that did not feel much like the poetry I was reading in literature courses. But there were also other poems that suggested another way. In *Behind the Lines*, I wrote about the astonishing work of war resistance poetry—not only as poems, but also as elegant dancers between the claims of art and the claims of conscience, between the nation and the peace movement.

What I argued about war resistance poetry may

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apply, tentatively, to poetries invested in social movements like Black Lives Matter. The secret of American poetry was the “presumption that poetry should be bounded by, limited to, or produced for the nation. War resistance poetry thus requires us to pay attention to the ways in which poetry constructs, addresses, and negotiates its nation(s). The dangers of employing that ‘we’ are obvious: it can produce a lyric subjectivity that refuses to acknowledge its own epistemological limits while speaking to the already-converted in a language that fails to challenge the writer or her audience.”⁴

Poetry in conversation with movements for social change necessarily invites questions of audience, and how we define nation. In *Behind the Lines*, I centered poetry that was able to address both its intimate audience and imagine the wider national audience. When we look at how poets have contributed to racial justice movements, the question of audience emerges with particular intensity. *Who am I addressing* is not an abstract rhetorical question for the writer of social justice poetry, but one that marked and scarred by ideological and generational wars.

During the Black Writers Conference at Fisk University in 1966, poet Robert Hayden made the argument that he didn’t want to write for a Black audience alone, and found himself in the crosshairs of Amiri Baraka and others who represented a separatist nationalism in Black poetry.⁵ In 1965 Baraka had changed his name after the assassination of Malcolm X and ushered in what would be called the Black Arts Movement. It might be too provocative to say that the fifty-three-year-old Hayden was canceled. But not by much. It was a devastating blow to the elder poet, and he didn’t even show up to the next year’s Black Writers Conference, even though it was at his home university.

Phillip Brian Harper has argued that the rhetorical address of Black Nationalist poetry relied not only upon a split between black and white nations, but also within the Black nation itself. “The other within” for Black Nationalism, according to Harper, was the Black person who sought assimilation with whites,

who “sold out” his race.⁶ That was Hayden, whose found himself metaphorically thrown “out the window,” as Baraka’s poem “Poem for Half White College Students” imagines.⁷ On the continuum of poetics, the Black Arts chose a separatist view in the intergenerational and political battle about the future of both the movement and of poetry.

Such arguments within excluded communities are not only inevitable, they can demonstrate a productive vitality. They are crucial to sustain and grow social movements. But there is a difference between lighting a fire beneath someone who is complacent and burning their house down. What if disagreeing with love could look more like a “calling in” rather than a calling out? In the age of Twitter, it is far easier to call someone out on social media than engage the more difficult work of wrestling with each other over tactics in a movement.

The Art(s) of Social Justice

The goals of what’s now termed “social justice art” could not be more different from the aims that attended my graduate poetry workshops in the late 1990s. That our art could primarily seek to raise critical consciousness about systemic oppression; share stories that have been suppressed, denigrated or erased by the dominant culture; build community; and motivate individuals to promote social change and catalyze action to alter systems of oppression—I wonder how my work would have changed if these aims were at the heart of our collective workshop practice.⁸ But they weren’t. And it’s not as if the poets and professors in workshops would have necessarily militated against them. We believed we were inside a brutal, competitive system that could not be changed, and that whatever justice or change we sought had to be done elliptically, evasively, a poetic subterfuge. Many of us, inducted into this selective service system of the arts, were trained out of thinking about a community and audience that did not involve a panel of unforgiving, elitist, powerful judges. It’s not that we couldn’t imagine the communities to which we belonged, and the communities that we joined intentionally to make

change in the world—but that poetry world did not care.

It's hard to remember now that, just a decade ago, the twin doyennes of elite white poetry criticism Helen Vendler and Marjorie Perloff—who probably would never agree about anything regarding poetry—both lambasted Rita Dove for using “multicultural inclusiveness” as a principal editorial criterion for her 2013 *The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*.⁹ Like Hayden, Dove herself is no radical, in poetry or in politics, but her selections made serious waves. Now, it's as if the paradigm has so completely shifted, that Harmony Holiday could, in a recent Tweet, create a meme of Dove's wonderfully annoyed expression after being asked by an interviewer: “You're an African American poet but not a Black poet in the movement type of way...”¹⁰

Dove's place in poetry is, of course, well established. Today, thanks to new liberatory models of education and social media democratization, young poets have a new place of possibility where the aesthetic and the political, where beauty and justice are not polarities but interconnected and overlapping fields. We will not resolve the old tensions between poetry and power, but a new generation of poets and writers have access to learning about and participating in the struggle for liberation and against white supremacy and empire.

Poets like June Jordan and Mark Nowak have been exemplars in this work, reclaiming and resituating poetry in contexts where people from excluded and oppressed groups could work with poetry as a means of survival and transforming society. Literary organizations like Cave Canem, Kundiman, and RAWI foster community and mentor young writers of color, utterly changing the face of contemporary poetry. More recently, Felicia Rose Chavez's popular *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How to Decolonize The Creative Classroom* (Haymarket 2021) also offers an alternative to the Iowa workshop model, one that creates spaces designed for the thriving of writers of color. Finally, Split This Rock, an exemplary Washington, DC non-profit, founded to promote social justice poetry, “cel-

brates poetry that bears witness to injustice and provokes social change.”¹¹ Split This Rock aims not only to uplift social justice poetry, but also to overcome the alienation of poets and the individualism associated with the art. In the words of their mission, “The work of writing the poems that split open the injustices in society is in some ways a solitary act, but it is also an act that requires community.”¹² Their activities have included a biannual festival, youth engagement, readings, workshops, community collaborations, and hosting an online archive, The Quarry, that offers an alternative canon of social justice poems that “help us name injustices and grieve losses both personal and communal. They speak our rage and our resistance. And they imagine another world, one built on justice and with the power of love.”¹³

But poetry’s role in social justice movements is not self-evident. Tensions abound. To enter into the fray for justice, particularly if you want to be an ally, we may need to set aside our desire to be right, and our need to be seen as good. *Virtue signaling, performative allyship, clout chasing*—these recent terms describe public actions that center the person doing the action rather than the movement for change; they’re taking credit, not helping to transform oppressive social structures.

Finding productive ways to participate in a social justice movement is not easy. People will disagree about both strategies and tactics. You may get criticized. Take Tamika Mallory. Her unforgettable 2020 “State of Emergency” speech after the death of George Floyd captured widespread attention.¹⁴ But after her 2021 Grammy performance with Lil Baby and Killer Mike, Samaria Rice, the mother of the murdered Tamir Rice, called her a clout chaser. She said: “You’re not going to continue to benefit on the blood of these families. If you’re fighting for justice of the families, make sure you’ve got the families on the front line. Don’t make a career out of this, when your loved ones aren’t the ones who were killed.”¹⁵ Responding to a now-deleted response from Tamika Mallory on YouTube, one commenter wrote: “She needs you to stop commodifying Black death. You can ask Ms.

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Rice what you should do with the money you made off of that Grammy performance.” This anonymous commenter has struck to the heart of the matter for any poet or writer interested in contributing to racial justice: how to write in a way that doesn’t benefit from Black labor and Black suffering?

During the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, racial justice activist Deepa Iyer shared a helpful visual called “Mapping Our Roles in a Social Change Ecosystem.”¹⁶ While it’s not complete, it does offer us ways for thinking about how we might play a role in movements for social justice, not just as writers.



Iyer’s visual map and explication offers us pathways to participate depending on our strengths and possibilities. Rather than seeing activism as merely the

province of courageous, confrontational youth, Iyer reconceptualizes and widens the very idea of social justice work. Caregivers and storytellers and healers, for example, can play a crucial role, not just disrupters and visionaries. Quite simply, everyone has a role to play.

So how do poets fit in? In *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*, Adrienne Rich argued that the problem with most political poetry is not its politics, but its lack of engagement with political struggle: it is “bad . . . not because it is engaged, but because it is not engaged enough: when it tries to express what has been logically understood but not yet organically assimilated.”¹⁷ If you want to write engaged or justice poetry, know the struggle in your bones completely. Enter the struggle yourself. Otherwise, we are mere tourists among landscapes of pain—extractors, not creators of justice.

In the months after the murder of George Floyd, I started to re-read Black poets’ responses to that death and the countless deaths that preceded it. I began to see a general taxonomy of racial justice poems emerge: Declarations of Self and Community, Elegies/Anti-Elegies to Martyrs, Exposing Systemic Oppression, Calls to Action, Subversions of Order, Joyful Celebrations/Visions of Hope/Alternative and Utopian Futures, and Documentary Poetics: recovery projects/speaking truth to power. In what follows, I center Black poets across generations, but at the end, I also address the role of non-Black writers in the struggle for racial justice. This just a tiny glimpse of the abundant field that is Black poetry, and my readings of the poems cannot do them the full justice they deserve. This is only a start. My hope is what I share here can be adapted (provisionally, of course) for other social movements.

Declarations of Self and Community, Advocacy, Solidarity

By speaking for oneself in a way that responds to community conditions, the poet speaks in relationship to collective struggle. In a society that has

systematically denigrated or commodified Black subjectivity, poems that claim subjective space offer a powerful resistance. Among many powerful poetic declarations of self-advocacy, Jericho Brown's "Bullet Points" is particularly devastating:

I will not shoot myself
In the head, and I will not shoot myself
In the back, and I will not hang myself
With a trashbag, and if I do,
I promise you, I will not do it
In a police car while handcuffed
Or in the jail cell of a town
I only know the name of
Because I have to drive through it
To get home. Yes, I may be at risk,
But I promise you, I trust the maggots
Who live beneath the floorboards
Of my house to do what they must
To any carcass more than I trust
An officer of the law of the land
To shut my eyes like a man
Of God might, or to cover me with a sheet
So clean my mother could have used it
To tuck me in. When I kill me, I will
Do it the same way most Americans do,
I promise you: cigarette smoke
Or a piece of meat on which I choke
Or so broke I freeze
In one of these winters we keep
Calling worst. I promise if you hear
Of me dead anywhere near
A cop, then that cop killed me. He took
Me from us and left my body, which is,
No matter what we've been taught,
Greater than the settlement
A city can pay a mother to stop crying,
And more beautiful than the new bullet
Fished from the folds of my brain.¹⁸

The poem functions as an advance argument for the prosecution against the police, a series of "bullet points" about the facts of his future case—in case of sudden death, Brown assures us, know that it was not suicide. I love the poem because it also seems to function as a life insurance policy. You (the city, the state) will pay, he seems to say, but whatever you pay will

never be enough. The fact that he put this in writing tells you the level of terror that Black people live with every day.

Elegies and Anti-Elegies to Martyrs

I recently came across an article in which a poet talked about a wonderful poem “inspired” by the death of George Floyd, and a shiver went through my body—“inspired,” of course, coming from the Latin words meaning to gather breath in. If we want to write a poetry of justice, it’s a good idea to not require Black pain to be inspired. The elegy, of course, is a powerful mode of mourning the dead, and when that death is political, the elegy also becomes more than a personal loss; it becomes a collective one. However, poems like “Why I Don’t Write About George Floyd” (2020) by Toi Derricotte work in that discomfiting space between feeling the need to speak out, to elegize another Black man murdered, but also being aware of the dangers of such an elegy:

Because there is too much to say
Because I have nothing to say
Because I don’t know what to say
Because everything has been said
Because it hurts too much to say
What can I say what can I say
Something is stuck in my throat
Something is stuck like an apple
Something is stuck like a knife
Something is stuffed like a foot
Something is stuffed like a body¹⁹

This anti-elegy shows by not showing, by refusing to depict the dead—thus opening a space for the uncertainty and grief about a poet’s role in the face of such unjust killing by the state. Derricotte explores language’s insufficiency and the feeling of suffocation—a moment of profound identification with the deceased and also a sense of complicity in writing a poem about his death.

Ross Gay’s “A Small Needful Fact” (2015), relatedly, wants to center something of the life of the murdered Eric Garner. And that thing, it turns out, is central to

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Gay's own life—working in gardens.

Is that Eric Garner worked
for some time for the Parks and Rec.
Horticultural Department, which means,
perhaps, that with his very large hands,
perhaps, in all likelihood,
he put gently into the earth
some plants which, most likely,
some of them, in all likelihood,
continue to grow, continue
to do what such plants do, like house
and feed small and necessary creatures,
like being pleasant to touch and smell,
like converting sunlight
into food, like making it easier
for us to breathe.²⁰

Gay imaginatively finds his way into what is for him and for us another person's life, as a way to pushing against all the demonization and martyrology of Garner. Both demonization and martyrology, in the end, diminish human dignity and mystery. Gay's poem also contains a rhetorical tentativeness that feels bracingly humble. The "perhapses" and "in all likelihoods" act as counterweights but suggest the longing to see how Garner's life was more than the death he suffered.

Exposing Systemic Oppression

Poems that expose systemic oppression invite readers into seeing the acts of police violence in a wider context of white supremacy, legal discrimination, and mass incarceration. Audre Lorde's "Power" (1978) meditates on how violent policing takes place in a wider context of legal discrimination, exonerating white officers from killing. Lorde begins the poem by riffing on W.B. Yeats's notion of the divide between poetry and rhetoric. While Yeats articulates the separation as between the argument with self (poetry) and the argument with others (rhetoric), Lorde's poem begins by suggesting that for Black people, that separation is more fraught, with dangerous consequences:

The difference between poetry and rhetoric

is being ready to kill
yourself
instead of your children.²¹

The enjambments enact the ways in which violence pervades the subjective experience of being Black in America. The first enjambed line foregrounds the idea of threat—“being ready to kill”—that Black people live in a situation where the threat of death is omnipresent, and killing almost seems necessary as a mode of defense. But Lorde’s next enjambment reverses that, turning the killing inward, against the self. It takes Yeats’s notion and shows its potential damage—that one might countenance self-murder to protect the lives of one’s children.

Further in the poem, Lorde explores how jury of eleven white men and one Black woman did not convict a white police officer for a killing. She understands, but laments, the woman’s inability to push back against a system that does not value Black lives. The poem concludes by reflecting on how her lack of power (the title of the poem) incites a rage for revenge in her that cannot but lead to more death:

I have not been able to touch the destruction
within me.
But unless I learn to use
the difference between poetry and rhetoric
my power too will run corrupt as poisonous mold
or lie limp and useless as an unconnected wire
and one day I will take my teenaged plug
and connect it to the nearest socket
raping an 85 year old white woman
who is somebody’s mother
and as I beat her senseless and set a torch to her bed
a greek chorus will be singing in 3/4 time
“Poor thing. She never hurt a soul. What beasts they are.”²²

Calls to Action

Claude McKay’s electrifying “If We Must Die,” published in 1919 during the widespread attacks on Black people during Red Summer, is nothing short of a call to arms. Employing the classic poetic form of the sonnet, that great traditional form of love poetry, McKay calls Black people to fight back in a language that

must have astonished its readers:

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursèd lot.
If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

That McKay uses the sonnet—a traditional mode often suited to declarations of love—for this political end, invites us to consider how this is, indeed, itself a love poem. Perhaps this is not the nonviolent love that King and Cornel West call for, but a love based on self-preservation in the face of a social order that is calling for their death.

Subversions of Order

Experimental poets like Harryette Mullen and Douglas Kearney, employing aesthetics of subversion and discomfort, compel readers to confront the deeply damaged nature of a social order that seems to require Black subjection. Mullen “Elliptical” plays with and skewers conventional syntax and thinking, as each sentence-start contains an othering of some “they” the poem elliptically gestures toward:

They just can't seem to . . . They should try harder
to . . . They ought to be more . . . We all wish
they weren't so . . . They never . . . They always
. . . Sometimes they . . . Once in a while they . . .
However it is obvious that they . . . Their overall ten-
dency has been . . . The consequences of which have
been . . . They don't appear to understand that . . . If
only they would make an effort to . . . But we know
how difficult it is for them to . . . Many of them
remain unaware of . . . Some who should know bet-
ter simply refuse to . . . Of course, their perspective

has been limited by . . . On the other hand, they obviously feel entitled to . . . Certainly we can't forget that they . . . Nor can it be denied that they . . . We know that this has had an enormous impact on their . . . Nevertheless their behavior strikes us as . . . Our interactions unfortunately have been . . .²³

The binary thinking that underlies the (racist) stereotyping alluded to in her poem underscores the implicatedness of ideology and systems of oppression and control; the other is X, and therefore we must Y. What is revealed is the speaker's own dehumanization.

Joyful Celebrations (Visions of Hope/ Alternative and Utopian Futures)

Given what Black people have faced, poems that embrace joy and offer visions of hope resonate with a significant countercultural power. Poet Lucille Clifton, in poem after poem, invited readers to celebrate:

won't you celebrate with me
what i have shaped into
a kind of life? i had no model.
born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself?
i made it up
here on this bridge between
starshine and clay,
my one hand holding tight
my other hand; come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.²⁴

Clifton's poem is an invitation to joyfully mark a (somewhat tentative) "kind of life" in the face of the murderous environment, the Babylon of white patriarchy. Over and over, clifton's poems are odes to survival, a sometimes-lonely survival in which the speaker must hold her own hand. But she's not asking for pity, just recognition.

Similarly, Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise" (1978) has at

its center an irrepressible, ever-resurrecting subjectivity. It feels like a counterpart to Langston Hughes's transhistorical Black subject of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," a voice that contains both itself and a whole people. It begins:

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.²⁵

Angelou's speaker refuses to be tromped down by the boots of oppression. She rises, and sasses, and will not be denied. Her direct rhymes have no shame in them. They glory in their own glory.

One final example. In their stunning "summer, somewhere" (2016), Danez Smith creates in this moment of the poem a sanctuary, an alternative heaven for black boys (the original title of the piece):

no need for geography
now that we're safe everywhere.

point to whatever you please
& call it church, home, or sweet love.

paradise is a world where everything
is a sanctuary & nothing is a gun.

here, if it grows it knows its place
in history. yesterday, a poplar

told me of old forest
heavy with fruits I'd call uncle

bursting red pulp & set afire,
harvest of dark wind chimes.

after I fell from its limb
it kissed sap into my wound.

do you know what it's like to live

someplace that loves you back?²⁶

In the space of the astonishing poem's utterance, the "here" of its reading/speaking, a heaven comes into being—a place where love is justice and justice is love. Where Black children are safe. Where trees have fruit that is not strange. Even if it's just for the span of the poem, Smith has created a visionary site where Black people are in a place "that loves you back."

Documentary Poetry, Social Poetics, and the Role of Non-Black Poets in the Struggle for Justice

Documentary poetry has become a powerful recovery method for making visible both lost voices and lives and the systems of erasure and oppression that have destroyed them. M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (2009) and Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* (2014)—among many other incredible books—stand out for their ability to engage with official documents and oral narratives in order to render visible the systemic violence of white supremacy.

White poets have done brave work at exploring their own racism, family history, complicity, or privilege. It's a strange irony of literary history that the failure of Tony Hoagland's poem "The Change" led to the profound rejoinder that is *Citizen*, one of the most celebrated books of poems in the 21st century.²⁷ Martha Collins (in *Blue Front, White Papers, and Admit One*), Ailish Hopper (*Dark Sky Society*), and Ilya Kaminsky (*Deaf Republic*) have all shown diverse ways that white poets can explore white supremacy and its racial violence.²⁸ Collins, in particular, employs documentary methods to unpack her own racial privilege in ways that are bracing and necessary. This work by white poets to confront systemic racism is so important, even if it is difficult and uncomfortable. After all, racism in America is a white people's problem to solve.

Mark Nowak provides an intriguing case for how a white writer has shifted his practice to align better with a social movement. While his books have done incredible work in the class struggle, Nowak found himself dissatisfied with the limited use of his poems

to workers. Nowak's solution was to pivot from being a producer of poems to becoming a producer of poets—starting the Worker Writers School and hosting workshops for workers directly. His response to the question: is your poetry ultimately really for other poets, and thus is parasitic to or extractive in its relationship to the movement for social change?—was to stop writing poems and center other poets.

For those of us non-Black writers interested in being allies, advocates, or activists, the work to support, amplify, and act to make systemic change can take many forms. It begins with our listening, and listening again, to what Black people have been saying for centuries about their experience. The ongoing process of educating ourselves without relying on Black labor is essential. Center the voices at the heart of the struggle. Host readings that feature Black writers. We need to leverage whatever privilege we have to stand up and make change for those without that privilege and power.

It may well be that the last thing Black Lives Matter needs is poets who write poems that pretend to do the work that they are not doing—like voting, marching, boycotting, and divesting. But poetry's gift can also be its ability to refuse to fit neatly into the narrative that a social movement might ask of it. One of the things I love most about poetry is how it often dramatizes so well the Yeatsian "struggle with ourselves." A poem's work may also be to resist the demands of a movement for simplistic binaries, for othering those whose tactics may differ. Keeping love at the center, a poetry of justice may also not only stretch what has seemed possible in poetry, but also sustain and widen a movement, through its bracing visions, its necessary outrage, its keen intelligence, its hope.

Special thanks to Bennington College and Vermont College of Fine Arts, who hosted early versions of this essay in 2021. I write this essay as a non-Black person in an act of solidarity with the struggle for Black peoples' justice, with the hope that I can inspire writers to see the possibilities of poetry as an engine of social change.

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Notes

1. Jordan, June. *We're On: A June Jordan Reader*. (Farmington: Alice James Books, 2017), p. 341.
2. "Cornel West: Justice is What Love Looks Like in Public." YouTube video. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGqP7S_WO6o&t. Accessed September 30, 2021.
3. Thanks to the poets who mentored me (David Wojahn, Yusef Komunyakaa, Catherine Bowman, and Maura Stanton) and fellow writers (especially Simeon Berry, Rebecca Black, Anna Meek) who approached my raw work with generosity and vigorous engagement.
4. Metres, Philip. *Behind the Lines: War Resistance on the American Homefront, since 1941*. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007), p. 6.
5. Smith, Denk. "Quarrelling in the Movement: Robert Hayden's Black Arts Era." *Callaloo*. Vol. 33, No. 2 (Spring 2010), pp. 449-466.
6. Harper, Phillip Brian. (1993). "Nationalism and Social Division in Black Arts Poetry of the 1960s." *Critical Inquiry*. Volume 19, pp. 235-255.
7. Ibid.
8. One touchstone of social justice poetics remains the anti-colonial struggle and postcolonial theory. Barbara Harlow's *Resistance Literature* (1987), for example, expanded Palestinian writer and activist Ghassan Kanafani's term into a theorization of the literature of national liberation movements from El Salvador to South Africa.
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