Theories and Methodologies

Hibernation without Rest

IMANI PERRY

I love to read. But it became harder during the pandemic. The anticipation, each morning, of fresh disaster or simply more bad news, interrupted my habit of escaping into novels, works of critical theory, and history. These times hadn't been accounted for, and it seemed too indulgent and just plain scary to turn away from the world. Hyper-vigilance felt like a political and ethical responsibility. Or maybe it was just the cycle of anxiety attacks. I had those too.

Worry sent me deep into isolation, and detached me from two of my most reliable anchors, narrative and argument.

But poetry? I could slip into that. As my world grew smaller, short strings of words grew bigger. I could collect some in the morning, like paper-shell pecans from a tree, crack them open, savor them intermittently, or just hold them and drop them, without feeling as though I had abandoned the urgency of the moment.

I know I wasn't the only one. So many of us were doing the same thing. We shared the words on social media platforms. I liked that. It was a little breathing room in a riot of proclamations, arguments, panics. One phrase from a Lucille Clifton poem was shared repeatedly by other Black women, women I admire, and that repetition wasn't incidental. It was this:

> . . . come celebrate
> with me that everyday
> something has tried to kill me
> and has failed.

What better way, I wondered, could there be to express the feeling of gratitude for each breath taken amid the grief of a collected demise—care workers, service workers, frontline workers like Breonna Taylor, caretakers without work, houseless or house-vulnerable,

IMANI PERRY is the Hughes-Rogers Professor of African American Studies at Princeton University and the author of six books, most recently *Breathe: A Letter to My Sons* (Beacon Press, 2019).

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deserted, hungry, abandoned, yet charged with saving the nation? The feeling was more complex than a thousand words, and the picture was blurry.

Few words with vast meanings. That is what we sought out and keep seeking.

It has been a long season of hibernation without rest. Impossible to explain but so necessary to speak to. Poets whittle down to essence, offering concepts that can be carried. But they also excite the imagination beyond the limits of narrative. That's what we need. Reading Victoria Chang's poems in *Obit* about all the ways we can and do die in the midst of death let me feel the floating sarchophagus, both not literal and yet very literal, of the time of COVID. In the titular poem, Chang describes the notes left by the night nurse as her mother lay dying. She begins, "Language—died again," the most concise wail of grief. I stopped at that line over and over. And later there are these words:

> But for every letter
> I picked up, another fell down, as if
> protesting the oversimplification of
> my mother's dying. I wanted the night
> person to write in a language I could
> understand.

Loss is guttural. At the level of feeling in the body it is simply incomprehensible just as pain, as Elaine Scarry taught us, is largely inexpressible. I, we, sat with that as a world, at a distance from living and each other.

When you know someone who has died, someone whom you don't ordinarily see, someone whom you don't witness being put into the ground, death is real and yet inchoate. And these are the deaths that you forget and then in a shock remember. That is also what this season was. Deaths seen on *Facebook*. A posting person whose page turned from quirky observations to elegies and odes from others. For me, Chang's words cast this experience in Gwendolyn Brooks's terms, "liv[ing] in the along."[1] The era is different, but it is also constantly bringing you back to the places where you've been hurt before. I guess it is the essence of the uncanny, the familiar unfamiliar. Harrowing, and yet snatching you back to traumas of the worst and most intimate sort.

I thought at one point about describing COVID season as a speculative dream. In childhood, I'd wonder about what would happen if aliens arrived, or if ghosts loudly populated our streets. I dreamed up, scaring myself, unknown forces that I had no idea how to fight. And this felt like that. Except becoming a hero wasn't available. Science, the thing that had always proved the hardest for me to grasp, was the only possible heroic force. I had to force my imagination to stay humble, even when I was terrified.

In the living nightmare, poems in song held me together. Stevie Wonder sang in "As":

> Just as time knew to move on since the beginning
> And the seasons know exactly when to change
> Just as kindness knows no shame
> Know through all your joy and pain
> That I'll be loving you always.
> (qtd. in McWhorter 101)

The song reassured me that, as I'd been taught by my mother and her mother, when tomorrow isn't promised, and you are going through the storm, love is the one thing that is reliable, eternal even. I know, for example, that death does nothing to quell love, having experienced a decade and a half of deaths of people I love. In fact, in the house of hibernation without rest, I began to grieve for them anew, as the sweetest memories flooded in. These poems, to paraphrase Roberta Flack, sang my life with their words.

We've had to rely on the scientists, to stop believing in the myth that we can foreclose danger with an alchemy of pseudo medicine or goodwill, good governance, and the power of prayer. But prayer itself, as a form of living, became one of my pandemic poems too. In this house, we light candles. Our words are usually held silent and private, but I ran my fingers along the rosary beads and spoke out

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loud. I didn't equivocate about or apologize for the hierarchical, patriarchal, and colonialist institution through which I'd learned the words, despite the many fundamental problems I have with it. I just rested my spirit inside the poems: "Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death."

I guess I didn't mean those words literally, at least not in the basic interpretive sense. I wouldn't put my religion up against another's, or another's absence of religion or theism; I wouldn't call my praying to ask for Mary's intercession a specific virtue. Instead, it did what poems do, gave me a place in which to rest my troubled spirit, a place for intercession without exegesis. Words brief enough to always remember and thick enough to hold me.

Note

1. "Live not for battles won. / Live not for the-end-of-the-song. / Live in the along."

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