RACHEL ZOLF

NO ONE'S WITNESS

A MONSTROUS POETICS

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WITNESS

BUY

Black Outdoors Innovations in the Poetics of Study

A SERIES EDITED BY J. KAMERON CARTER AND SARAH JANE CERVENAK

RACHEL ZOLF

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A MONSTROUS POETICS

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS / *Durham and London* / 2021

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Designed by: Matthew Tauch
Typeset in Portrait Text by Copperline Book Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Zolf, Rachel, [date] author.
Title: No one's witness : a monstrous poetics / Rachel Zolf.
Other titles: Black outdoors.
Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2021. | Series: Black outdoors | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2020046228 (print) | LCCN 2020046229 (ebook)
ISBN 9781478013334 (hardcover)
ISBN 9781478014249 (paperback)
ISBN 9781478021551 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Celan, Paul—Criticism and interpretation. | German literature—Jewish authors—History and criticism. | German literature—20th century—History and criticism. | Holocaust, Jewish (1939–1945), in literature. | Psychic trauma in literature. | Poetics.
Classification: LCC PT2605.E4 Z978 2021 (print) | LCC PT2605.E4 (ebook) | DDC 811/.54—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020046228
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020046229

Cover art: James Allister Sprang, *Concrete Color Arrangement #12*, 2017. Archival Ink Print. Courtesy of the artist.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to thank Fred Moten, brilliant thinker and poet, for his crucial writing and friendship, for generously entering a conversation with me, and for helping me push past the third to a fleshly something (no-thing) more. My deep gratitude also to Judith Butler for her steadfast support for my work as a poet and thinker, for helping me trust that I could be both at the same time, and for her work as a guiding force.

Tremendous thanks to Elena Basile for reading several drafts and thinking with me as this book changed course and became something (no-thing) new. Many thanks to the following people for conversations over the years that have deepened this work: Emily Abendroth, Emily Beall, Margaret Christakos, Moyra Davey, Sarah Dowling, Laura Elrick, Andrea Geyer, Che Gossett, Sharon Hayes, Jeff T. Johnson, Eunsong Kim, Gregory Laynor, Robert Majzels, Airea D. Matthews, Laura Meyers, Marcia Oliver, M. NourbeSe Philip, Heike Raschl, Ariel Resnikoff, Lytle Shaw, Cheryl Sourkes, James Allister Sprang, Emma Stapely, Fenn Stewart, and Divya Victor. My gratitude to Glenn Ligon, Dread Scott, Sharon Hayes, Richard L. Copley, Laura Elrick, Bracha L. Ettinger, James Allister Sprang, and Bhanu Kapil for giving me access to images for this book, to Stephen Motika for image assistance, and to Gregg Bordowitz for helping with contacts. An earlier version of the study in chapter 6 appears in different form in *A Forest on Many Stems: Essays on the Poet's Novel* (Nightboat Books, 2021). Finally, thanks to J. Kameron Carter, Sarah Cervenak, and Ken Wissoker for believing in this queer book, to the anonymous readers for their feedback, and to Annie Lubinsky and the rest of the hardworking Duke staff for shepherding the book through the press. Thanks also to Josh Rutner for the indexing.

No One's Witness was written over a number of years in which I went through numerous challenging life experiences compressed into too short a period of time: difficult deaths of all my immediate family members and one friend, relationship breakups, multiple moves across a border, immigration issues, graduate school, a new job, a new relationship,

and, most recently, a new baby. I am so grateful to my love Julia Bloch for bearing witness with me through much of this—and for assiduously commenting on drafts and copyediting the monster! Most of all thanks to you and Rafa and all our queer kith and kin for creating a new family with me.

Writing these acknowledgments in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, I wonder if the book would have been different if written during or after this particular end of the world. Perhaps, but the swarm, field, plenum, chorus persists, insists, even if the No Ones touch not touching. The book lives in now-time, and as a friend wisely said when Julia and I finally decided to let the other creature in our family, the one-eyed semiferal feline (Heavy) Meadow, roam outside every day, it's a profound experience just letting go.

No One's Witness is dedicated to Akilah Oliver (1961–2011), luminous poet and thinker and No One and friend.

OPENING

What if, instead of The Ordered World, we could imagine The World as a Plenum, an infinite composition in which each existant's singularity is contingent upon its becoming one possible expression of all the other existants, with which it is entangled beyond space and time.

DENISE FERREIRA DA SILVA

Can this being together in homelessness, this interplay of the refusal of what has been refused, this undercommon appositionality, be a place from which emerges neither self-consciousness nor knowledge of the other but an improvisation that proceeds from somewhere on the other side of an unasked question?

STEFANO HARNEY AND FRED MOTEN

are there greeters there [are you one] when we former ghosts arrive

AKILAH OLIVER

Could it be that language happened?

M. NOURBESE PHILIP

The flesh gives empathy.

HORTENSE SPILLERS

Niemand / zeugt für den / Zeugen.[1] "These three lines resist even the best translation."[2] In English, does the first line/word translate as a (non)figure named "No one" or "Noone" or "Nobody"—or no one at all? In the French translation of *Niemand*, is *Personne* a person? Does this pronoun *Niemand* perform an action, *zeugt*, such that it "witnesses" something or someone with its very own eyes, or does it "bear witness" to or for something beyond normative knowledge—something encompassed in the noun *Zeugen*/witness? Or does (or should) the pronoun *Niemand* perform no such action at all? Or is it neither one nor the other, *ne-utre*, neutral? And what is the weight of the preposition *für*/for or the article *den*/the? A panoply of inflections accompanies each translation choice, long before interpretation confronts the poem. The poem resists, and a messy resistancy is necessary to approaching the poem.[3] When the interpreters arrive, the poem prefers not to.

STUDY · A class is studying Herman Melville's story *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, and students are bewildered by Bartleby's refusal to move, keep copying, conform. They feel frustrated, can't grasp Bartleby's preferred (in)actions.[4] The professor (a writer) asks everyone to stand and stay silent beside their chairs. A number of minutes go by. The spaces between bodies begin to palpate the room. More time passes and the shuffling settles. After a few more breaths, the teacher asks, "What are you doing?" and a student responds, "I think we're writing."

Maurice Blanchot makes a claim for a certain kind of activated patience: "To write: to refuse to write—to write by way of this refusal."[5] Fred Moten makes a claim for blackness as "a theater of the refusal of what has been refused."[6] Not dissimilar to Bartleby's refusal that enacts what it refuses (a waiting that is a writing), Romanian Jewish poet and Nazi holocaust survivor Paul Celan's poem "Aschenglorie" (Ashglory)—the poem that ends with *Niemand / zeugt für den / Zeugen*—prefers not to clarify whether no one *can* or *should* (or conversely whether a generic one *can't* or *shouldn't*) bear witness for the witness, or whether an aporetic (non)figure called Noone or Nobody (or even my own variation, No One) is in the process of doing just that (i.e., witnessing).[7] This paradox enacts and indexes the limits not only of poetic interpretation but of witnessing itself. Like the slippery theological-political terms "neighbor" or "sovereign" or "friend" or "host" or, more abstractly, "justice" or "democracy" or "responsibility" or "forgiveness," the term "witness," as noun or verb, refuses to sit still and yield a "proper" (*propre*, French, "clean," an anagram of Celan) meaning.[8] "Witness" operates under a contradictory signification, whether we are discussing its juridical definition of giving testimony in a court of law or its theological definition of testifying spiritually/bearing witness to something beyond knowledge and meaning.[9] Indeed, thought reaches a limit in trying to grasp the conceptual contours of witnessing, but it is a *necessary* limit, a limit that can *perhaps* become a threshold, the mirror a window, if one prefers projective metaphors. Threshold like poetry and its fraught relation to philosophy, wherein perhaps *poesis* (making, generating—an upending force that *zeugt* also contains) and poetics can push be-

yond the tired tropes of Aristotle, Heidegger, Hölderlin, and the *New York Times*.[10] Threshold like Blanchot on Bartleby:

> This is abnegation understood as the abandonment of the self, a relinquishment of identity, refusal which does not cleave to refusal but opens to failure, to the loss of being, to thought....We have fallen out of being, outside where, immobile, proceeding with a slow and even step, destroyed men come and go.[11]

Perhaps Niemand/No One is akin to one of these destroyed lives, not simply a Bartleby or a zombie but a new form of life both immobile and proceeding with a slow and even step, a new "'genre' of the human," to apply Sylvia Wynter's terminology, outside the shopworn white-western-imperialist scope of humanist Man.[12] Or if we set aside the human and its disastrous violences, perhaps No One is simply life. Perhaps the infamous *Muselmann* ("Muslim"), the "living dead" figure of the Nazi camps, is a No One, a destroyed yet still living life, a life without the decision-making capacity of Bartleby because "'I'd prefer not to' is simply not an option" for people in states of extreme subjection, as Alexander Weheliye argues: people enduring the Nazi camps or plantation slavery and its afterlives, for example.[13] Fully self-present and self-possessed agency and subjectivity was—and in many ways still is—impossible. For Frank Wilderson, "if, when caught between the pincers of the imperative to meditate on Black dispossession and Black political agency, we do not dissemble, but instead allow our minds to reflect on the murderous ontology of chattel slavery's gratuitous violence—seven hundred years ago, five hundred years ago, two hundred years ago, last year, and today, then maybe, just maybe, we will be able to think Blackness and agency together in an ethical manner."[14] For Moten, blackness encompasses nonnormative lives who refuse refused subjectivity and individuation, who "prefer not to, in stuttered, melismatic, gestural withdrawal from that subjectivity which is not itself, which is not one, which only shows up as thwarted desire for itself, as the lurid autocathectic lure of an airy fiend that walks beside you in a storefront window."[15] Perhaps No One lives in that gestural withdrawal.

There is an activated waiting that is not *about* the ontological subject, not projecting from the person as central site of knowledge and speech, but rather encompassing a paraontological form of being "that is neither for itself nor for the other."[16] *Paraontological* is Nahum

Dimitri Chandler's term that Moten has called an "undercommon disruption of ontology."[17] Moten writes that paraontology "derived from [Chandler's] engagement with [W. E. B.] Du Bois's long anticipation of [Frantz] Fanon's concern with the deformative or transformative pressure blackness puts on philosophical concepts, categories, and methods."[18] Para- as protecting against, warding off, but also queerly alongside, prior to, and beyond ontology. Blackness as "the anoriginal displacement of ontology…ontology's anti- and antefoundation, ontology's underground, the irreparable disturbance of ontology's time and space."[19] Perhaps the person has been destroyed and/or never allowed to exist, and there is only no-thing or no-body or No One, a monster constitutively composed of multiple parts; not an individuated one but an entangled social (non)figure who (non)performatively "consent[s] not to be a single being," a phrase Moten borrows and shifts from Édouard Glissant.[20] As Denise Ferreira da Silva claims, expanding on concepts from particle physics, "when the social reflects The Entangled World, sociality becomes neither the cause nor the effect of relations involving separate existants, but the uncertain condition under which everything that exists is a singular expression of each and every actual-virtual other existant."[21] For Moten, "I who have nothing, I who am no one, I am who am not one" is also a "surreal presence—not in between some things and nothing is the held fleshliness of the collective head."[22] Perhaps No One(s) bear(s) witness to Ferreira da Silva's "difference without separability."[23]

My aim in this book is to enact a knowledge assemblage that brings into apposition (nonhierarchically, not as a mode of comparison or analogy but as a contiguous and interconnected constellation—drawing on Glissant's torquing of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's enmeshed network, the rhizome, into his concept of Relation) concepts and methodologies from black studies (and black study), twentieth-century European philosophy, queer theory, and experimental poetics.[24] While I will refer to trauma studies as a well-trod stage for examining the process of witnessing, its white, Eurocentric, Shoah-as-singular-event frame is insufficient to encompass an abyssal ongoing trauma such as racial slavery and its afterlives that, to torque Wilderson slightly, is "a condition of [para]ontology and not just…an event of experience"; or, as Moten says, more "durational field rather than event," an "unremitting non-remittance."[25] Much as (overwhelmingly white and Eurocen-

tric) Celan scholars may disagree, it is impossible to confront Celan's poetry, and the Nazi holocaust in general, without confronting transatlantic slavery and its afterlives amid ongoing colonialism. Black studies specifically, with its over-two-hundred-year examination of race, history, society, culture, ontology, and ideas of witnessing, and with its rich internal differentiation, charts a field of thought that perhaps makes it possible to start understanding these irreducible, incalculable three lines by Celan—*Niemand / zeugt für den / Zeugen*—as an index of the im/possibility of witnessing and witnessing witnessing.

The No One who keeps emerging through its dis/appearance in this book eschews individuation while always already becoming within differential entanglement. I am seeking to activate a No One who/that is paraontological and hauntologically informed by the no-thingness that has been historically ascribed to blackness and that blackness enacts within, apposite to, and beyond the No One. No One is a slippery concept that, particularly in the context of Celan's work, could encompass God and the poet and the reader and the poem—though Moten might argue that those No Ones can be black things too. No One could be a theological-political limit concept, but it is more and less than that. No One is an unhomed site to think about no-things that refuse received notions of subjectivity and objectivity, oneness, twoness, and thingliness. Odradek has no fixed abode. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. "Monsters cannot be announced. One cannot say: 'Here are our monsters,' without immediately turning the monsters into pets."[26]

Jacques Derrida was what Friedrich Nietzsche might call a "new style of philosopher...[a] philosopher of the dangerous Perhaps...arriving on the scene."[27] Indeed, Derrida borrowed Nietzsche's concept of "the dangerous Perhaps" and morphed it to encompass a messianic justice to-come (*à-venir*) as im/possible (non)event of the *avenir* (future), or what he calls "messianic hope" that is "messianic without messianism."[28] Derrida writes of "those 'perhapses' which have for decades explicitly marked the privileged modality, messianic in this instance, of the statements that matter the most to me."[29] He speaks of the "necessity or ineluctability of this 'perhaps'" and "what is going to come, *perhaps*, is not only this or that; it is at last the thought of the *perhaps*, the *perhaps* itself....the thought of the 'perhaps' perhaps engages the only possible thought of the event."[30] And, at the center of one of his key essays:

> Justice remains *to come*, it remains *by coming* [*la justice reste à venir*], it *has* to come [*elle a à venir*], it *is* to-come, the to-come [*elle* est *à-venir*], it deploys the very dimension of events irreducibly to come. It will always have it, this à-venir, and will always have had it. *Perhaps* this is why justice, insofar as it is not only a juridical or political concept, opens up to the *avenir* the transformation, the recasting or refounding [*la refondation*] of law and politics.
>
> "Perhaps"—one must [*il faut*] always say *perhaps* for justice.[31]

No One's Witness: A Monstrous Poetics draws on concepts from European philosophy such as Derrida's messianic perhaps (*peut-être*, maybe, could be, by chance) and the to-come, and Deleuze and Guattari's notions of becoming and virtuality, but is most influenced by how these concepts converge and resonate with black studies theorizing on blackness as a radical and excessive paraontological social force. Moten's concepts of blackness as absolute no-thingness and consent not to be a single being; Ferreira da Silva's concepts of no-bodies, the plenum, and difference without separability; and Hortense Spillers's concept of the flesh (and its monstrosity) ground my thinking in this book. Weheliye's theorizing on Spillers's flesh and Wynter's genres of the human against Man is also important to my thinking as Weheliye draws the Muselmann into the field of the flesh in apposition to black flesh under extreme subjection while providing a vital critique of Giorgio Agamben's biopolitical claims centered around the Muselmann as the "absolute biopolitical substance" and "complete witness" of the Nazi camps, "who by definition cannot bear witness."[32] In *No One's Witness*, the Muselmann as No One does bear witness, in and through the monstrous, incalculable flesh. Saidiya Hartman's theorizing on and enactment of choral and fleshly empathy and witnessing are also significant for my argument for No One's im/possible speech, as is Jared Sexton's theorizing on abolition as a movement of movements toward unsovereign landless, selfless existence.

Radical black theory as the critique of western "civilization" and black feminist theory in particular, with its critique of the regimes of Man, the human, and the self and, as Spillers writes, its insurgently "*claiming* the monstrosity" of "unprotected...female flesh 'ungendered'" as "a primary narrative" and "a praxis and a theory, a text for living and for dying, and a method for reading both through their diverse mediations," are crucial apposite interlocutors to my theorizing of No One's

monstrous witness.[33] For Moten, "blackness as a kind of aesthetic and social force is not determined and structured by what it is people have been calling the black/white binary. Blackness is this other (no-)thing" that "is not the property of black people. Everybody has the right and an option to claim blackness."[34] Blackness is a monstrous social force, with the Latin roots of monstrosity from *monstrum*, portent, prodigy, atrocity, and marvel, and *monere*, to warn, with a link to *monstrare*, to point and show, and a Proto-Indo-European root, *men-*, to think with. Moten and Stefano Harney's call for an undercommon sociality and Laura Harris's study of the "aesthetic sociality of blackness" and its monstrous "motley crew," an "interclass and interracial and queer collaboration and...disruption and reconfiguration of gender structures....a different way of being and belonging together, of acting and creating in concert, for themselves but also for others: not citizenship but a kind of critical noncitizenship, a free and motley association that would materialize in dissident, disruptive work and works, the undocuments of the undocumented," ground the disruptive, ensemblic, monstrous assemblage that constitutes this book.[35]

The etymological roots of witnessing and testimony contain not only a masculinist *testes* but also *terstis*, the one who is present as a third. Perhaps No One, in its witnessing for the witness, occupies a gender-neutral third (or more) grammatical "person" (who is not a person) not caught up in the specularity of the I-you binary. Something happens, some-thing is *demonstrated*, when the heterogeneous political (or social, Moten would say) third or more interrupts not only the individual but the closed space of Emmanuel Levinas's transcendental ethical two (me and the other, but also reader-writer, reader-text, writer-text, etc.). Misappropriating Jacques Lacan in kindergarten, "It is only because we count *three* that we can manage to count *two*."[36] Yet, to be clear, when "we" invoke the three we are not invoking third-way neoliberal politics, the synthesis, or an Oedipal daddy-mommy-me triad. Indeed, it may be impossible to calculate No One and its relation to first, second, or third "persons" at all. Moten again: "To invoke the more (or less) incalculable is to recognize how life-in-danger takes certain conceptual apparatuses over the limit, in unnatural defiance of their rule, placing *them* in danger, such that the difference between internal and external imposition, or that between major and minor struggle, fails properly to signify."[37] No One is numerous and innumerable, improperly invoking queer forms of life that swerve toward incalculable speech. As Derrida

suggests, "justice [to come] is incalculable, it demands that one calculate with the incalculable."[38]

A dangerous perhaps measures the span of such thresholds and strange turns. As do certain forms of literature and art, particularly the Deleuzian and Guattarian "minor" ones that in their "collective assemblages of enunciation," in their monstrously political language gestures, explode dominant forms from within.[39] For Celan, a thinker of a dangerous perhaps and a minor writer who takes language over its limit, breaking the hold of the German language on his own and his era's wounded consciousness:

> Poetry is perhaps this: an *Atemwende*, a turning of our breath. Who knows, perhaps poetry goes its way—the way of art—for the sake of just such a turn? And since the strange, the abyss *and* Medusa's head, the abyss *and* the automaton, all seem to lie in the same direction—it is perhaps this turn, this *Atemwende*, which can sort out the strange from the strange? It is perhaps here, in this one brief moment, that Medusa's head shrivels and the automatons run down? Perhaps, along with the I, estranged and freed *here, in this manner*, some other thing is also set free?
>
> Perhaps after this, the poem can be itself...can in this now art-less, art-free manner go other ways, including the ways of art, time and again?
>
> Perhaps.[40]

The breathturn (*Atemwende*) is an untranslatable caesura, an abyssal event, a dangerous perhaps wherein the poem becomes not simply an author's vocable breath—the poem breathes—but its own queered materiality, its line of escape from Medusa's (also known as the Gorgon's) obliterative gaze that turns the bearer to stone. A becoming otherwise, a becoming No One, a becoming monstrous, pointing and showing something terrible and potentially miraculous. To draw on Spillers's crucial essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" and her distinction between the black body and the ethereal, elusive flesh, perhaps here in this book the last three lines of the poem "Aschenglorie" could be made flesh so that a grammar something like Weheliye's *habeas viscus* ("you shall have the flesh") could let *some other thing* be *set free*. Spillers's "hieroglyphics of the flesh" and Weheliye's habeas viscus, "the differently signified flesh," inscribing lines of flight

from the bounds of bare life and biopolitical discourse, the thingly flesh "embod[ying] both more and less, but above all something other, than it does in the world of Man."[41] This book embodying No One's witness, a language No One speaks, a monstrous poetics, (un)making and sur-viving word and world.

Niemand / zeugt für den / Zeugen. What follows is an attempt to turn and churn Celan's three lines, this performative gesture, into thought—on the ethicopolitical, paraontoepistemic, and affective limits of the subject and witnessing and the subject of witnessing; and how the time of the now (Walter Benjamin's messianic *Jetztzeit*, through which past memories of suffering flash up and reorient the present and future) attends the time to come, perhaps even in a poem or a work of art.[42] "One cannot write without bearing witness to the abyss of time in its coming," writes Jean-François Lyotard.[43] While, for Celan, "the strange, the abyss *and* Medusa's head, the abyss *and* the automaton, all seem to lie in the same direction," and the breathturn is a Jetztzeit-like caesura that perhaps effects change and sets some-traumatic-thing free, for Glissant the sea, the Middle Passage, is the "womb abyss" from which time begins and accumulates, an abyss where "memory of the past weaves itself back *into* the abyss without seeking retrieval or reactivation," as Glissant scholar John E. Drabinski puts it.[44] These two concepts of abyss converge with Harriet Jacobs's concept of the perilous abyss that an enslaved girl is entrapped within, wherein a self-possessed decision is not just impossible but unthinkable.[45] Travailing syllable by syllable through three abyssal lines of poetry by Celan, *No One's Witness* attempts to sort out a poetics of the strange, the strange, and the monstrous apposite to but also swerving from Celan. Perhaps via errant detour this poetics can approach a space of dangerous thought.

In theorizing this dangerous perhaps of No One's speech, I am not interested in engaging in an exhaustive discourse analysis of witnessing per se, nor in dwelling in the well-trod terrain of the "poetry of witness."[46] As Nathaniel Mackey, writing about his book *Eroding Witness*, claims, "If somebody were to say to you that poetry is an act of witnessing, that would conjure some pretty definite images, pretty reassuring and familiar images of what the function of poetry is. But for someone to say that the function of poetry is to simultaneously witness and erode its witness, to witness and erode its witnessing…announces a different vocation for poetry, a trajectory for the poem that differs from

that more common understanding."[47] No One performs and enacts this erosion, this eating away at witnessing and the witness—and the subject and the self, the one, Man, and the human.

No One's Witness also counters the knee-jerk association of witnessing with the Nazi holocaust, given the overwhelming Eurocentric emphasis in trauma studies on that particular event as exceptional. In *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aimé Césaire obliterates that notion of exceptionality:

> And then one fine day the bourgeoisie is awakened by a terrific boomerang effect: the gestapos are busy, the prisons fill up, the torturers standing around the racks invent, refine, discuss.
>
> People are surprised, they become indignant. They say: "How strange! But never mind—it's Nazism, it will pass!" And they wait, and they hope; and they hide the truth from themselves, that it is barbarism, the supreme barbarism, the crowning barbarism that sums up all the daily barbarisms; that it is Nazism, yes, but that before they were its victims, they were its accomplices; that they tolerated that Nazism before it was inflicted on them, that they absolved it, shut their eyes to it, legitimized it, because, until then, it had been applied only to non-European peoples; that they have cultivated that Nazism, that they are responsible for it, and that before engulfing the whole edifice of Western, Christian civilization in its reddened waters, it oozes, seeps, and trickles from every crack.[48]

While writing this book in a time and place (the United States) where waters always already ooze red, and Nazism, internalized and externalized, spills over, I am interested in certain usages of the witness as a figure and concept, particularly Agamben's yoking of the witness with the Muselmann, the "'walking corpse' par excellence" inmate of the Nazi death camps who, in Agamben's formulation, is always already on the way to death without any spark of life to dwell in or on.[49] I am interested in how Agamben can publish a whole study on the Muselmann as a quintessential *homo sacer* figure (a sacred man, i.e., a disposable human representing bare, mere life in today's biopolitical context—in Roman law a person so debased he "*may be killed and yet not sacrificed*") and "complete witness" (i.e., already dead nonwitness) without examining the racialized nature of the term Muselmann (German for "Muslim," now considered a racial slur) that Weheliye and others point to, and that term's reverberations with real people, not just in the Nazi camps

but in now-time.[50] People such as a Muslim suicide bomber, who after successfully completing their political act is deemed a *shahīd*, a martyr or *witness* to the truth. Or four unnamed Muslim boys blown up by the Israeli Defense Forces while they play soccer and hide-and-seek on a Gaza beach—perhaps they are also *homines sacri*.[51] But these people are also much more than that designation, as are the *Muselmänner* of the Nazi camps, whom Agamben emphasizes "no one wants to see," while, as will become evident in this book, the Muselmänner may be No Ones who *want* to see and to speak and to witness, however indecipherable their looking and sounding.[52] Whether they are kicking the ball or hunting for food or falling out of line and getting beaten with a stick, the Muselmann/Muslim is a life engaging in forms of fugitivity and dreaming of alternate futures, not just an always already dead and silent figure ready to be donned, dissected, and/or disavowed.

When it comes to re-figuring the constitutive and operational protocols that racialize Agamben's homo sacer and its unfreedoms, Hartman's theorizing on the "spectral and spectacular character of [black] suffering" is a crucial touchstone.[53] In the opening of *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Hartman decides not to reproduce the primal scene of Frederick Douglass witnessing his Aunt Hester being brutally beaten by Captain Anthony. Hartman's reasoning resonates today as video footage of black lives being murdered by police circulates widely on social media:

> What interests me are the ways we are called upon to participate in such scenes. Are we witnesses who confirm the truth of what happened in the face of the world-destroying capacities of pain, the distortions of torture, the sheer unrepresentability of terror, and the repression of the dominant accounts? Or are we voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and sufferance? What does the exposure of the violated body yield? Proof of black sentience or the inhumanity of the "peculiar institution"? Or does the pain of the other merely provide us with the opportunity for self-reflection? At issue here is *the precariousness of empathy and the uncertain line between witness and spectator*. Only more obscene than the brutality unleashed at the whipping post is the demand that this suffering be materialized and evidenced by the display of the tortured body for endless recitations of the ghastly and the terrible. In light of this, how does one give expression to these outrages without exacerbating the indifference to suffering

> that is the consequence of the benumbing spectacle or contend with the narcissistic identification that obliterates the other or the prurience that too often is the response to such displays?[54]

These are essential questions to ask in the age of social media and continuous "trauma porn," when too often viewers are complicit (folded together) with the structures that enable these scenes to proliferate. What, for example, is the role and responsibility of the white viewers of Philando Castile's "hypervisible" murder by police on Facebook Live "in real time" on July 2, 2016?[55] Are they witnesses to the witnesses of the murder, Castile's girlfriend Diamond Lavish Reynolds and her daughter Dae'Anna, or are they some other sadistic monstrosity? Hartman asks, "Is the act of 'witnessing' a kind of looking no less entangled with the wielding of power and the extraction of enjoyment?"[56] Douglass describes his seven-year-old self, hiding in a closet and looking helplessly through the slats at his aunt being brutalized before him, as "a witness and a participant."[57] Douglass's witnessing, and black witnessing in general, occurs in a space of collective experience and traumatic memory far different from that of the white reader/viewer, as Elizabeth Alexander notes.[58] But in telling this story in his memoir, Douglass, as Christina Sharpe claims, "positions his white readers to reckon with what he knows about the all-encompassing and routinized violence in slavery, positions them to see that they are witness to and participant in brutal scenes of conception and transformation."[59] Encountering the "monstrous intimacies" (Sharpe's term) of transatlantic slavery and its afterlives demands that white viewers/readers look directly at Medusa's obliterative head and listen to what is said and unsaid in the monstrous duration, not as voyeurs or spectators but as participants in an ongoing disaster.

To avoid the kinds of violent appropriations that can attend "the precariousness of empathy" means performing witness as a literally self-less praxis. Moten calls for a new modality of empathy, an "empathy of no-bodies, an empathy of the flesh, an empathy against the metaphysics of Individuation, which is that which comprises and compromises witness. I believe a poetics of witness seeks to undo that compromise but can't. But is there a poetics of fleshly empathy, of entanglement, of absolute no-thingness, of 'difference without separation,' as Denise [Ferreira da Silva] would put it? For me, that's what a black poetics would enact."[60] In this book I am attempting, through No One, to tra-

vail alongside the black poetics of Moten, Spillers, Ferreira da Silva, and Hartman—and of M. NourbeSe Philip, Claudia Rankine, Glenn Ligon, Akilah Oliver, and others—to enact a monstrous poetics of fleshly empathy, an empathy of unselfsovereign no-bodies, an undercommon entanglement in and through the flesh, while No One(s) bear(s) witness for the witness(es).

As part of my practice of writing this book, I have examined the undersides of certain philosophical concepts whose construction or political effects and affects are generally accepted and unquestioned. For example, Blanchot's "neutral" is a rich theoretical concept (he calls it "a word *too many*") that could apply to No One as excessive third-or-more-person witness, and to certain kinds of writing as a potential space for witnessing at a remove.[61] The neutral is also a term that must be deconstructed for its political limits—for example, another term for the neutral that is deployed, however unconsciously, by Jean-Paul Sartre and Roland Barthes is "white writing"—and not just because Blanchot's politics had its limits.[62] Instead of Barthes's *Writing Degree Zero* as exemplifying the neutral, perhaps a more fruitful concept to ponder is Spillers's excessive flesh as "zero degree of social conceptualization," always already on a line of flight (a flight Deleuze borrowed/stole from George Jackson) from physical and conceptual capture.[63] "What could such flesh do?" ask Harney and Moten—and this book suggests some such actions in the flesh.[64]

A linked example is the concept of the impersonal: while I am attracted to Deleuze and Guattari's comprehensive destruction of the majoritarian notion of Man in favor of the preindividual impersonal event, I question if all being-things must be abstracted along with Man when racial capitalist colonial power structures continue to oppress certain marked lives more than others, employing racializing techniques that, as Weheliye claims, "discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans and nonhumans."[65] Moten's theorizing of no-thing and Ferreira da Silva's theorizing of "entangled particles (that is, every existing particle) [that] exist with each other, without space-time" in "difference without separability" offer important new ways of thinking virtuality and nonlocality.[66] As Moten writes, "The interplay of physics and blackness is precisely at this intersection—this mutual sexual cut—of the theory of nothing and the theory of everything. And who are the theorists of everything and nothing, everywhere and nowhere? Refugees, flightlings, black things, whose dissident passage through un-

derstanding is often taken for a kind of lawless freedom."[67] No One is a theorist of nothing and everything, of what Celan deems "the eternalized Nowhere, here, / in the memory of the over- / loud bells in—where only?"[68]

The thrust of this book, which makes its own dissident passage through understanding, is not to exhaustively propose one argument but to enact a monstrous assemblage composed of heterogeneous strands of thinking in response to questions such as: What happens when the incalculable political (or social) three or more or Moten's "more + less than one" or some combination thereof interrupts the ethical one or two—what precisely happens when No One *does* bear witness for the witness?[69] How does the human's supposedly constitutive formation in relation signify beyond the Levinasian face-to-face hostage-taking/caress of transcendental me and transcendental you as other? The neighbor/witness, the unavoidably immanent other other or "third party," always already interrupts "our" ecstatic embrace, making "us" beside ourselves (*ek-stasis*, Greek, "standing outside oneself") with confusion and vulnerability and potential radical openness.[70] But the neighbor you love to hate across the always already white picket fence is understood as neighbor only insofar as they are deemed a some-thing, a some-body. What about forms of nothing, forms of not standing but collectively falling? Moten and Harney: "We fall so we can fall again, which is what ascension really means to us. To fall is to lose one's place, to lose the place that makes one, to relinquish the locus of being, which is to say of being single. This radical homelessness—its kinetic indigeneity, its irreducible queerness—is the essence of blackness."[71] This "sharing of a life in homelessness" is resonant with the non-Zionist secular Jewish messianic thought and writing practices of Derrida, Benjamin, Franz Kafka, and Celan that I draw on throughout this book.[72] Jared Sexton writes about abolition as "the interminable radicalization of every radical movement," and with this radicalization comes an unsovereign unhoming: "No ground for identity, no ground to stand (on). Everyone has a claim to everything until no one has a claim to anything. No claim....The flesh of the earth demands it: the landless inhabitation of selfless existence."[73] What follows and folds and falls and fails and fleshes is No One making a claim to a theorizing without a claim, No One as an im/possible, anoriginal, paraontological, emergent form of life queering normative ways of thinking life, the subject, witnessing, and form itself. This gesture toward the emergent is not a modernist

thrust into the prophetic wilderness; it is a future anterior push at the now, a dangerous perhaps.[74]

A NOTE ON FORM

> In this scenography, nothing comes on the scene punctually. Nothing comes on the scene on its own terms; which is to say, it comes on the scene on other terms. Distinctions move laterally or obversely vibrating through chains and networks of associations. It is in this lateral, or obverse, movement that we can describe the formation of form. Everything in this paragraph moves by indirection. Nothing settles down. Form would be deflection as indirection; for each movement is inflected back into itself, doubled and redoubled by the differences that organize its formation. The prose itself, by its syntax and the con*fusions* of its meanings, remain not only the site of a question, but the very movement or form of a question.
>
> **NAHUM DIMITRI CHANDLER**

I am a poet, and with this book I am presenting *un essai*, an attempt, a try, a trial that is exposed to its own failure, like all language acts. This essay comes from a lineage of poetics writing, *makings* in form and theorizing, enactments of literary, political, and philosophical argument through experimental and improvisatory language forms rather than via expository persuasive prose. The poetic is not unlike blackness as a social and aesthetic force that upends received categories and concepts and ways of being. It is no wonder that Aristotle tried in vain to contain the poetic within his taxonomic organon and Plato banished poets from his utopian Republic. The long history of poetics writing in western literature includes works from a vast range of poet-thinkers, from Philip Sidney, Alexander Pope, and William Wordsworth to Gertrude Stein, Charles Olson, Amiri Baraka, and Moten, Glissant, Césaire, and Celan.[75] The works of poetics by these writers and many more are deeply scholarly while operating outside of, and in many cases rejecting, the accumulative rigidity of normative scholarly apparatuses, whether from the Renaissance, the Romantic era, or now. In these works, the distinctions among poetry, criticism, and theory blur to such a degree that any taxonomic desire becomes fruitless and

inconsequential. This book aims to make a contribution to this great poetics—or, as poet-thinker Joan Retallack would say, *poethics*—tradition. For Retallack, "a poetics can take you only so far without an *h*. If you're to embrace complex life on earth, if you can no longer pretend that all things are fundamentally simple or elegant, a poetics thickened by an *h* launches an exploration of art's significance *as*, not just *about*, a form of living in the real world. That *as* is not a simile; it's an ethos. Hence the *h*. What I'm working on is quite explicitly a poethics of a complex realism."[76] As I will elaborate, Ferreira da Silva has drawn on Retallack's term to theorize a black feminist poethics of complex realism that is important to how I am thinking about No One's monstrous witness, No One as a poethical (non)figure or (non)image of poethical thought, No One enacting a fleshly poetics of entanglement alongside Moten's notion of black poetics mentioned above.[77] With this book I am working through in prose a wide range of thinking and research about witnessing, writing, and the social that I have demonstrated in my poetry for over twenty-five years—and that black study has helped me work through to a new place. Indeed, this experiment, this performance, this try, *is* a poem generated from reading, one that generates its own form in the process of its (un)folding. Like many experimental poems and theoretical texts that enact their ideas through form, *No One's Witness: A Monstrous Poetics* teaches you how to read it as it spirals along, and I hope this book will be read with a consciousness that what remains unsaid is an incitement to readers to generate more.

As the table of contents demonstrates, each chapter of this book begins from a word from the English translation of the last three lines of Celan's poem "Aschenglorie" (Ashglory): *Niemand / zeugt für den / Zeugen*; "No one / bears witness for the / witness" (one possible translation). There are chapters for "No," for "one," for "bears," "witness," and so on—along with chapters on the caesura between "No" and "one" and on the (non)figure of the No One. Across each chapter, I imagine whether an incalculable, irreducible No One can perhaps enact an improvisation of an im/possibility of bearing witness. Against the manifest interpretation of the three Celan lines that no one can or should bear witness for the witness, a manifold No One's fleshly speech im/possibly performs just that. No One as never one, never the space and speech of the sovereign self-possessed individual, No One as some no-thing altogether different and diffuse, plural and perverted, monstrously generative. *Niemand / zeugt für den / Zeugen*. The heterogeneous monster that is this book ar-

ticulates by way of a set of interlocking *essais* that spiral out from each word/chapter. Together they enact a call to an undercommon social poesis, with monstrosity's etymological roots bearing a pointing, a showing, an overexposure even, a demonstration of some-thing deviant, excessive, uncontainable, and possibly miraculous—an out form of collective becoming otherwise in another world always already here and to come, dancing.[78]

All chapters include "studies" of cultural concepts and products, primarily drawn from literature and art, that ground their arguments. These forays into literature and art are not meant as explicatory close readings. On the contrary, they seek to highlight how the creative works of M. NourbeSe Philip, Glenn Ligon, Sharon Hayes, Dread Scott, Bhanu Kapil, Akilah Oliver, Saidiya Hartman, Juliana Spahr, and others performatively index and draw toward the philosophical concepts and political questions in the book. But I am not forgoing close reading altogether—the whole book is indeed a hyperclose, granular reading of three lines from a poem by Paul Celan.

The form or style of writing in this book is fragmentary, associative, accretive, and recursive—a lesbian spiral or Möbius strip or another allegorical image that isn't linear or dialectic, that allows for future anterior spaces of radical secular messianic hope.[79] Actively waiting (i.e., acting) for a world that will perhaps have come or perhaps never come, but still an event worth attending—and making every day. One wag famously suggested that "philosophy ought really to be written only as a *poetic composition*," and my thinking and formal process constructing this book could be interpreted as enacting that directive.[80] The bringing together, and sometimes clash, of disparate voices that occurs here on these pages is deliberate. I consider myself a cocreator rather than a solo author; I am engaged in an ensemblic practice, a choral architecture, a social poetics (an out kind of social ecology, even) of the incalculable more + less than one + three or more. My compositional methods in theoretical prose and poetry are very similar, methods that include a perhaps embarrassing attachment to a kind of montage shock effect or Benjaminian citational assemblage leaping out and relieving the reader of their convictions. Benjamin described his *Arcades Project* in this way: "Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't *say* anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making

use of them."[81] I am not following Benjamin's method exactly, but embedded in all my writing is a similar emphasis on showing over saying. As is the constellatory interpenetration of reading, gleaning, and making use, as well as the possibilities of montage or assemblage for pushing readerly thinking and affect.

Celan's last poem before he committed suicide in the Seine in 1970 includes the line "du liest," which translates as both "you read" and "you glean."[82] My writing practice consists of reading and gleaning and assembling the refuse, the refused, refusal. Assemblage has always appealed to me as a concept and a praxis that pushes beyond the two-dimensional page (or the limits of the montage film cut and basic collage forms) into new configurations of space, time, and thought. Ferreira da Silva's black feminist "raw materialist" and "at least four dimensional... poethical...compositional...or fractal thinking" is an important apposite method for how a constellatory assemblage can form.[83] I create multidimensional assemblages that are "contradictory and mobile," as Benjamin might say; that openly "evade rest," as Glissant's work enacts; and that employ Deleuzian "irrational cuts."[84] My writing attempts to generate "mad" (or ungovernable) affects in the reader, and Benjamin's "craziest mosaic technique you can imagine" is an aid to that process.[85] As Shoshana Felman suggests, "The more a text is 'mad'—the more, in other words, it resists interpretation—the more the specific modes of its resistance to reading constitute its 'subject."[86] I imagine disavowed "sticky" affects being drawn to the surface of readerly bodies through the reading process, circulating and sticking to other readerly bodies and perhaps doing something, kind of like montage shock affects. As Sara Ahmed writes in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*: "Stickiness...is about what objects do to other objects—it involves a transference of affect—but it is a relation of 'doing' in which there is not a distinction between passive or active, even though the stickiness of one object might come before the stickiness of the other, such that the other seems to cling to it."[87] I want readers to cling to one another and make something social happen.

To borrow from Nahum Dimitri Chandler, "I have attempted to carry out a certain practice of intervention in discourse, to enact a certain politics of theoretical discourse."[88] In the epigraph that opens this "Note on Form," Chandler is referring to his im/possible effort "to read with Du Bois; writing," and the paragraph can describe both Du Bois's writing in the opening of *The Souls of Black Folk* and Chandler's *own writ-*

ing with and through Du Bois, using form, association, and constant uncontainable movement to ask unaskable questions.[89] In the scenography that is *No One's Witness*, I am attempting some-thing apposite in form as I dwell with the no-thing that comes on the scene on its own terms. Something happens when Moten's and Blanchot's words and my words are placed side by side, some-thing dangerous, perhaps—and some-thing monstrously social. Something similar happens when Moten's and Wilderson's words are placed side by side in apposition. The uneasiness of a distinction or opposition between Afro-Pessimism and so-called Black Optimism (Moten would say Black Ops) is brought to bear in this formal montagic juxtaposition. When concepts by these important thinkers hold space together in the same paragraph, on the same page, their seemingly rigid differences soften and their overlapping resonances emerge; they gather together, in and as dehiscence.[90] I perform these kinds of monstrous citational assemblages throughout this text as a form of readerly and writerly witnessing and cohabitation.

My use of "ensemble" to describe the cocreative practices of writing and reading is influenced by Moten's beautiful elongation of that musical term to write against individuation and toward, within, and through difference across his body of work. Poststructuralist notions of the death of the author and the birth of the reader as coproducer of meaning that have been taken up by experimental poets for over half a century are also embedded in my psyche and practice, as they are in those of many of the thinkers and artists I cite and study. Sometimes I elaborate on the appositional juxtapositions of my assemblages, and sometimes I leave them to resonate. And as in my poetry books, I and you and we dwell here in difficult affective content and questions of the ethics of representation. The formal and content decisions I make in assembling my ideas and sentences, the cuts and tears of decision, are necessarily partial. They are deeply thought through and made toward generating complex forms of thinking, feeling, and acting. Borrowing from Derrida on his experimental text *Glas*, I aim to create a text that "produces a language of its own, in itself, which while continuing to work through tradition emerges at a given moment as a *monster*, a monstrous mutation without tradition or normative precedent."[91] No One's witness: a monstrous poetics, a language No One speaks, a dangerous perhaps. I am a white-skinned, middle-class, secular Jewish, gender-queer, dyke poet and thinker and educator and lover and abuse survivor and alto sax player and friend and settler and other positionalities

as well. I and we are here (like and unlike Abraham) desiring to abolish the white self-same self. There is a poem, and there is *un essai*, a radical try, poethical wager. A travailer is made.[92] Do these words matter when forty-nine Latinx and black, queer and trans people are massacred in Orlando while they dance?[93] There is the so-called constative and the so-called performative. There is testimony, and there are four chimneys blown beyond knowledge to deformed freedom.[94] There is author, vendor, rhetor as witness, survivor, balls. There is a monster in the neighbor's face. That alien traumatic kernel of *Das Ding* in the *Nebenmensch* adjoins and hystericizes me as the both/and that exceeds and opens thought.[95] Yes and no are unsplit neighbors housed in abrasive proximity in the noem.[96] Nothing settles down.[97] There is a thinking encrypted in silence and a thinking encrusted in noise. There is a listening to what is unsayable. There is blur when we try to see one thing.[98] There is a reach, a touch, an impress. There is a limit and a limit and a limit and, peut-être, a threshold, break. Nothing for [N]o [O]ne.[99] As the impure products of Amerika go crazy, there is *un éveil*, a queerly errant arousal.[100] There is a veil, im/movable.[101] Everything in this paragraph moves by indirection. No One arrives to witness and adjust. There is an experience that cannot be translated. No One(s) drive(s) the car to Orlando. There is an experience that cannot be undone. I is undone. There is a time that could have been then and a time that will have been now and a time always already to come. These coincide. Nothing comes on the scene punctually. Another city gathers, dancing.[102] Language is flesh, flesh language. You are what we gain from this disorientation.[103]

NOTES

OPENING

1 The last three lines of Paul Celan, "Aschenglorie" (Ashglory), one translation of which is "No one / bears witness for the / witness." In Celan, *Breathturn into Timestead: The Collected Later Poetry; A Bilingual Edition*, 62–65, translated by Pierre Joris. See the appendix for the complete poem and one English translation by Joris. One of the several other possible translations is "Nobody / witnesses the / witness."

2 Jacques Derrida, "Poetics and Politics of Witnessing," in *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, 67.

3 *Resistancy* is translation scholar Lawrence Venuti's term for preserving the roughness/strangeness of words in translation, "not merely because it avoids fluency, but because it challenges the target-language culture even as it enacts its own ethnocentric violence on the foreign text." See *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, 24.

4 "I would prefer not to" is Bartleby's consistent response to his employer's entreaties that Bartleby perform his copying duties as scribe—and subsequent demands that he leave the premises. Herman Melville, *Bartleby, the Scrivener*.

5 Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 10.

6 Fred Moten, "The Blur and Breathe Books," in *Black and Blur: Critical Essays*, vol. 1 of *consent not to be a single being,* 257. Moten is drawing on Charles Gaines's essay "The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism," 13–21.

7 I follow Norman G. Finkelstein's use of the term "Nazi holocaust" instead of the commercialized "Holocaust" or "Shoah," placing the focus of the term, and responsibility, on the perpetrators. See *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering*, 3: "*Nazi holocaust* signals the actual historical event, *The Holocaust* its ideological representation."

8 Paul Antschel wrote under the pseudonym Paul Celan. Antschel in Romanian form is Ancel, and Celan is an anagram of Ancel. One often feels the urge to place "proper" in scare quotes after Derrida's obliteration of the proper name and Moten's definition of black radicalism as "the performance of a general critique of the proper." See Derrida, *Of Grammatology*; Moten, "Chromatic Saturation," in *The Universal Machine: Theoretical Essays*, vol. 3 of *consent not to be a single being,* 140; and Denise Ferreira da Silva on "the limits of the proper (in its economic and ethical meanings)" in "Hacking the Subject: Black Feminism and Refusal beyond the Limits of Critique," 22. Proper's imbrication with property, appropriation, self-

possession (and thus legal personhood), and dispossession is explored in various ways in this book.

9 See Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, 18.

10 See the "witness" and "for" chapters in this book.

11 Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 17.

12 See Sylvia Wynter, "*Proud Flesh* Inter/Views: Sylvia Wynter," 24.

13 Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, 44; and Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*, 130.

14 Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, 143.

15 Moten, "Erotics of Fugitivity," in *Stolen Life: Social Essays*, vol. 2 of *consent not to be a single being*, 243–44.

16 Moten, "Chromatic Saturation," in *The Universal Machine*, 142.

17 Moten, *A Poetics of the Undercommons*, 28. See Nahum Dimitri Chandler's *X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought*; and "The Problem of the Centuries," 41.

18 Moten, *The Universal Machine*, 262n3.

19 Moten, "Chromatic Saturation," in *The Universal Machine*, 194.

20 See Édouard Glissant, Manthia Diawara, and Christopher Winks, "Édouard Glissant in Conversation with Manthia Diawara," 5. See Moten's *consent not to be a single being* trilogy.

21 Ferreira da Silva, "On Difference without Separability," 65.

22 Moten, preface to *Stolen Life*, ix.

23 See Ferreira da Silva, "On Difference without Separability."

24 See Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*. My use of the expression "bring into apposition" is influenced by how Weheliye expands on Glissant's concept of Relation to discuss "bringing-into-relation…interconnected existences that are in constant motion" as a "productive model for critical inquiry and political action." See Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 12–13. For more on black study, see Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*.

25 Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 18; and Moten, preface to *Black and Blur*, xii. See also Stef Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*, for more on trauma as ongoing rather than eventual.

26 Derrida, "Some Statements and Truisms about Neologisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and Other Small Seismisms," 80.

27 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, 7. Derrida references Nietzsche's "dangerous Perhaps" in several places, including in "Perhaps or Maybe: Jacques Derrida in Conversation with Alexander García Düttmann," 2.

28 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 211, 82.

29 Derrida, "Marx and Sons," 221.

30 Derrida, "Marx and Sons," 221; and Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 29 (italics in original).

31 Derrida, "Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority," 256–57 (italics and brackets in original translation).

32 Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 156, 39.

33 Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*, 229, 207, 206 (italics in original).

34 Moten, *A Poetics of the Undercommons*, 30.

35 See Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*; and Laura Harris, *Experiments in Exile: C. L. R. James, Hélio Oiticica, and the Aesthetic Sociality of Blackness*, 10, 7. Harris is drawing on Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker's description of the motley crew in *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*, a book Harris describes as a "study of the transatlantic working class of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries, before blackness and citizenship became clearly divided categories" (10).

36 Jacques Lacan, *Les non dupes errent* (italics in original). Quoted in a slightly different translation in Slavoj Žižek, Eric L. Santner, and Kenneth Reinhard, *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology*, 71.

37 Moten, preface to *Stolen Life*, i (italics in original).

38 Derrida, "Force of Law," 244.

39 See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*.

40 Celan, "The Meridian," in *Collected Prose*, 47 (italics in original).

41 Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," in *Black, White, and in Color*, 207; and Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 111.

42 See Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, *1938–1940*, 395.

43 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, 74.

44 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 6. John E. Drabinski, *Glissant and the Middle Passage: Philosophy, Beginning, Abyss*, 62 (italics in original).

45 Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*, 59.

46 Poet Carolyn Forché is generally associated with the term "poetry of witness," stemming from her book *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*, though the practice of writing "poems of witness" has proliferated from there. See the "for" chapter in this book for further discussion.

47 Nathaniel Mackey, *Paracritical Hinge: Essays, Talks, Notes, Interviews*, 309.

48 Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 36.

49 Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 70.

50 Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 8 (italics in original). See, for example, Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 53–56. See also C. Heike Schotten, *Queer Terror: Life, Death, and Desire in the Settler Colony*, 1–30; Jill Jarvis, "Remnants of Muslims: Reading Agamben's Silence"; and Gil Anidjar, *The Jew, the Arab: A History of the Enemy*, 113–49.

51 Kim Senguputa, "Israel-Gaza Conflict: Four Boys Killed While Playing Football on Beach after Israeli Warships Open Fire."

52 Agamben is quoting survivor Aldo Carpi in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 50.

53 Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, 20.

54 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 3–4 (italics added).

55 See Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 36, on hypervisibility.

56 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 22. See also page 21 on "the sadistic pleasure to be derived from the spectacle of sufferance."

57 Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, 19.

58 See Elizabeth Alexander, "'Can You Be BLACK and Look at This?': Reading the Rodney King Video(s)."

59 Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects*, 7.

60 Moten, email to author, May 26, 2017.

61 Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 312 (italics in original).

62 Blanchot exhibited fascist leanings in his early adulthood, published in fascist journals before and during World War II, etc. He later assiduously disavowed these tendencies and participated in French leftist circles after the war.

63 Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," in *Black, White, and in Color*, 206.

64 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 93.

65 Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 61.

66 Ferreira da Silva, "On Difference without Separability," 64.

67 Moten, "Notes on Passage," in *Stolen Life*, 209.

68 Celan, "The written hollows itself," in *Breathturn into Timestead*, 67.

69 Moten, "Erotics of Fugitivity," in *Stolen Life*, 242. See also *Stolen Life*, i.

70 See Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, 24.

71 Harney and Moten, "Michael Brown," 82.

72 Moten, "Chromatic Saturation," in *The Universal Machine*, 212.

73 Jared Sexton, "The *Vel* of Slavery: Tracking the Figure of the Unsovereign," 593. See also Sexton, "All Black Everything," on abolition as "the true movement of movements." While I have written two books of poetry addressing settler colonialism in Palestine and Turtle Island, in this book I am exploring No One as a (non)figure of witnessing that bears more kinship with black studies thinking on land-less, self-less, nonnatal, unsovereign life than it does to Indigenous philosophies and practices of collective sovereignty, nationhood, and self-determination. However, decolonization as an ongoing praxis of unknowing and undoing and "unthinking this world with a view to its end—that is…the return of the total value expropriated from conquered lands and enslaved bodies," undergirds this book, as it does my poetry, and is "the only proper name for justice," as Ferreira da Silva suggests ("In the Raw").

74 My thinking on the future anterior has been influenced by my reading of Weheliye's *Habeas Viscus*, combined with my own torquing of Benjamin's Jetztzeit/now-time.

75 See, for example, Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry, or, The Defence of Poesy*; Al-

exander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*; William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads: 1798 and 1802*; Gertrude Stein, "Composition as Explanation"; Charles Olson, "Projective Verse"; Amiri Baraka, *Blues People*; Moten, the *consent not to be a single being* trilogy; Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*; Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*; and Celan, *Collected Prose*.

76 Joan Retallack, *The Poethical Wager*, 26 (italics in original).

77 See Ferreira da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness toward the End of the World."

78 See Harney and Moten, "Michael Brown," 81: "another city gathers, dancing."

79 For more on the lesbian spiral, see Nicole Brossard, *The Aerial Letter*. On the unraveling of a Möbius strip, see Deleuze's *Logic of Sense*.

80 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 24 (italics in original).

81 W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, N1a, 8, 460 (italics in original).

82 The words "du liest" appear twice in the last poem Celan wrote, "Rebleute graben" (Vinegrowers dig up), written on April 13, 1970, a week before he committed suicide. See Celan, *Breathturn into Timestead*, 454–56.

83 Ferreira da Silva, "Fractal Thinking." One element of my assemblage to note is that I follow the vast majority of my interlocutors in placing "black" and "blackness" in lowercase throughout this book, except in citations in which these terms appear in uppercase.

84 W. Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932–1940*, 108–9; Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 172; and Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 182.

85 W. Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*, 256. Benjamin is actually referring to his composition process in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, which he further develops in *The Arcades Project*.

86 Shoshana Felman, *Writing and Madness: (Literature/Philosophy/Psychoanalysis)*, 254.

87 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 91.

88 Chandler, *X*, 65.

89 See Chandler, *X*, 3 (italics in original). While the putatively "more correct" grammatical choice in the last sentence of the epigraph would be "remains," I chose this passage from Chandler partly because of the indeterminacy of whether it is the prose itself that remains or the prose taken together with its syntax and its "con*fusions*" that remain.

90 While my fastidious poetics of citation ensures that there are hundreds of citations in this book, there are hundreds more instances where a word or phrase, or even half or a quarter of a word or phrase, comes to me through the (not-so-unconscious) influence of all that I have read and lived. There is no way I can cite every instance of this phenomenon, as no poet (or being) can or should; yet through the accretive, recursive course of this book, these connections do tend to flutter to the surface. Reader, please do bear in mind, however, that one thing I refuse to do every time this (un)conscious influence arises is this: "Here in this sentence I use the word 'dehiscence' that Moten makes such beautiful use of in

his work, as he does 'apposition' and 'refusal,' and 'more or less than one,' although Chandler also uses apposition beautifully, so is it Moten's or Chandler's or no one's. A little later I don't cite Barthes or Foucault on the death of the author, nor do I cite Benjamin earlier on leaping out and robbing the idler of their convictions (the idler here becoming a reader). Weheliye also makes interesting use of Deleuze and Guattari's assemblages, which I will get to later in the book, as I will get to decision and Derrida too. And the notions of destroying this disastrous world or always already living and dancing another world in this world appear in various ways across black studies, so is it Wilderson's or Moten's or Ferreira da Silva's or Fanon's or no one's or everyone's."

91 Derrida, "Jacques Derrida: Deconstruction and the Other," 123 (italics added).

92 See "The Author's Apology for His Book," the preface to John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The line I am alluding to is "This Book will make a Travailer of thee." A travailer is a traveler and a worker—and a reader.

93 I wrote this sentence shortly after Omar Mateen killed forty-nine people and wounded fifty-three others inside Pulse, a queer nightclub in Orlando, Florida, on June 12, 2016.

94 See Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, 59–63. And see the "bear(s)" chapter in this book.

95 See Žižek, Santner, and Reinhard, *The Neighbor*.

96 This is a riff on Celan, which will become more apparent in the "No" chapter in this book.

97 See the epigraph to this "Note on Form," from Chandler, *X*, 3. Additional references to this epigraph appear in this paragraph.

98 See Moten, *Black and Blur*.

99 See Sexton, "The *Vel* of Slavery," 593.

100 See William Carlos Williams, "To Elsie." There are additional references to this poem in this paragraph. I am also torquing Emmanuel Levinas's notion of *l'éveil à partir de l'autre*: see "Philosophy and Awakening," 77–90.

101 See Celan, "Conversation in the Mountains," in *Collected Prose*, 18; and W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*, on the veil.

102 Harney and Moten, "Michael Brown," 81.

103 Here I am torquing a line from Judith Butler's *Precarious Life*, 49, that also appears in my book *Neighbour Procedure*, 30.

1 No

1 Moten, "The Blur and Breathe Books," in *Black and Blur*, 257.

2 Robert A. Harris, "A Handbook of Rhetorical Devices."

3 John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 13.

4 Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 2.