



University of  
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**REFERENCE ≠ ENDORSEMENT /  
ARCHIVES, INTERTEXTUALITY AND IDENTITY**

Alison Jane Moore

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

2025

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School of English

February 2025

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## ABSTRACT

### **REFERENCE ≠ ENDORSEMENT / ARCHIVES, INTERTEXTUALITY AND IDENTITY**

This project explores archival poetics, absence and identity, expansively redefining the archival by extending conventional notions [a repository of documents] to embrace ‘theoretical archives’ which, I argue, include literary genres, ‘state apparatuses’,<sup>1</sup> language and mass culture. The critical thesis interrogates works by Maggie Nelson, Ann Carson, Susan Howe, Claudia Rankine and Jeff Hilson, explaining why these authors treat the archival with suspicion, questioning the validity of its truth claims. Informed by thinking which includes Andrea Brady, Judith Butler, Charles Knight, Jacques Derrida, Kate Eichhorn, Audre Lorde, Marjorie Perloff, M NourbeSe Philip and Denise Riley, it examines the archival in terms of specific problematics: documentation as gendered, structurally racist and ‘governmental space’,<sup>2</sup> controlled by a plutocratic elite. Giving equal weight to creative and source texts highlights the emotional and ethical work in the authors’ reshaping of original materials, uncovering a reframing of content to create a living archive populated with those previously un-, under- or misrepresented. My poetry collection *Reference ≠ Endorsement* complements the cultural work done by the five authors in widening the scope of what constitutes archival practice, positing an alternative archive through six sequences exploring domestic objects – ‘Bread’, ‘Candles’, ‘Bookshelves’, ‘Plates’, ‘Bedding’ and ‘Dining Table’ – interwoven with reflective mini-essays. Mining quotidian items from fabrics and furniture to

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Althusser, ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)’, *marxists.org* <https://www.csun.edu/~snk1966/Lous%20Althusser%20Ideology%20and%20Ideological%20State%20Apparatuses.pdf> [accessed 15 November 2022].

<sup>2</sup> Ana Baeza Ruiz, ‘Museums, archives and gender’, *Museum History Journal*, 11.2 (October 2018), 174-187 (p. 175) <https://doi.org/10.1080/19369816.2018.1529268>.

instruction manuals and product packaging, it discovers among breadcrumbs and wax drips, tableware and nylon sheets the significance of the everyday in documenting our society and the dislocated selves consistently denied by 'official' apparatuses. Both elements aim to extend the thinking about poetry's ability to challenge how and what we document and create new possibilities for the representation [re-presentation] of selves, expanding on discussions about the relevance of archive in works by Nelson, Carson, Howe, Rankine and Hilson, and offering another creative voice advocating for a more blended, inclusive, organic approach.

## RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

***‘Whatever the archive contains is already a reconstruction – a recording of history from a particular perspective’<sup>1</sup>***

While the above observation from Marlene Manoff should not be news to anyone, it nonetheless remains a cautionary reflection which may usefully be born in mind when approaching any academic thesis – but most especially one which interrogates poetic works that address the biases and absences inherent in documentation. Like all completed PhD projects this thesis, if successful, will become part of the academic archive – held in its institution’s nominated repository, logged for comparison with similarity detection services such as Turnitin, its chapters submitted for consideration by scholarly journals. There is also the potential for elements to cross over, become subsumed into the archive that is poetry, as the project has yielded an interview with poet Jeff Hilson, published in *Blackbox Manifold* journal of poetry and poetics<sup>2</sup> and a collection of poetry, *Reference ≠ Endorsement*, which will be published by Erratum Press (forthcoming in late 2025). It is worth noting, therefore, that the researcher positionality statement has a role to play in the archival process, in that it offers an opportunity to record at the outset the potential for partiality in what follows.

In a paper for the ‘Disrupting Dominance in the Archive’ conference (December 2022), Jenny Shaw highlighted the significance of Hope Olson’s WEBCHAM model (White,

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<sup>1</sup> Marlene Manoff, ‘Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines’, *Portal : Libraries and the Academy*, 4.1 (January 2004), 9-25 (p. 14) <https://www.proquest.com/docview/216168595/abstract/A9C932FC8F24CDAPQ/1> [accessed 15 February 2023].

<sup>2</sup>A J Moore, ‘Jeff Hilson Interview’, *Blackbox Manifold* 30 (Summer 2023) [Blackbox Manifold - JeffHilsonInterviewBM30 \(sheffield.ac.uk\)](https://www.blackboxmanifold.com/jeff-hilson-interview).

Ethnically European, Bourgeois, Christian (Citizen Cis), Heterosexual, Able bodied, Male)<sup>3</sup> in impacting archival bias – categories of which, in common one suspects with a high proportion of researchers, over half apply to this PhD candidate. Further, a particular personal interest in absence and female identity will necessarily have shaped the choosing of creative and theoretical texts in the thesis and the perspective from which they are analysed. These decisions had equal bearing on the creative element of this project, *Reference ≠ Endorsement* being a piece of research-led practice which evolved in part through interaction with the works discussed in ‘Archives, Intertextuality and Identity’ (and others – as outlined in the following paragraph). My process is reflected in the inclusion of eight poetic mini essays in the poetry collection, which offer a creative-analytical response to its overarching themes. The final piece, ‘Bridging’ (p. 51) both draws together these themes and situates them within the wider field of archival poetics, inspired by and written in solidarity with the authors whose works are then interrogated in the critical thesis.

Finally, like Nelson, Carson, Howe, Rankine and Hilson – who have themselves made choices about what and what not to include<sup>4</sup> – I too have been selective, influenced by writing which particularly chimes with me and theory which will substantiate my own views, as well as the practicalities of the space available. There are countless other authors whose

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<sup>3</sup> Jenny Shaw, *Diversity and Inclusion in UK Archival Collection Development* [Paper presentation], ‘Disrupting Dominance in the Archive’ (6 December 2022), London College of Communication, UAL online conference.

<sup>4</sup> In a paper given at the UEA conference ‘Poetry, Representation and the Archive’, Sarala Estruch suggests that through this process of selection the poet (and therefore, presumably, researcher) becomes ‘the archon’ – ie those whom Jacques Derrida describes in ‘Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression’ as ‘the documents’ guardians’. [Sarala Estruch, *Re-Visiting and Re-Creating the Past for the Future: Decolonialising the Archive in Bhanu Kapil’s Humanimal: A Project for Future Children and in The House of My Ancestors, a work-in-progress* [Paper presentation], ‘Poetry, Representation and the Archive’ (25 May 2023), University of East Anglia conference.]

work in the sphere has relevance both for my approach to my own poetic practice – being experimental in nature and interwoven with intertextual references – and who could (arguably should) have been included in the thesis. To give just a few examples, Geraldine Monk's *Interregnum* and *Escafeld Hangings*, Kimberly Campanello's *MOTHERBABYHOME* and Kate Bolton Bonnici's *A True & Just Record* would have had much to contribute to a discussion of documentation as a gendered space; M NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* to Chapter 2's exploration of documentation as a structurally racist space; Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* and Peter Riley's *Excavations* to the interrogation of documentation, commodification and the commodification of bodies in the final chapter. Even within my selections there are many more possible illustrations from both the poetic and critical source texts which a different researcher may have chosen ahead of those discussed here. As Jacques Derrida has remarked, 'The archivization produces as much as it records the event'.<sup>5</sup>

If, as the thesis will explore, there is an inevitability that even works which set out to illuminate the problematic nature of the archive are themselves to some degree complicit in its absences and biases what exactly, as Lauryn Anderson has queried, is our responsibility as its critics?<sup>6</sup> My response would be that equally important as adding our voices to those drawing attention to these omissions and partialities is that we as researchers and practitioners recognise to what extent we too – be it consciously or unconsciously –

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<sup>5</sup>Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, 'Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression' *Diacritics*, 25.2 (Summer 1995), 9-63 (p. 17) <https://doi.org/10.2307/465144>.

<sup>6</sup> Lauryn Anderson, "I go in quest of my inheri-/tance": Tracing Susan Howe's "sordidly spectacular" *Ancestors in the Archive*, [Paper presentation], 'Poetry, Representation and the Archive' (25 May 2023), University of East Anglia conference.

contribute to their perpetuation. And while this may sometimes be rooted in factors which we are unable to change, what we can do is acknowledge and take ownership of their existence, and the subsequent limitations this imposes, both on our research and on our own creative work.

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by Alison Moore

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**ARCHIVES , INTERTEXTUALITY  
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## INTRODUCTION

Inspired by poetic works which draw on citation, documentary sources and found materials, this thesis posits that these devices operate within a wide-ranging intertextual archive which may, in its own way, be as much influenced by practices, conventions and biases of recording as are physical archives in a library or museum, a government department or a gallery. I will explore collections by Maggie Nelson, Anne Carson, Susan Howe, Claudia Rankine and Jeff Hilson – authors who fuse private and public, personal and political, high brow and low brow, borrowing language, terminologies and techniques from letters and diaries, media reports, song lyric fragments, speeches, academic protocol, payday loan reviews, classical literature and true crime writing to name just a handful of the wealth of resources they excavate. Via a close reading of the texts alongside a selection of source materials and with new commentary from one of the authors (Hilson), the thesis sets out to interrogate the role of writer as archivist, seeking to determine if harnessing the lexicons and methodologies associated with the archive can enable a questioning of its validity. I will argue that, by adopting these conventions to shine a light on the systemic absence and discriminatory ideologies they perpetuate, the texts initiate discussions about how and what we document<sup>1</sup> and create new possibilities for the representation (re-presentation) of selves.

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<sup>1</sup> Elements of this paragraph first appeared as part of the following article: A J Moore, 'Three Poems About Absence: A Creative Response To Women's History Month', *University of Sheffield*, March 2023 <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/arts-humanities/faculty/equality-diversity-and-inclusion/womens-history-month-2023/research/three-poems-about-absence>

## 1: A brief note on social and political context

The contemporary preoccupation with the archive – and, indeed, conflicting opinions as to what we mean by this term – will be explored in due course but at the outset we must, as Kate Eichhorn has pointed out, ‘first consider what sort of *present* we occupy’.<sup>2</sup> Originally published between 2005 and 2021, the texts examined here have emerged against a backdrop of burgeoning reactionary philosophies. The rise of populist leaders and a backlash against international migration of workers and refugees as a consequence of globalisation have fostered a climate where online abuse, hate speech and casual bigotry of all kinds are normalised, encouraged: fuel for both omission and exclusion and, by extension, more sinister dogmas which, when acted upon, have violent or fatal consequences. The blanket commodification and consumerism underpinning late capitalism afford those in power limitless opportunities to distract their citizens from genuine issues such as the cost of living crisis [and to surveil them in the process] with increasingly sophisticated algorithms offering not-to-be-missed deals and [apparently] bespoke recommendations. Meanwhile, positions of authority – particularly in the early twenty-first century UK of which Hilson writes – are increasingly occupied by a wealthy, privileged and morally dubious elite, more blatantly focussed on protecting its own interests than perhaps at any other time in the post-war period (and who would probably consider this analysis to be loaded with its own biases, and agendas). This is a climate where the discrimination and violence (both verbal and physical) experienced by individuals so often historically under-written, homogenised within, or written out of documentation – perhaps due to gender, gender identity, race, ethnicity,

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<sup>2</sup> Kate Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), p. 5. ProQuest Ebook Central.

sexuality, class, disability, neurodivergence (and any combination of these), to give just small number of examples – is mirrored *still* by persistent absences, prejudices and omissions in the official or mainstream record.<sup>3</sup>

Maggie Nelson's exposure, in *Jane: A Murder*, of the inherent biases in the recording of the 1969 killing of her aunt Jane Mixer and the repeated decentring of female subjects of male violence, for instance, speaks to a marked and ongoing present-day increase in misogyny – partly as an extremist reaction to Third Wave Feminism. Moreover, it is not unusual to see this behaviour propagated and defended by those in the highest positions of power, such as President Donald Trump's dismissal of his derogatory comments about women (which I will not give space to here) as being no more than 'locker room talk'.<sup>4</sup> If living women are to be so casually disregarded we should probably not be surprised that, over fifty years after Jane's murder, dead ones continue to be unacknowledged, unpresent, sidelined. This point is exemplified in a speech to Parliament by the English MP Jess Phillips on International Women's day 2021. Reading out a list of the 118 women and girls killed in the UK during the previous year, Phillips reminded us that 'we don't currently count dead women... Dead women is a thing we've all just accepted as part of our daily lives. Dead women is just one of those things'.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This point may also be found in my article 'Three Poems About Absence: A Creative Response To Women's History Month' [*University of Sheffield*, March 2023 <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/arts-humanities/faculty/equality-diversity-and-inclusion/womens-history-month-2023/research/three-poems-about-absence> [accessed 12 June 2024].]

<sup>4</sup> Daniella Diaz, '3 times Trump defended his 'locker room' talk' *CNN Politics*, 9 October 2016 <https://www.cnn.com/2016/10/09/politics/donald-trump-locker-room-talk-presidential-debate-2016-election/index.html> [accessed 20 November 2023].

<sup>5</sup> Jess Phillips, BBC News, 'Jess Phillips: Society has 'just accepted' dead women', *BBC News*, 11 March 2021 <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-56365827> [accessed 7 April 2022].

Similarly, we might consider the racist microaggressions attached even to everyday interactions such as queueing to buy groceries documented by Claudia Rankine in *Citizen*:

Oh my God, I didn't see you.

You must be in a hurry, you offer.

No, no, no, I really didn't see you.<sup>6</sup>

The speaker here is caught in a vicious cycle of being unseen: individual microaggressions feed attitudes in the public domain – such as the media under-reporting of Black and Brown women who have died at the hands of male perpetrators compared with coverage for white women<sup>7</sup> – which in turn feeds the white predisposition towards unseeing. Further, the microaggressions which Rankine documents are often perpetrated by (often female) members of the white, liberal, educated elite ('when the woman with multiple degrees says, I didn't know black women could get cancer'<sup>8</sup>) – which invites the reader to question whether the rise of far right activity has also contributed to an upturn in racist attitudes within supposedly liberal white culture.

This unseeing perhaps reaches its climax in 'A Final Poem With Full Stops', Jeff Hilson's harrowing, heartbreaking examination of migrant deaths as a consequence of 'Fortress Europe's'<sup>9</sup> fundamentally racist policy responses to the increased movement of people resulting from factors which include climate change and resource wars. Hilson's

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<sup>6</sup> Claudia Rankine, 'V' in *Citizen: An American Lyric* (London: Penguin, 2015), p. 77.

<sup>7</sup> BBC News, 'Sabina Nessa: We were treated differently due to ethnicity, family says', *BBC News*, 11 April 2022 <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-61065432> [accessed 5 October 2023].

<sup>8</sup> Rankine, 'Ill' in *Citizen*, p. 45.

<sup>9</sup> Amnesty International, 'The human cost of Fortress Europe: human rights violations against migrants and refugees at Europe's borders', *Amnesty International*, (9 July 2014) [The human cost of Fortress Europe: human rights violations against migrants and refugees at Europe's borders - Amnesty International](#) [accessed 6 March 2023].

decision to present the circumstances of these deaths through the language of homogenisation and depersonalisation not only exemplifies a lack of official concern – fatalities are often only recorded ‘through local media reports and communication with local migrant and anti-racist support groups’<sup>10</sup> – but also raises bigger questions about both abnegation of responsibility and a ‘deeply embedded racism’<sup>11</sup> towards refugees from Africa and the Middle East in particular. As Judith Butler has pointed out, the outcome of a lack of documentation is that ‘through providing no image, no name, no narrative... there never was a life, and there never was a death’.<sup>12</sup> By placing the texts within this very particular present, then, we are able to begin to make connections between the specific absences they document and systemic issues of absence in the wider archive.

## **2: What do we mean by ‘The Archive’?**

Kate Eichhorn has noted that while ‘the “archival turn” in the humanities and social sciences has made it commonplace to understand the archive as something that is by no means bound by its traditional definition as a repository for documents’.<sup>13</sup> this brings with it concerns from ‘professional archivists [who] understandably worry about the increasingly

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<sup>10</sup> Reem Abu-Hayyeh and Frances Webber, ‘Unwanted, Unnoticed: an audit of 160 asylum and immigration-related deaths in Europe’, European Research Programme, *Institute of Race Relations*, Briefing No. 10, March 2015, p. 3 <https://irr.org.uk/app/uploads/2015/03/ERP-Briefing-Paper-No-10-FINAL.pdf> [accessed 17 March 2023].

<sup>11</sup> Something which has been more recently highlighted by the marked difference in willingness to accommodate refugees from the current war in Ukraine, compared with those from African or Middle Eastern nations. [Associated Press [quoting Lena Karamanidou], ‘Europe’s different approach to Ukrainian and Syrian refugees draws accusations of racism’, *CBC News*, 28 February 2022 <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/europe-racism-ukraine-refugees-1.6367932> [accessed 20 November 2023].]

<sup>12</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London, New York: Verso, 2006), p. 146.

<sup>13</sup> Eichhorn, p. 2.

hazy distinction between the terms “collection,” “library,” and “archive”.<sup>14</sup> Given the broad parameters of the classification as outlined in the opening paragraph, is this thesis therefore guilty too of what Marlene Manoff terms ‘the inflation of the term “archive”, which has become a kind of loose signifier for a disparate set of concepts’?<sup>15</sup> While it is clearly entirely appropriate that those who have worked to achieve high standards of professionalism in the field should wish to protect definitions of what constitutes an archive, and that overly broad, inadequately defined categories can be problematic, I would argue that there is, equally, sound theoretical support for a more fluid interpretation, where archive may be described as expansive, unbounded, rather than being merely ‘disparate’. Although space will not allow for a detailed discussion here, it is worth highlighting a small selection of examples. Joseph Harrington, for instance, has identified the potential scope of the term in Derrida: ‘On Derrida’s account, “archive” is a very broad category indeed, and so there are many archives; we could even say that genre is a type of archive (perhaps even *the type of the archive*)’.<sup>16</sup> Foucault, meanwhile, asserts that what he ‘propose[s] to call *archive*’ is ‘systems of statements’.<sup>17</sup> Carolyn Steedman – albeit also expressing concerns about ‘inflation’ – identifies another common (mis?)-definition as ‘the ways and means of state power: Power itself, perhaps, rather than those quietly folded and filed documents that

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>15</sup> Marlene Manoff, ‘Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines’, *Portal : Libraries and the Academy*, 4.1 (January 2004), 9-25 (p. 10)  
<https://www.proquest.com/docview/216168595/abstract/A9C932FC8F24CDAPQ/1>  
[accessed 15 February 2023].

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Harrington, ‘Docupoetry and Archive Desire’, *Jacket 2* (27 October 2011)  
<http://jacket2.org/article/docupoetry-and-archive-desire> [accessed 7 October 2021].

<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans by A. M. Sheridan Smith (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 128.

provide the mere and incomplete records'.<sup>18</sup> Discussing the connection between popular culture and archives, David Beer and Roger Burrows, citing M. Featherstone, have queried whether contemporary definitions should develop so that 'the walls of the archive [should] be extended and placed around everyday life'?<sup>19</sup> And finally, Marika Cifor and Stacy Wood – referencing Anjali Arondekar – make the connection between the archive and memory: 'It can be expansively "understood as a universal metaphor for memory structures, information storage, and knowledge production"'.<sup>20</sup> While this then creates the potential issue of 'becoming so broad as "include nearly everything"'<sup>21</sup>, they also note that nonetheless – referencing Ann Cvetkovich – 'the archival turn has led to a productive and thorough "rethinking of what counts as knowledge and method"'<sup>22</sup>.

For the purposes of this thesis, then, I am choosing to characterise the archive as something which may at once be formal and informal, private and public, officially catalogued or unofficially remembered. My analysis will cover both physical archives such as library collections, newspaper archives and personal family documents and archives which I will call theoretical, including cultural history, specialist languages and literary genre. Within the overarching archive that is poetry, for example, I will discuss conventions from elegy (Nelson, Carson, Howe) and lyric poetry (Rankine) and intertextual references from seventeenth century English verse (Hilson). By way of contrast, I will also consider Nelson's

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<sup>18</sup> Carolyn Steedman, 'Something She Called a Fever: Michelet, Derrida, and Dust', *The American Historical Review*, 106.4 (October 2001), 1159-1180 (p. 1162) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2692943> [accessed 7 January 2022].

<sup>19</sup> David Beer and Roger Burrows, 'Popular Culture, Digital Archives and the New Life of Social Data', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30.4 (July 2013), 47-71 (p. 51) <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276413476542>.

<sup>20</sup> Marika Cifor and Stacy Wood, 'Critical Feminism in the Archives', *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1.2 (2017) 1-27 (p. 15) <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i2.27>.

<sup>21</sup> Cifor and Wood, p. 15.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

reappropriation of materials from the subdivision which is true crime writing from within the overarching archive that we might call non-fiction writing. I will reflect on archives which may, in Althusserian terms, be considered 'state apparatuses',<sup>23</sup> including interrogating conventions and materials from the media archive and its subdivisions of crime reporting (Nelson), sports reporting and news reporting (Rankine); and the education archive's subsection academia, focussing particularly on the employment of referencing and notes in Rankine's *Just Us* and Hilson's *Organ Music*. I will consider family archives which include both the professionally curated (materials from the Beinecke Library Jonathan Edwards Collection cited by Howe in *That This*) and the personally curated (Jane's letters and diaries reproduced by Nelson; family photographs and other artefacts reproduced by Carson). In Chapter 3, the capacity for language itself to function as a kind of archive will be examined, via an analysis of the archives that are specialist languages (for example heraldry, terminology associated with the organ) or the language of mass culture (payday loan reviews, music streaming algorithms) in the work of Jeff Hilson. It is my intention that this approach, while setting some parameters, will allow for a more expansive interpretation of the term archive in line with J Jack Halberstam's assertion (here quoted by Eichhorn) that 'the archive must exceed its current definition as a repository of documents and be understood as "a theory of cultural relevance, a construction of collective memory, and a complex record"'.<sup>24</sup> It is by turning to the personal, the unofficially collected and remembered that we are able to properly understand the extent of the historic and continued impact of systemic partiality

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<sup>23</sup> Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)', *marxists.org*  
<https://www.csun.edu/~snk1966/Lous%20Althusser%20Ideology%20and%20Ideological%20State%20Apparatuses.pdf> [accessed 15 November 2022].

<sup>24</sup> Eichhorn, p. 19.

and the consequent skewed forces of inclusion at work in formal documentation, erasing lives from memory. This approach owes a great deal to Denise Riley's observation that there is 'an argument for writing the histories of far more selves, for having as many accounts of as many genres of being as possible' – a self which is categorised, vocalised through 'an act of consent' is very differently placed to one whose identity is merely 'overheard'.<sup>25</sup> Working from an alternative suite of organic, inclusive sources which afford space and equality to a multiplicity of selves, those absent, disregarded by official archives may then begin to be re-collected, reanimated, recognised.

### **3: The archive and identity**

The thesis proceeds from the premise that institutional forms of the archive underrepresent, misrepresent or completely exclude particular individuals and groups, informed by Michelle Caswell's research which seeks to challenge systemic problems of 'dominant appraisal hierarchies that value records created by those in power to justify and consolidate their power at the expense of records created by the oppressed to document and resist their oppression and imagine liberation'.<sup>26</sup> As Caswell has pointed out, the blueprint for much of archival practice in both the UK and the US throughout most of the twentieth century, colonial administrator Hilary Jenkinson's *Manual of Archive Administration* (1922)<sup>27</sup> represents, despite its author's ruminations on the importance of impartiality, 'the view

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<sup>25</sup> Denise Riley, 'Historic Passions Reflections in the Archive?', *History Workshop* 44 (1997), 238–242 (p. 241) <https://dx.doi.org/10.1093/hwj/1997.44.238>.

<sup>26</sup> Michelle Caswell, 'Dusting For Fingerprints: Introducing Feminist Standpoint Appraisal', *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, 3.2 (2021), 1-36 (p. 1) <https://journals.litwinbooks.com/index.php/jclis/article/view/113> [accessed 7 December 2022].

<sup>27</sup> To be explored in more detail in Chapter 2.

from a large government bureaucracy attending to an increasingly vocal working class and women's movement at home and active resistance to imperialism in far-flung colonies across the world'.<sup>28</sup> Given these deep-rooted colonial, capitalist and patriarchal agendas, it is perhaps unsurprising that, despite significant scholarship on the subject, there persists a need to address these systems which, Jamie Ann Lee has explained, 'constrain', based on 'normative archival structures that continue to uphold and reproduce exclusionary hegemonic power dynamics through adherence to grand metanarratives that tell one story and often from the perspectives of those with privilege'.<sup>29</sup> Further, it is perhaps not unreasonable to assume that the biases which exist in official, institutional archives might also be replicated to some degree in the unofficial record: in family documents, in memory and almost certainly in the theoretical archives discussed in Section Two. This thesis sets out to establish that, in both formal and informal archives, processes of documentation become by default mechanisms for constraining expressions of identity which might otherwise threaten the status quo, and the positions of those who regulate its content.

Capable, as Thomas Osborne has remarked, 'of producing huge amounts of information *for itself*' [my italics],<sup>30</sup> the archive's skewed or incomplete record of selves may be seen to feed a wider agenda of diversion, pacification, surveillance and control supervised by Derrida's 'archons... the documents' guardians' who 'have the power to

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<sup>28</sup> Caswell, p. 16.

<sup>29</sup> Lee is specifically discussing archival practices with reference to the documentation of queer lives, but posits her methodology as having relevance for a range of marginalised communities. [Jamie Ann Lee, 'A Queer/Ed Archive Methodology Archival Bodies As Nomadic Subjects', *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1.2 (2017) 1-27 (p. 5; p. 9) <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i2.26>.]

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Osborne, 'The Ordinarity of the archive', *History of the Human Sciences*, 12.2 (May 1999), 51-64 (p. 56) <https://doi.org/10.1177/09526959922120243>.

interpret the archives'.<sup>31</sup> From newspaper editors and academics to keepers of police records and government officials, the archons' capacity to direct public perceptions of these individuals and groups has implications not only for how they *are seen* but also, crucially, for how they *see themselves*: as Rex Ferguson et al have pointed out, 'identity formation is inextricably tied to the act of being identified'.<sup>32</sup> By ensuring information is recorded in such a way that identities are rendered 'through the same limited set of data points'<sup>33</sup> – for example the misogynist stereotyping of female victims of male violence in the archive that is true crime writing (Nelson), or the racist anonymisation of migrants in the archive that is government reporting (Hilson) – the archons create a network of absence and lacunae which lays the foundations for a self-serving, self-perpetuating cycle of reinforcement and compliance. The resulting lack of voice is not what Rodney G S Carter has termed the 'natural silence of the marginal',<sup>34</sup> but rather 'silences created to avoid culpability'.<sup>35</sup> In undertaking some level of documentation the archons can claim to be acknowledging these individuals but, paradoxically, it is through the act of recording that the silencing – of the human and of individuality – takes place. What ensues is a culture which places the onus on the victim, not the perpetrator and most certainly not on those who have the power [but elect not] to effect meaningful change.

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<sup>31</sup> Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, 'Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression' *Diacritics*, 25.2 (1995), 9-63 (p. 10) <https://doi.org/10.2307/465144>.

<sup>32</sup> Rex Ferguson, Melissa M Littlefield and James Purdon, 'Introduction' in *The Art Of Identification: Forensics, Surveillance, Identity* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021), pp. 9-31 (p. 10). Proquest Ebook Central.

<sup>33</sup> Ferguson et al, 'Introduction', p. 22.

<sup>34</sup> Rodney G S Carter, 'Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and Power in Silence', *Archivaria* 61 (Spring 2006), 215-233 (p. 228) <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2518923413/abstract/213455E7E7254518PQ/1> [accessed 10 May 2023].

<sup>35</sup> Carter, p. 228.

It should be noted, however, that despite these observations, the authors discussed here do not simply paint a bleak picture of this situation. Just as the archive can limit and disregard, it can also be reinterpreted, reclaimed as a positive force amid the deliberate dislocations and divisions which have dominated the early twenty-first century socio-political climate: as Eichhorn has noted, it has the 'ability to restore to us what is routinely taken away under neoliberalism'.<sup>36</sup> The thesis will consider how each of the authors reappropriates convention in different ways in order to achieve this, to challenge the archive's biases and omissions precisely because of, not in spite of, its received practices. To give just a few instances, working within the overarching, traditionally masculinist space of the poetry archive that is elegy, Nelson, Carson and Howe reclaim elegiac conventions such as collage<sup>37</sup> – Nelson's placement of text from true crime writing and media reports alongside Jane's diaries; Carson's incorporation of visual materials such as photographic fragments; Howe's adoption of segments from another family's personal records – to initiate a dialogue about female absence in the grieving process for the both the mourner and the mourned. For Rankine, it is practices drawn from the predominantly white spaces of lyric poetry<sup>38</sup> (seen in the intimate, personal experiences recounted in *Citizen*) and academia (such as the rigorous referencing in *Just Us*) that become a means to address white supremacist behaviours which begin in the casual racism underpinning everyday encounters. Finally, Jeff Hilson's use of humour and satire – achieved in particular through what he terms

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<sup>36</sup> Eichhorn, p. 6.

<sup>37</sup> Andrea Brady has noted the use of '*genera mixta*... the blending of several traditions' as an historic feature of elegy. To be discussed in Chapter 1. [Andrea Brady, *English Funerary Elegy in the Seventeenth Century: Laws in Mourning* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 11.]

<sup>38</sup> M. NourbeSe Philip has noted that the lyric voice is 'one of the tools used to further the ends of colonialism'. To be discussed in Chapter 2. [M. NourbeSe Philip, 'Interview With An Empire' in *Blank: Essays and Interviews* (Toronto: Book\*hug Press, 2017), p. 62.]

‘misusing terminologies or deploying what might be called counter-terminologies’<sup>39</sup> from diverse intertextual archives including payday loan reviews, music streaming algorithms, seventeenth century verse and song and the mechanics of the organ – functions to create a kind of readerly community, united against the divisive politics of a privileged elite. The contemporary interest in the archive is therefore, according to Eichhorn, significant as it both enables us ‘to understand the conditions of our everyday lives longitudinally and, more important, the conviction that we might, once again, be *agents* of change in time and history’.<sup>40</sup>

#### **4: The ‘intertextual archive’**

As outlined in the opening paragraph, this thesis proceeds from the assumption that the intertextual archive is an expansive term, referring to a wide range of texts including but not limited to different literary genres, official records, specialist languages, family documents and the language of mass culture. Below follows a brief selection of headline concepts which constitute the key components of what I believe the intertextual archive represents in terms of this hypothesis.

##### **i) When literary texts incorporate archival materials, it signals that these texts are part of the archive**

Writing about Muriel Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead* (1938), Mark Byers has pointed out that ‘the incorporation of non-poetic material effectively transforms the poem from an

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<sup>39</sup>Jeff Hilson, quoted in S. J. Fowler, ‘Maintenant #92 – Jeff Hilson’, *3:AM Magazine*, 22 April 2012 <https://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/maintenant-92-jeff-hilson/> [accessed 21 June 2022]. To be discussed in Chapter 3.

<sup>40</sup> Eichhorn, p. 6.

exclusively linguistic artefact into a curated space or repository; an archive of documentary testimonies'.<sup>41</sup> This may be seen, for example, in *Jane: A Murder*, via Nelson's interweaving of her own poetry both with excerpts from the formal published record (newspaper reports and true crime accounts connected with Jane's murder) and the informal record (written by Jane herself and taken 'either from her childhood diary dated 1960-1961 or a loose sheaf of journal pages from her college years').<sup>42</sup> The inclusion of Jane's unofficial words alongside official ones which deny or compromise her identity not only position the text as having an archival role but also, vitally, write into the record via the poetry archive important evidence about Jane's character overlooked, ignored by the true crime archive and mainstream media archives. The thesis will consider genre preoccupations with stereotypes and assumptions and a tendency to focus on the killer rather than the killed, seeking to establish that the juxtaposition of these very different 'non-poetic materials' invites the reader to consider the validity of Jane's words as well as raising wider questions about how 'killed women' are documented.

**ii) Citation's reputation as a means of adding credibility to an argument may be subverted to query the credibility of those who control the archive**

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau notes that citation is able 'to give reality to the simulacrum produced by a power, by making people believe that others believe in it, but without providing any believable object'.<sup>43</sup> The thesis will explore how the notion of

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<sup>41</sup> Mark Byers 'Archival Poetics: Containing Multitudes' in *The Contemporary Poetry Archive Essays and Interventions* ed. by Linda Anderson, Mark Byers, and Ahren Warner (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), pp. 46-62 (p. 50).

<sup>42</sup> Maggie Nelson, front matter, *Jane: A Murder* (London: Zed, 2019).

<sup>43</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1988), p. 189.

citation as a tool to enhance credibility may be inverted, used instead to subversive and satirical effect to highlight the problematic nature of archival convention and methodologies. For example, Jeff Hilson's 'Foreword' to *Organ Music* wryly references the collection's 'overlong notes and resources'<sup>44</sup> which, despite his self-confessed love of notes,<sup>45</sup> also become a vehicle for satirising the academic archive's self-justifying demands to produce 'evidence of research' ('In the process of writing these resources have of course been transformed, though one might go further and say that they have been sabotaged').<sup>46</sup> While deploying its own conventions, Hilson at once signposts a need for caution, as however stringently observed these practices may be, they are still vulnerable to prejudice and distortion. Moreover, we might reflect that, if the thesis begins from the premise that institutional archives are inherently biased, some level of prejudice most likely already exists in these methodologies, and so will be built into scholarly processes from the outset.

### **iii) The intertextual weaving in of archival materials can help foster communitarian, discursive and transtemporal relations**

As well as being a means of illuminating and satirising archival bias, intertextuality may also be used as a positive force for resistance and change. Majorie Perloff has commented on a tendency in twenty first century poetics to engage in 'a dialogue with earlier texts or texts in other media, with "writings through"' that 'permit the poet to participate in a larger, more public discourse'.<sup>47</sup> This may be seen, for example, in Susan Howe's *That This* where, I will

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<sup>44</sup> Jeff Hilson, 'Foreword' in *Organ Music* (London: Crater Press, 2020), p. 8.

<sup>45</sup> Jeff Hilson, quoted in A J Moore, 'Jeff Hilson interview', *Blackbox Manifold* 30 (Summer 2023) [Blackbox Manifold - JeffHilsonInterviewBM30 \(sheffield.ac.uk\)](https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/blackbox-manifold/issue-30/jeff-hilson-interview) [accessed 1 August 2023].

<sup>46</sup> Hilson, 'Foreword' in *Organ Music* (London: Crater Press, 202), p. 8.

<sup>47</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius: poetry by other means in the new century* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 11.

argue, the author's interactions with the eighteenth century diary fragments of Hannah Edwards Wetmore foster a sense of connectivity between past, present and future, via citation which 'put[s] one mind into another'.<sup>48</sup> I will consider how this enables Howe to posit a community of women writers, readers and researchers – past and present, living and dead – united in a discourse about both historic and ongoing issues of female absence.

As Julia Kristeva has commented, 'by studying the text as intertextuality' we are able to consider it 'as such within (the text of) society and history'.<sup>49</sup> I will argue that, in these texts, intertextuality becomes a cross-genre, cross era mechanism through which all five authors may relocate the selves – stranded among the 'gaps and silences'<sup>50</sup>, the denials of identity which can arise from archival practices that position themselves as being a means of recording culture but which also stand outside of it – within both an historical continuum and the socio-political present as summarised in Section One. Informed by Denise Riley's concept of 'impersonal passion'<sup>51</sup> as affect, in conjunction with Marjorie Perloff's assertion that citations become 'distancing devices'<sup>52</sup> which allow contemporary authors to express '*pain*'<sup>53</sup> [Perloff's italics], I will consider how what might, on first reading, appear to be

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<sup>48</sup> Susan Howe, 'That This' in *That This* (New York: New Directions, 2010) p. 104.

<sup>49</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'The Bounded Text' in *Desire in Language*, trans. by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), p. 37. University of Sheffield digitised chapter [accessed 27 January 2022].

<sup>50</sup> See Note 64, p. 88.

<sup>51</sup> 'Language is impersonal: its working through and across us is indifferent to us, yet in the same blow it constitutes the fiber of the personal.' [Denise Riley, *Impersonal Passion: Language As Affect* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 1.]

<sup>52</sup> Marjorie Perloff, 'The Pleasures of Deja Dit: Citation, Intertext and Ekphrasis in Recent Experimental Poetry', in *The consequence of innovation: 21<sup>st</sup> century poetics* ed. by Craig Dworkin (New York: Roof Books, 2008), 255-277 (p. 258). Digitised interlibrary loan from Henry Madden Library, California State University, Fresno.

<sup>53</sup> Perloff, p. 258.

merely the faithful reproducing of what Kristeva has termed ‘another’s word’<sup>54</sup> may be reinterpreted as part of a wider cultural-historical context, through which the reader is encouraged both to feel empathy for these selves and to reflect that the archive may represent more than just a method for curating information.

## 5: The archive and the anti-archive: duality in the texts

Given that archives are, according to Kate Eichhorn, ‘notoriously difficult, disorderly, impenetrable spaces, prone to produce multiple and conflicting narratives’,<sup>55</sup> it should be noted that all the authors discussed here are taking a risk in reproducing or imitating the techniques and content of their sources. It could be argued that their work is in danger of being read and understood as merely conforming to the conventions of the archive, its reliance on intertextuality simply bolstering Derrida’s suggestion that we are all ‘en mal d’archive: in need of archives’.<sup>56</sup> Undoubtedly, there is an element of *dialetheia*, what Howe describes as ‘a two(-way) truth’ with ‘true contradictions’<sup>57</sup> operating in these texts which are at once archival and anti-archival: Nelson’s positioning of *Jane: A Murder* as ‘a “true story”’ (Jane’s murder clearly happened) yet at once acknowledging that it may also contain some fictions (‘I make no claim for the factual accuracy of its representations of events or individuals’)<sup>58</sup>, or the Hilson collections’ recurring doublenesses, in which satire is simultaneously a symptom of and resistance to toxic right wing culture, for example. Critics

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<sup>54</sup> Julia Kristeva, ‘Word, Dialogue and Novel’ in *Desire in Language*, p. 73.

<sup>55</sup> Eichhorn, p. 9.

<sup>56</sup> Derrida, p. 57.

<sup>57</sup> In Howe’s *The Midnight*, as referenced by Susan Barbour. [Susan Barbour, ‘Spiritual hyphen’: bibliography and elegy in Susan Howe’s *The Midnight*, *Textual Practice*, 25:1 (2011), 133-155 (p. 151) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2010.495847>.]

<sup>58</sup> Nelson, *Jane: A Murder* front matter.

might suggest that such an approach could appear confusing, or dilute the impact of the work but dialetheism allows that ‘some inconsistency can be maintained without incoherence’.<sup>59</sup> We might consider, in support of this, Freud’s ‘The Antithetical Meaning of Primal Words’, which deploys the model of the ancient Egyptian language to demonstrate how words can have two meanings which are the opposite of each other<sup>60</sup>; or Derrida’s concept, in critical theory, of writing as a ‘pharmakon’, as both ‘a medical remedy’ and ‘a poison’.<sup>61</sup> Given that the archive can be both a positive and a negative force in these texts, being at once a source of absence, underrepresentation and misrepresentation *and* a vehicle for highlighting this, I believe that such apparent inconsistency is crucial in realising their effectiveness. To view them therefore as merely exercises in the replication of archival convention would be to grossly over-simplify their methodology and diminish their importance. I concur with Bradley J Fest’s observation that it is possible for a work ‘to raze monuments of patriarchal, racist, misogynist, fascist totality, pick through their rubble, and reuse whatever small speck it might find for rather different ends’.<sup>62</sup>

While acknowledging the paradoxical nature of these works, my research aims to extend the thinking about the poet as archivist, zeroing in on the role of intertextuality as a

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<sup>59</sup> Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, ‘Dialetheism’, *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (2022) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dialetheism/> [accessed 3 July 2022].

<sup>60</sup> For example, ‘strong’ and ‘weak’. Understanding as to which meaning was intended was achieved via ‘explanatory pictures’. [Sigmund Freud, ‘The Antithetical Meaning of Primal Words’ in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans by James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), p. 158.]

<sup>61</sup> ‘Introduction’ to ‘The Pharmakon’, *Jacques Derrida: basic writings*, ed. by Barry Stocker (London, New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 57.

<sup>62</sup> Fest is commenting on Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s work *Drafts*, which ‘seeks to transform the long poem and its history’. [Bradley J Fest, “‘Is an Archive Enough?’: Megatextual Debris in the Work of Rachel Blau DuPlessis’, *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture*, 54.1 (April 2021), 139-165 (p. 153) <https://read.dukeupress.edu/genre/article/54/1/139/173581/Is-an-Archive-Enough-Megatextual-Debris-in-the> [accessed 5 May 2022].]

means of highlighting the tensions between archival and author intent. My approach has been informed by scholarship from Fest, along with Joseph Harrington's essay 'Docupoetry and Archive Desire' and the critical reflections and creative responses collected in *The Contemporary Poetry Archive Essays and Interventions*, edited by Linda Anderson, Mark Byers and Ahren Warner. Through the close reading of source documents referenced by the authors (or comparable examples if these are not available) alongside the primary texts, I will demonstrate that analysing the two side by side crystallises the role of citation as a means of harnessing language and practices associated with the archive to create an alternative record which questions and challenges its validity. Working within this broad framework, the thesis will consider the different strategies adopted by the individual authors to counter the archive: the offsetting of public and private documents by Nelson to encourage a shift in focus away from masculinist perspectives on 'killed women'; Carson's reappropriation of classical elegy and funerary ritual which reimagines the role of the female mourner as an active rather than a passive one; Howe's creation of a sense of transtemporal relations to draw parallels between historic and ongoing female absence; the documentation by Rankine of microaggressions routinely unrecorded, accepted by a fragile white supremacist mentality; or Hilson's deployment of satire to critique systems of misdirection and misinformation, for example. I will contend, therefore, that the texts interrogated here are evidence that using 'another's word' need not denote conformity to a compulsion to record which essentially repeats and legitimises pre-determined conventions and agendas but rather represents a playing of the archive at its own game, a rewriting of the record through the lens of its own words and traditions which opens up opportunities for not just the authors but also the individuals they reveal and the readers of these works to become the 'agents of change' Eichhorn describes.

## 6: Three interpretations of archival space

As noted in Section One, the list of individuals and groups who both historically have been and continue to be undocumented, under-documented and/or mis-documented is essentially as diverse and wide-ranging as the archive itself: to attempt to do justice to them all would be a task without end. Therefore, having undertaken my own process of selection, this thesis will focus on three specific areas – those of gender, race and the misuse of power by a privileged, plutocratic elite – in an effort to illuminate the capacity for archival spaces to create and perpetuate absences and the impact this has on identities.

Chapter 1 will explore notions of documentation as a gendered space in Maggie Nelson's *Jane: A Murder*, Anne Carson's *Nox* and Susan Howe's *That This*, interrogating how the borrowing of conventions from [typically patriarchally inflected] works which memorialise the dead might initiate discussions about absence and female identity. My analysis is underpinned by scholarship surrounding feminism and archives, which takes as its starting point Cifor and Wood's observation that 'from the beginning archives, records and memory were "remorselessly and intentionally patriarchal"' <sup>63</sup> as well as Howe's own remarks that 'If you are a woman, archives hold perpetual ironies. Because the gaps and silences are where you find yourself'. <sup>64</sup> I will consider how processes and conventions historically developed and dominated by male actors and where women are routinely seen as 'potential subjects rather than as central agents of the archive' <sup>65</sup> impact the recording of female selves. Reflecting on how these patterns are reproduced in the archive that is poetry,

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<sup>63</sup> Cifor and Wood, [Referencing Terry Cook and Gerda Lerner], p. 8.

<sup>64</sup> Susan Howe, quoted in Edward Foster, 'An Interview with Susan Howe', *Talisman 4* (Spring 1990), 14-38 (p. 17) <https://jstor.org/stable/community.28045485> [accessed 10 October 2023].

<sup>65</sup> Kate Eichhorn has noted her surprise that, at a conference she attended designed to explore 'archiving women', this was the emphasis. [Eichhorn, p. 2.]

I will highlight a tendency in two of the most influential late twentieth century critical examinations of elegy [written, perhaps unsurprisingly, by male scholars] to direct focus and analytical methodology to overwhelmingly favour male elegists. Denise Riley's writings on female selfhood<sup>66</sup> and theory from Peter Becker<sup>67</sup> and Matt Houlbrook<sup>68</sup> about historic practices surrounding identification will help to provide a wider context for the issues of identity drawn to our attention in these works. Through a close reading of the texts, alongside source documents from a predominantly masculinist intertextual archive which includes elegy, classical funerary ritual and twentieth century true crime writing, I will argue that Nelson, Carson and Howe's reappropriation of these materials and the procedures associated with them allows the authors to function as active agents of the archive, revealing, empowering and liberating the unseen, unheard selves who populate the muteness and lacunae of which Howe speaks.

In Chapter 2, I will discuss documentation as a structurally racist space, using J J Ghaddar and Michelle Caswell's assessment of national archives as being 'always already colonial and imperial, always already white supremacist'<sup>69</sup> to activate a dialogue about how discriminatory practices embedded in official means of recording set a precedent which cascades into the more fluid intertextual archives explored by Claudia Rankine in *Citizen* and

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<sup>66</sup> In Denise Riley, *Am I That Name: Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988).

<sup>67</sup> Peter Becker, 'The Standardized Gaze: The Standardization of the Search Warrant in Nineteenth Century Germany', in *Documenting Individual Identity*, ed. by Jane Caplan and John Torpey (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>68</sup> Matt Houlbrook, 'Charming Faces and the Problem of Identification', *The Art Of Identification: Forensics, Surveillance, Identity*, ed. by Rex Ferguson, Melissa M Littlefield and James Purdon, (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021). Proquest Ebook Central.

<sup>69</sup> J J Ghaddar and Michelle Caswell, "'To Go Beyond": towards a decolonial archival praxis', *Archival Science* 19 (2019), 71-85 (p. 76) <https://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10502-019-09311-1>.

*Just Us*. Referencing scholarship which highlights the historical context that has colluded in the perpetuation of the resulting stereotypes and assumptions, absences and silences, I will consider factors including the continued influence of Jenkinson's *Manual of Archival Administration* and a racist culture of documentation of the Black population of the United States written into the national consciousness through texts produced by its Founding Fathers.<sup>70</sup> I will reflect on how Rankine's description of herself as an 'archivist', who aims to highlight 'the questions we should be asking both of the past and of the present',<sup>71</sup> is realised, paradoxically, through the inclusion of materials and methodologies from archives controlled by what she has termed a culture that is 'set up to keep them [white people] ignorant of their ignorance'.<sup>72</sup> Robin DiAngelo's concept of 'White Fragility'<sup>73</sup> will help to situate these observations within the context of the racist microaggressions Rankine documents and which are fundamental to her compilation of what Toby Ashraf has called an 'archive of the construction of whiteness'.<sup>74</sup> Meanwhile, thinking from M NourbeSe Philip and Audre Lorde will provide a Black, female perspective on the traditionally white masculinist spaces of lyric poetry and academic convention from which *Citizen* and *Just Us* borrow their form. Via a close reading of both collections, as well as source documents including media coverage of the tennis player Serena Williams and Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, I will consider how Rankine shines a light from within on the

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<sup>70</sup> Examples from Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* can be found in Chapter 2.

<sup>71</sup> Claudia Rankine, BBC Radio 4, 'Claudia Rankine', *Desert Island Discs*, 16 June 2023 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m001msyr> [accessed 16 June 2023].

<sup>72</sup> Claudia Rankine, 'evolution' in *Just Us*, p. 59.

<sup>73</sup> Robin DiAngelo, 'White Fragility', *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, 3.3 (2011), pp. 54-70.

<sup>74</sup> Toby Ashraf, Internationales Literaturfestival Berlin 2022, *Claudia Rankine*, online video recording, YouTube, 17 September 2022 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W0qJFwrUFps> [accessed 3 October 2022].

systemic prejudice which lies at the heart of our systems of recording. In this way, Rankine invites white readers to question not only the validity of what these archives represent but also their own complicity in its perpetuation; while at once asking a Black readership not to tolerate this perpetuation, and to call out the microaggressions at the root of white supremacist behaviours.

Novalis noted the relationship between archives and the state, remarking that ‘Writings are the thoughts of the State and archives are its memory’.<sup>75</sup> My final chapter will investigate the archive, as defined by Ana Baeza Ruiz, as ‘governmental space’,<sup>76</sup> through the lens of Jeff Hilson’s *Latanoprost Variations* and *Organ Music*. Beginning with Judith Butler’s concept of ‘the power that misuses language’,<sup>77</sup> this section will consider how the lexicons and habits found in multiple intertextual archives – including poetry, mass culture, specialist languages and bureaucratic documentation – may be subverted to raise questions about the misdirections deployed by a ruling plutocratic right wing elite concerned to mould identities which support, unhesitatingly accept or, at the very least, tolerate its agendas. Theory from Henri Bergson<sup>78</sup>, Charles A Knight<sup>79</sup> and Keston Sutherland<sup>80</sup> will help locate Hilson’s trademark use of deadpan humour in the tradition of satire and its role in the critiquing of establishment behaviours. Meanwhile, an examination of the very serious relationship

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<sup>75</sup> As quoted by Guy Debord. [Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994), p. 96.]

<sup>76</sup> Ana Baeza Ruiz, ‘Museums, archives and gender’, *Museum History Journal*, 11.2 (October 2018), 174-187 (p. 175) <https://doi.org/10.1080/19369816.2018.1529268>.

<sup>77</sup> Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence* (London, New York: Verso, 2021), p. 3.

<sup>78</sup> Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay On The Meaning Of The Comic*, trans. by Cloudesley Brereton, Fred Rothwell. Project Guttenberg eBook plain text file, released 1 August 2003 (updated 27 December, 2020).

<sup>79</sup> Charles A Knight, *The Literature Of Satire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>80</sup> Keston Sutherland, *Stupefaction: A Radical Anatomy Of Phantoms* (Calcutta [sic]: Seagull Books, 2011).

between this misdirection, commodification and its impact on the self will be informed by tracing connections between concepts such as Shoshana Zuboff's 'surveillance capitalism'<sup>81</sup> and what Butler has termed 'grievability',<sup>82</sup> which posits that some lives are perceived to matter more, and so are more 'grievable' than others. Comprising a close reading of poems from both collections, alongside examples of text from diverse materials which include payday loan reviews on Trustpilot, Amazon recommendations and reports into migrant deaths from non-governmental agencies such as Amnesty International and the Institute of Race Relations, this chapter will examine how Hilson's 'misuse of terminologies' directs the reader to question establishment motivations while at once offering them – for the duration of their reading experience if nothing else – a sense of liberation.

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<sup>81</sup> Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (London: Profile Books, 2019).

<sup>82</sup> Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, p.17.

## 1: 'REMEMORATION'<sup>1</sup> REVISITED: ARCHIVES OF PERSONAL MEMORIAL, ABSENCE AND FEMALE SELF IN MAGGIE NELSON'S *JANE: A MURDER*, ANNE CARSON'S *NOX* AND SUSAN HOWE'S *THAT THIS*

'Memory (the deliberate act of remembering) is a form of willed creation. It is not an effort to find out the way it really was--that is research. The point is to dwell on the way it appeared and why it appeared in that particular way'.<sup>2</sup>

Toni Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches and Meditations*

'Language has unmistakably made plain that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past, but rather a medium.'<sup>3</sup>

Walter Benjamin, 'Excavation and Memory'

'Memory is the re-presentation of something itself in the sense of the past. The present memory is a phenomenon wholly analogous to perception. It has the appearance of the object in common with the corresponding perception, except that the appearance has a modified character, in consequence of which the object does not stand before me as present but as having been present.'<sup>4</sup>

Edmund Husserl, 'A Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time'

### 're-collected (recollected)'<sup>5</sup>: intertextual space and female identity

In a widely-quoted 1990 interview, Susan Howe observes that 'If you are a woman, archives hold perpetual ironies. Because the gaps and silences are where you find yourself'.<sup>6</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Freud made possible the idea of an archive properly speaking... which, in what is already a psychic spacing, cannot be reduced to memory: neither to memory as conscious reserve, nor to memory as rememoration, as act of recalling'. [Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, 'Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression' *Diacritics*, 25.2 (1995), 9-63 (p. 58) <https://doi.org/10.2307/465144>.]

<sup>2</sup> Goodreads, 'Toni Morrison quotes', *goodreads*, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/9729255-memory-the-deliberate-act-of-remembering-is-a-form-of> [accessed 9 May 2023].

<sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Excavation and Memory' in *Selected Writings Volume 2, Part 2 1931-1934*, ed. By Michael W Jennings, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith (Cambridge MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 576.

<sup>4</sup> Edmund Husserl, 'A Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time', *The Essential Husserl*, ed. by Donn Welton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 203.

<sup>5</sup> Susan Howe, *Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy Of Archives* (New York: New Directions, 2014), p. 24.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Howe, quoted in Edward Foster, 'An Interview with Susan Howe', *Talisman* 4 (Spring 1990), 14-38 (p. 17) <https://jstor.org/stable/community.28045485> [accessed 10 October 2023].

collections interrogated in this chapter are personal memorials to dead loved ones, created via the negotiating of an expansive intertextual archive comprising contents which, while wide-ranging – from classical elegy to eighteenth century family records to twentieth century true crime writing – are nonetheless united; cross-era cross-genre collaborators in a high decibel continuum of catalogued male vocality. Confronted with a network of lacunae, absence and under-representation – of female selves mourned and mourning, and of a wider historical community of female mourners, readers and writers – Maggie Nelson, Anne Carson and Howe herself elect to *re-collect* the documents and rituals they unearth in acts which exemplify Jamie Ann Lee’s concept of ‘reframing’ as part of a proposed new archival methodology that is ‘valuable in understanding and expanding the notion of preservation as linked to practices of remembering and forgetting’.<sup>7</sup> The three authors mine resources from both formal, physical archives (such as Howe’s deployment of content from the Beinecke Library’s Jonathan Edwards Collection) and what we might term theoretical, intertextual archives (for example, Nelson’s reappropriation of text from the true crime archive). The excavated materials and techniques associated with systems of recording which, to borrow from Michelle Caswell, bear the fingerprints of the ‘almost exclusively’ white male archons and archivists historically responsible for establishing and maintaining dominant practices of documentation and selection<sup>8</sup> are reappropriated, redeployed to question their own status and validity. Proceeding from Marika Cifor and Stacy Wood’s assertion that these processes

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<sup>7</sup> Jamie Ann Lee, ‘A Queer/Ed Archive Methodology Archival Bodies As Nomadic Subjects’, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1.2 (2017)1-27 (p. 14) <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i2.26>.

<sup>8</sup> Michelle Caswell, ‘Dusting For Fingerprints: Introducing Feminist Standpoint Appraisal’, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, 3.2 (2021), 1-36 (pp. 5-6) <https://journals.litwinbooks.com/index.php/jclis/article/view/113> [accessed 7 December 2022].

and the resulting archives therefore ‘from the beginning were “remorselessly and intentionally patriarchal”<sup>9</sup>, I will argue that it is reasonable to assume the gendered biases and absences perpetuated by conventions from what we might consider to be more official archives are also at work in their unofficial counterparts.

The approach taken by Nelson, Carson and Howe may be seen as finding what Elisabeth Frost terms ‘a sense of a usable past’,<sup>10</sup> where the ‘gaps and silences’ enable the construction and co-existence of works which move beyond Derrida’s observation that *rememoration* may be ‘the mere repetition of a monument’.<sup>11</sup> These texts are at once private memorials which *recollect* the deceased *and* public, political testimonies which seek to locate female selves routinely and repeatedly sidelined, inadequately or inappropriately documented, or excluded from the grieving process<sup>12</sup> by masculinist structures and conventions founded on an historic ‘pervasive cultural condition in which women’s lives were either misrepresented or not represented at all’,<sup>13</sup> and which simultaneously erase as they record. This excavation and appropriation of what Lynn Keller has referred to as the ‘masculine imaginary’<sup>14</sup> functions therefore as a mechanism for reclaiming, its myriad

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<sup>9</sup> Marika Cifor and Stacy Wood, ‘Critical Feminism in the Archives’, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1.2 (2017), 1-27 (p. 8) <http://dx.doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i2.27>. [Referencing Terry Cook and Gerda Lerner.]

<sup>10</sup> Elisabeth A. Frost, *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2003) p. xii. ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘The *Pharmakon*’, in *Jacques Derrida: basic writings*, ed. by Barry Stocker (London, New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 74. [Derrida also namechecks alongside monuments the following tools of documentation ‘inventories, archives, citations, copies, accounts, tales, lists, duplicates, chronicles, genealogies, references’, (ibid., p. 72).]

<sup>12</sup> For example, via the genre of elegy. Discussing ‘The Rhetoric of Grief’, Andrea Brady notes ‘a gendering of mourning which had persisted since classical times’. [Andrea Brady, *English Funerary Elegy in the Seventeenth Century: Laws in Mourning* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 43.]

<sup>13</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York, London: Routledge, 2007), p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Lynn Keller, *Forms of Expansion* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 195.

references and citations yielding an alternative mode of connectivity which can transcend history and genre and, vitally, through the intrinsically interactive nature of these works, ensures 'the centrality of the reader in the making of meaning'.<sup>15</sup>

The discussion will explore the contradictions and juxtapositions which inhabit not only the texts but are also manifest in the blurred edges of the archive itself. I will consider whether the authors' selection and/or manipulation of archival materials differs from the way in which those who control the archive opt to preserve certain documents while denying or decentring others. What, if anything, makes Nelson's, Carson's and Howe's versions more compelling? Additionally, I will reflect on the element of risk fundamental to any work which may be deemed to exploit loss and grief, while also exposing the author's families to public scrutiny. How could these works be defended against accusations that they are cashing in, selling out to the bestseller archive of, for example, true crime writing and 'misery memoir'? Further, how do their intertextual sources function to achieve reader empathy, rather than appearing to be detached, a list of often tangential references, or a form of intellectual ostentation? I will consider Denise Riley's concept of 'impersonal passion'<sup>16</sup> as affect, in conjunction with Marjorie Perloff's assertion that citations become 'distancing devices'<sup>17</sup> which allow contemporary authors to express '*pain* – whether the pain of lost love or lost identity – a pain that quite literally doesn't dare to speak its name in our

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<sup>15</sup> Rachel Tzvia Back, *Led by Language The Poetry and Poetics of Susan Howe* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2002), p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> 'Language is impersonal: its working through and across us is indifferent to us, yet in the same blow it constitutes the fiber of the personal.' [Denise Riley, *Impersonal Passion: Language As Affect* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 1.]

<sup>17</sup> Marjorie Perloff, 'The Pleasures of Deja Dit: Citation, Intertext and Ekphrasis in Recent Experimental Poetry', in *The consequence of innovation: 21<sup>st</sup> century poetics* ed. by Craig Dworkin (New York: Roof Books, 2008), 255-277 (p. 258). Digitised interlibrary loan from Henry Madden Library, California State University, Fresno.

sophisticated poetry climate'.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, how is this impacted by the writers' position as archivists – albeit ones who use the scholarly archival convention of citation in an unconventional way – as well as mourners and family members? Finally, an examination of the role of elegy will reflect on whether it adds to the conversation about impersonal passion, Peter M. Sacks having noted 'a separation of voices'<sup>19</sup> often found in the genre where 'personal voice is distanced or assimilated to the apparent impersonality of inherited language'.<sup>20</sup> Is the adoption of elegy – like the reappropriation of archival materials and methodology – evidence that these authors are merely repeating conformative practices, or does it suggest, as Jahan Ramazani has proposed,<sup>21</sup> a reclaiming of convention to (in this instance) initiate a dialogue about female identity?

Beginning with Maggie Nelson's *Jane: A Murder*, I will assess how Nelson's memorial to her aunt Jane Mixer illuminates considerations of Jane's self, Nelson's self and the wider selves of 'killed women'<sup>22</sup> as a response to representations in the archive of true crime writing and media reports. A discussion of *Nox* will explore how Anne Carson's 'epitaph'<sup>23</sup> for her estranged brother Michael can also become a vehicle for female empowerment, via the reclaiming from the literary and classical archives of the traditionally masculinist territories

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<sup>18</sup> Perloff, p. 258.

<sup>19</sup> Peter M. Sacks, *The English Elegy* (Baltimore, London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. 36.

<sup>20</sup> Sacks, p. 36.

<sup>21</sup> 'modern poets reanimate the elegy not by slavishly adopting its conventions; instead, they violate its norms and transgress its limits... They make it new but make it old, rebel against generic norms but reclaim them through rebellion.' [Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 1-2.]

<sup>22</sup> Term used by the Birmingham Yardley MP Jess Phillips in a Parliamentary debate on International Women's Day, March 2021. [BBC News, 'Jess Phillips: Society has 'just accepted' dead women', *BBC News*, 11 March 2021 <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-56365827> [accessed 7 April 2022].]

<sup>23</sup> Anne Carson, back cover text, *Nox* (New York: New Directions, 2010).

of elegy and mourning ritual. Lastly, an examination of Susan Howe's *That This*, written following the death of her husband Peter Hare, will interrogate the interaction between loss and absence in one's own family and in the documented traces of another family, drawing on historical archives both as a means of locating self and to posit an 'active' community of women – whether living or dead – which offers an alternative cross-era continuum: one of female collaboration.

### **1: 'Pulp fact': the true crime archive and 'killed women' in Maggie Nelson's *Jane: A Murder***

***'none of these details belongs to me'*<sup>24</sup>**

Maggie Nelson responds in this way to text she cites in *Jane: A Murder* from Edward Keyes's *The Michigan Murders*, a true crime account of serial killings perpetrated by John Collins between 1967 and 1969 which, as Nelson was working on her book, were believed to include her aunt. Discovering by chance papers from Jane's journals at her mother's home, Nelson resolves to learn more about this absent-yet-present figure whose spirit, according to family lore, 'lives on' in Nelson herself.<sup>25</sup> However, the resulting personal memorial becomes also a public interrogation of female selfhood, fuelled by the uncovering of sustained and systematic absence. Delving into the archive of true crime writing, its representation of Jane's self gives Nelson pause to consider its impact on her own self and how this may speak more universally to the documentation of killed women. This shift in focus from personal to political is prevalent in elegy, exemplifying Peter M. Sacks's

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<sup>24</sup> Maggie Nelson, 'Aside', in *Jane: A Murder* (London: Zed, 2019), p. 129.

<sup>25</sup> Nelson, 'Spirit', p. 24.

observation that elegiac questioning may function ‘to set free the energy locked in grief or rage... a voicing of protest’.<sup>26</sup> Nelson may have joked that “‘a less hip [original] publisher than Soft Skull” would have made her call the book *Jane: An Elegy*’<sup>27</sup> but this title – while on the surface less edgy and impactful and, perhaps, more in-keeping with true crime’s insistent gender stereotyping<sup>28</sup> – would, therefore, have been equally apposite. As well as both genres being concerned with documenting the dead, there is a further commonality in the constraints on female voices perpetrated by the true crime archive and those placed on the voices of female elegists working in an historically masculinist tradition.

Collaging contemporary newspaper reports, correspondence and intertextual references together with excerpts from the journals and Keyes, Nelson’s memorial-protest elucidates how the same archival sources can yield significantly different outcomes, piggybacking onto the telling of particular stories in particular ways to expose tensions between the reported and the unreported, the under-reported and the implied. Focusing specifically on *The Michigan Murders* and a small sample of newspaper articles alongside a close reading of the text, I will discuss how Nelson harnesses the true crime archive to excavate the selves inhabiting its ‘gaps and silences’, making new meaning which shines a light on the ‘me’ of women mourned and mourning obscured and displaced by the ‘details’ of its narrative, as well as those reading the agenda-driven accounts.

The risk involved for Nelson in this undertaking should not be underestimated. Notwithstanding the widely-acknowledged modernist and post-modernist interest in

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<sup>26</sup> Sacks, p. 22.

<sup>27</sup> Walter Benn Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem: Photography, Autonomy, Economy* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> Discussed later in this section.

rejecting boundaries between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, the decision to write about a murder, particularly one which appropriates the cliché-ridden, sensationalist language of true crime writing, could be viewed by critics as a step too far into ‘low’ culture’s murkier depths, one which capitalises on that which it alleges to critique. Further, Nelson’s family had already endured a very public mourning process in the glare of media coverage attendant on serial killer cases and the subsequent high-profile trial. Bringing private documents (Jane’s journals, correspondence) into the public sphere and potentially reigniting their grief in such an outward-facing way leaves Nelson open to criticism not just of selling out but cashing in on their anguish, with little regard for the distress this might cause. Hypothesising the motivations behind this risk-taking and tracing its trajectory from private and personal to public and political, I will explore Nelson’s approach, before moving on to examine what, in the light of these motivations, might make her treatment more credible than that of the true crime archive.

***‘She probably had not been a bad-looking girl. Her shape was respectable, trim and small-boned, and her face must have been pleasant’<sup>29</sup>***

Faced with ‘gaps and silences’ in the Mixers’ personal archive the family, traumatised by Jane’s death, the initial lack of a conviction and its impact on their ability to mourn,<sup>30</sup> ‘folded in on /itself’... ‘shuttered the windows of that house’.<sup>31</sup> Nelson turns to the public archive in an attempt to bridge the void; however, as the above quotation from *The Michigan Murders*

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<sup>29</sup> Edward Keyes, *The Michigan Murders* (Sevenoaks: New English Library, 1978), p. 57.

<sup>30</sup> ‘The failure of accounting for violent death makes it impossible to grieve. For though the loss is known, the explanation of how the death took place is not, and so the loss cannot be fully registered. The dead remain, to that extent, ungrievable’. [Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence* (London, New York: Verso, 2021), p. 74.]

<sup>31</sup> Nelson, ‘Serials’, p. 114.

suggests, this can provide few clues about Jane the individual. Keyes's writing leans heavily on one-dimensional description drawn from an identikit 'pulp' lexicon and is founded entirely on [perceived] physical attributes.<sup>32</sup> The slothful anonymity of his positioning of Jane, to borrow from Denise Riley, 'as a woman-thing, objectified as a distortion'<sup>33</sup> could surely, one assumes, only serve to amplify the family's distance from its grief. The earlier noted reliance on generalisation and stereotype is a recurring trait in a text whose focus persistently veers away from the killed women to zero in on the suspects (male) and investigative team (almost exclusively male). It is, as Riley has remarked, 'as if a strongly conventional identity of 'women' must be maintained in order to secure the identity of 'men''.<sup>34</sup> It appears at one point that perhaps Nelson too might have become ensnared by this preoccupation with killer over killed when she orders 'a copy of Collins's jail admission card':<sup>35</sup> however, interaction with this artifact instead crystallises for Nelson 'a space growing/between this man/and Jane... it is Jane's murder/that interests me./His crimes do not'.<sup>36</sup> Thus, a document designed to record Collins's identity becomes both affirmation of Nelson's self which refuses these 'details' and another means of reclaiming Jane's.

Further, despite working from limited information, Nelson infuses her text with tiny yet vital illuminations which foster a rich insight into Jane's psyche, be it teenage hate-the-

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<sup>32</sup> 'Nelson's desire to celebrate or at least elaborate Jane's life requires first that she know something about that life, and that in turn requires not just meditation but research. This research, however, cannot be easily done, for the nature of absence challenges all efforts at detection and deduction'. [Raymond McDaniel, 'Narrative and Crime', *Michigan Quarterly Review* 44:4 (Fall 2005) 793-797 (p. 794) <https://www.proquest.com/docview/232312693/abstract/3DB2A35D852B4557PQ/1> [accessed 6 October 2021]. ProQuest One Literature.]

<sup>33</sup> Denise Riley, *Am I That Name: Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p. 97.

<sup>34</sup> Riley, p. 38.

<sup>35</sup> Nelson, 'Mail Order', p. 142.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 142-143.

world moodiness<sup>37</sup> and worries about her weight,<sup>38</sup> the fact that she was ‘unconventionally bright’<sup>39</sup> or her tendency to be ‘*a gusher*’;<sup>40</sup> illuminations which serve again to reclaim Jane<sup>41</sup> (and by extension the ability to adequately mourn her) from true crime’s faceless homogeneity. When Nelson *does* reference Jane’s appearance therefore, this widens rather than narrows the lens through which we view her, becoming a tool for empowerment, its captivating vibrancy standing in marked contrast to Keyes’s torpid labelling:

Her youth an aura like a  
new haircut – just blatant,  
raw, crushing. A headband  
keeps her brown hair back;  
her lips are parted slightly.  
How she wants. How she  
penetrates<sup>42</sup>

Jane’s youth, her desire for life, her determination are placed front and centre, Nelson’s use of the word ‘penetrates’ at once conjuring received notions of male power and suggesting Jane’s potential, had she lived, to cut through male dominated structures and systems. In the interests of balance, it should be noted that later in his interpretation of Jane’s killing, Keyes does include a passage – which Nelson cites in full – eschewing Jane’s looks in favour of her academic achievements. It soon becomes apparent, though, that these are incidental

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<sup>37</sup> Nelson, [*Jane’s diary*], (January 21, 1960), p. 43.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., ‘Letter from France’, p. 67.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., ‘Second Letter from Phil’, p. 62.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., ‘Gushing’, p. 35.

<sup>41</sup> ‘Most of these stories focus on the horrific act and person who committed them but don’t have anything to do with the life before... I wanted to use poetry as a means of transferring what happened into something that wasn’t exploitative, something more personal that takes the story back from the tabloids’. [Maggie Nelson interview with Christopher Dreher, ‘A poet reinvents the true-crime potboiler – and finds herself featured on ‘48 Hours’’, *boston.com*, 20 November 2005 [http://archive.boston.com/ae/books/articles/2005/11/20/crime\\_beat/](http://archive.boston.com/ae/books/articles/2005/11/20/crime_beat/) [accessed 6 October 2021].]

<sup>42</sup> Nelson, ‘First Photos’, pp. 22-23.

details in an episode really designed to elicit sympathy not for Jane or her family, but for the attending (male) police officer.<sup>43</sup>

The stereotyping which permeates *The Michigan Murders* and ‘sickens’<sup>44</sup> Nelson invites questions not just about its impact at a micro level, for the individual killed women and their families, but also at a macro level, about how this speaks to societal attitudes towards women who die as a result of male violence. Given that Keyes’s introduction acknowledges access to ‘countless volumes of records both public and confidential’,<sup>45</sup> is it not unreasonable to assume, therefore, that at least some of these generalisations – be it consciously or subconsciously – originate from deeply-rooted practices within the bureaucratic archive of police procedure itself? Discussing the development of methods for identifying criminals in nineteenth century Germany, Peter Becker has highlighted the inherent dangers of such an approach: ‘even the most standardized mode of representation could express and reproduce a prejudicial mindset’.<sup>46</sup> And if these methods can generate prejudice concerning the perpetrators of crimes, is it also not unreasonable to assume that

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<sup>43</sup> ‘Nothing could be more crushing to any family than to have a police officer appear at the front door and grimly announce that a beloved child has been taken. Jeanne Holder had been just twenty-three. She’d graduated in 1968 from the University of Michigan in the top ten percent of her class and a week ago she’d been admitted to the Phi Beta Kappa national honor society. She’d always wanted to be a great lawyer. But now – she’d been not only taken but destroyed. How could any father and mother, wondered Lieutenant Baker, ever be prepared to defend against such horror?’

And yet, after reeling from the first shock, Dr. and Mrs. Holder managed to make Lieutenant Baker’s job easier. Somehow they collected themselves; seeming to draw reserve strength from one another, they regrouped and retained control. It happened in a matter of seconds, before the policeman’s eyes, and it was marvelous’. [Nelson, p.90/Keyes p. 62. (Keyes changed the names of certain protagonists).]

<sup>44</sup> Nelson, ‘Aside’, p. 129.

<sup>45</sup> Keyes, p. 6.

<sup>46</sup> Peter Becker, ‘The Standardized Gaze: The Standardization of the Search Warrant in Nineteenth Century Germany’, in *Documenting Individual Identity*, ed. by Jane Caplan and John Torpey (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 139-163 (p. 153).

this too might be the case in attitudes to victims, creating a culture where ‘The question “who is this person” leaches constantly into the question “what kind of a person is this?”’<sup>47</sup> It then requires little imagination to see how this prejudice could begin to radiate outwards, ‘embedding itself’<sup>48</sup> as a form of ‘malediction’<sup>49</sup> in other interactions. Matt Houlbrook has addressed this issue in his essay ‘Charming Faces and the Problem of Identification’, noting both a proliferation of newspaper competitions ‘to find new screen stars’<sup>50</sup> based on ‘the correlation between appearance and character’<sup>51</sup> and of advertisements for ‘Courses such as “How to Size People Up from Their Looks”’.<sup>52</sup> With the accompanying images being ‘reminiscent of the passport photo and police mug shot’,<sup>53</sup> Houlbrook observes, it is unsurprising that analysis of facial features should be ‘primarily associated with the work of criminal investigation and anthropological study – forms of expertise that sought to categorize and control’.<sup>54</sup> Further, the ‘bleeding’ of these methods into ‘high, middlebrow, and popular culture’<sup>55</sup> creates a precedent which becomes normalised not only in the true crime archive but also in wider public perception and so, heartbreakingly, in the response of families like the Mixers.

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<sup>47</sup> Jane Caplan and Peter Torpey, ‘Introduction’, in *Documenting Individual Identity*, ed. by Jane Caplan and John Torpey (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 1-12 (p. 3).

<sup>48</sup> Denise Riley discusses the reinforcing impact of labelling in ‘Impersonal Passion’: ‘The tendency of malignant speech is to ingrow like a toenail, embedding itself in its hearer until it’s no longer felt to come “from the outside”’. [Riley, p. 11.]

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>50</sup> Matt Houlbrook, ‘Charming Faces and the Problem of Identification’, *The Art Of Identification: Forensics, Surveillance, Identity*, ed. by Rex Ferguson, Melissa M Littlefield and James Purdon, (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021), pp. 33-61 (p. 35). Proquest Ebook Central.

<sup>51</sup> Houlbrook, p. 35.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

It is, perhaps, the apparent need of the true crime genre, likely influenced by information fed out from the procedural archive, to define killed women as both attractive (in a low-key, girl-next-door kind of way) and pure (ie sexually chaste or, failing that, monogamous),<sup>56</sup> which compels Nelson's grandmother to insist at Jane's funeral 'on having an open casket/to show everyone Jane was still whole'.<sup>57</sup> The notion of 'wholeness' is a recurring motif in the text, one which also initiates considerations at a macro level regarding Butler's concept of 'grievability', in its implicit suggestion that some lives (in this instance, those of clean-living, 'not bad looking' young women over, for example, sex workers or those who are less attractive) are perceived to matter more, and so are more 'grievable' than others.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, in the poem 'John Collins', Nelson uses the personal context of Jane's death to highlight the historical and ongoing issue that women themselves may be portrayed as responsible for the problems of the men who kill them:

'Psychiatrists told an old story:

"boundless rage against the female sex, a particular coldness to his mother"<sup>59</sup>.

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<sup>56</sup> These generalisations echo the examples of mass cultural female stereotypes noted by John Berger in *Ways of Seeing*: 'serene mother (Madonna), free-wheeling secretary (actress, king's mistress), perfect hostess (spectator-owner's wife), sex object (Venus, nymph surprised), etc'. [John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 138.]

This tendency is faithfully adhered to by Keyes, who notes of the first woman killed by Collins: 'while on the whole not unattractive, she was not generally regarded as pretty, much less sexually provocative'. [Keyes, p. 10.]

<sup>57</sup> Nelson, 'Open Casket', p. 96.

<sup>58</sup> This well-trodden path beloved of media reporting and true crime writing is discussed by Sally Vincent in her article 'The Ripper, Rape and the Moviemakers: Women who ask for it' 'We have long been inured to the crass innocence of the more popular tabloids, and their consistent presentation of the notion that one woman's slaughter is less or more consequential than another's... Newspaper accounts of rape-murders are invariably at pains to suggest there is something more piteous in the violation of a 'respectable' woman than we need to bother to feel for a woman who is no better than she should be...' [Sally Vincent, 'The Ripper, Rape and the Moviemakers: Women who ask for it', *New Statesman*, 19 December 1980 pp. 12-13 (p. 12). Interlibrary request.]

<sup>59</sup> Nelson, 'John Collins', p. 135.

Here, the medical and criminal justice archives collide, the outcome being a reinforcement of another 'old story', one which, as Judith Butler has observed, all too often seeks to 'dismiss the crime, blame the victim, or pathologize the killer in the spirit of exoneration'<sup>60</sup> or even, as Sally Vincent has discussed, portrays the desire to commit these acts as in some way simply part of the male psyche.<sup>61</sup> More than half a century after Jane's death, and over 150 years after the 'standardizations' discussed by Becker, this thinking may still be found, for instance in the reporting of contemporary incidents of feminicidio highlighted by Judith Butler.<sup>62</sup> Further, it is arguably the insistence by trusted official sources on homogenising Jane, placing her in an archive of women murdered by Collins, that means the Mixers do not question whether their daughter has received justice, even though – as Nelson's examination of, crucially, the same sources reveals:

Nothing ties him to Jane's death except  
some shells of a .22 found in his room;

a rumor that he used to do target practice  
near Denton Cemetery, where she was found;

and the fact that the murders stopped  
once he was no longer around.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence* p. 189.

<sup>61</sup> 'Within our conventional sexual mythology it is written that while it is unreasonable for a man to give in to his wish to molest, attack, rape and bash to death the nearest nubile female, it is reasonable for him to harbour the desire'. [Vincent, p. 13.]

<sup>62</sup> 'Often the deaths from feminicidio are reported as sensationalist stories, after which there is a momentary shock. And then it happens again. There is horror, to be sure, but it is not always linked with an analysis and a mobilization that focuses collective rage. The systemic character of this violence is effaced when the men who commit such crimes are said to suffer personality disorders or singular pathological conditions'. [Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, p. 188.]

<sup>63</sup> Nelson, 'John Collins', p. 136.

History is littered with examples too numerous to reference here, where the need for a conviction allows generalisation to override such concerns. Over thirty years later, too late for Nelson's grandmother to witness, a different man would be found guilty of killing Jane.<sup>64</sup>

Perhaps the most devastating instance of synergy between Nelson's personal memorial and the memorialisation of killed women can be found in the poem 'Tally', which compares the horrific injuries inflicted by Collins on the women he killed to the circumstances of Jane's murder:

I am grateful that a three-inch nail wasn't hammered into her head.

I am grateful that her face wasn't beaten beyond recognition.<sup>65</sup>

Nelson's matter-of-fact language, reading almost like an inventory yet suffused with both a dignity and an understated anguish, *re-collects* the lurid embellishments of the true crime archive ('Where the face would have been was a fearsome charcoal death mask, the mouth frozen open in a wide, silent scream'<sup>66</sup>) to create a threnody for Jane which also *recollects* both the women killed by Collins and all women who have died at the hands of men. The simple refrain 'I am grateful' chillingly foreshadows the words spoken by Katie Everard in her victim impact statement at the 2021 trial of her sister Sarah's killer,<sup>67</sup> the unrelenting insistence echoing a recursive pattern of killing, its certain continuity. Equally chilling is Nelson's signposting that this gratefulness is bitterly ironic – one would conventionally

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<sup>64</sup> As recounted by Nelson in *The Red Parts* (2007).

<sup>65</sup> Nelson, 'Tally', p. 115.

<sup>66</sup> Keyes, p. 41.

<sup>67</sup> Katie Everard: 'The first thought you have in your head after despair and shock is – was she dead before you burnt her? Imagine that even having to be a thought. You find out no soot was found in her lungs, which suggests she was burnt after you murdered her. Imagine being relieved to hear your sister was dead before she was burnt'. [BBC News, 'Sarah Everard murder: Victim impact statements in full', *BBC News*, 21 September 2021 <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-58742568> [accessed 4 April 2022].]

assume this gratitude to be directed towards a deity or to the fates, but if you are a non-believer you are left with the option of it being expressed to the killer himself. An unthinkable alternative which yet again underscores how easily focus may be shifted from the women experiencing violence to the male perpetrators. As well as mourning Jane and the historic community of killed women, then, Nelson also invites the reader to consider what Lissa Skitolsky has termed a ‘politics of mourning’ in the ‘pre-emptive mourning’ of those women whose future loss – by virtue of their simply being women – will be ‘inevitable’.<sup>68</sup>

***‘although this is a “true story,” I make no claim for the factual accuracy of its representations of events or individuals’<sup>69</sup>***

Nelson’s introductory note to *Jane* suggests from the outset that *diatheia* has played a role in the construction of the text. There is a doubleness in her deployment of the phrase “true story”, which positions what follows as being an account of a real-life occurrence but also signposts the potential partiality and unreliability of both pre-existing documentary sources *and* that her own work, whatever its intentions, is still ultimately just another version of events. Moreover, when we consider the Foreword to Keyes’s text, which opens with the single line paragraph ‘What follows is true’<sup>70</sup>, Nelson’s use of quotation marks takes on a note of dark irony, which serves to underline further that other agendas may be at work and apparently factual sources should be treated with suspicion, despite their claims. Even

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<sup>68</sup> ‘The politics of mourning becomes acute when entire communities must *preemptively mourn* for the inevitable loss of more family and friends to violence, targeted on the basis of their association with communities marked by race, gender, ethnicity, class, ability, and sex’. [Lissa Skitolsky, ‘The Politics of Mourning in the Neoliberal State’, *Dialogue*, 57 (2018), 367–382 (p. 368) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0012217317000531>.]

<sup>69</sup> Nelson, *Jane: A Murder* front matter.

<sup>70</sup> Keyes, p. 5.

allowing for a later disclaimer (*The Michigan Murders* is ‘factual to the very best of my ability’)<sup>71</sup> the bold arrogance of Keyes’s statement presupposes the police procedural and true crime archives’ omniscient, unchallenged authority when in reality, as we have already established, it is clear that the same “true story” can be very differently engineered in order to achieve desired outcomes.

A comparison of text from *Ann Arbor News*, a likely documentary source for both authors, alongside Nelson’s poem ‘Position’ and Keyes’s recounting of the same episode in *The Michigan Murders*, adds weight to this assertion. The press report is factual and to-the-point, conveying minimal detail in a concise and objective manner ‘he stretched the body on the gravesite, placed the head against a cemetery marker, and covered the body’.<sup>72</sup>

It is noteworthy, however, that even such an apparently neutral statement places the emphasis on the male perpetrator, its focus drawing our attention primarily on what *he* did rather than on the woman subject to his actions. In ‘Position’, Nelson retains the factual tone and succinct style:

Her raincoat laid out over her body,  
her head on a stranger’s grave.<sup>73</sup>

However, via the incorporation of a single word (‘stranger’s’), and a refocusing of attention on Jane, this factuality is repurposed as ‘impersonal passion’, prompting the reader to access a deeper, more complex level of emotion, driven by a devastating sense of the loneliness and abandonment which must have characterised *her* final moments. Keyes’s account, meanwhile, augments the facts of the positioning of Jane’s body by adding information

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>72</sup> *Ann Arbor News*, ‘Who Gave Murder Victim A Ride?’, *Ann Arbor News*, 22 March 1969 <https://aadl.org/taxonomy/term/2611?page=1> [accessed 1 October 2021].

<sup>73</sup> Nelson, ‘Position’, p. 89.

which rather inevitably wrenches the focus to a sexual motivation for the murder – details of which both of the other authors were probably aware but elected to omit: ‘The raincoat and blanket had been removed, and now she was revealed fully clothed except that her skirt was bunched up around her waist’.<sup>74</sup> Keyes goes on to add still more lurid specifics which at face value serve no useful purpose other than to attempt to draw the reader in with sensationalist content. However, it seems that something other than the storyteller’s compulsion to ‘produce sensation in their audiences... create suspense’<sup>75</sup> is also at work here, namely the perpetuation – be it conscious or unconscious – of the true crime archive’s apparent need to categorise killed women in a very particular way.

This analysis ultimately reveals that all three texts inexorably carry with them an element of prejudice or distortion – from the seemingly neutral press report’s conditioned (perhaps unwitting) decentering of Jane, to Nelson’s emotional closeness to the case, to Keyes’s desire to spin a good yarn. Nelson is no more immune to partiality than the true crime archive or the sources it draws on but, I would argue, that it is her willingness to acknowledge the blurred edges, the existence of a ‘two-way truth’ lying as much in ‘gaps and silences’ as allegedly ‘true’ testimony which makes the archive she creates definitely more compelling and, additionally, more credible. By *re-collecting* true crime’s assumptions and generalisations alongside highly personal detail from family documentary sources, Nelson is able to *recollect* a sense of Jane’s self, her own self, and the selves of killed women, past

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<sup>74</sup> Keyes, p. 57.

<sup>75</sup> S. Elizabeth Bird and Robert W. Dardenne, ‘News and Storytelling in American Culture: Reevaluating the Sensational Dimension’, researchgate.net, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/230197729\\_News\\_and\\_Storytelling\\_in\\_American\\_Culture\\_Reevaluating\\_the\\_Sensational\\_Dimension](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/230197729_News_and_Storytelling_in_American_Culture_Reevaluating_the_Sensational_Dimension) [accessed 18 May 2022].

present and future – one which is paradoxically all the more clearly defined through giving space to sources which persist in denying female identity.

## **2: ‘Gendered grief’: reclaiming elegy and funerary ritual in Anne Carson’s *Nox***

***‘I wanted to fill my elegy with light of all kinds’<sup>76</sup>***

Anne Carson’s declaration in the opening line of *Nox*, an ‘epitaph’ for her deceased estranged brother Michael, at once takes ownership of a genre historically associated predominantly with male authorship, and which also evokes a gendered ritual of mourning with roots traceable to classical funerary custom. While it is not my contention that quite such extensive female absence persists into the twenty-first century, it should be noted that the spectre of its legacy still lingers. Denise Riley has spoken of ‘the extra burden of being read as a woman poet in a universe in which the (man) poet is very much the generic category’<sup>77</sup>, something which has historically been evident with reference to the genres of both elegy and the lyric (to be discussed in Chapter 2). For example, in two of the most significant academic assessments of elegy, written as recently as the 1980s (Peter M. Sacks’s *The English Elegy*) and 1990s (Jahan Ramazani’s *Poetry of Mourning*), the space afforded to female elegists is heavily outweighed by that allocated to their male counterparts, even allowing for a difference in ratio between the two.<sup>78</sup> Further, Susan Howe has highlighted a

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<sup>76</sup> Anne Carson, ‘1.0’ in *Nox* (New York: New Directions, 2010).

<sup>77</sup> Denise Riley in Romana Huk ‘in Conversation with Denise Riley’, *PN Review* 103, 21.5 (May-June 1995) [https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item\\_id=1912](https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=1912) [accessed 17 January 2025].

<sup>78</sup> In *The English Elegy*, Peter M. Sacks affords space to female elegists only in his Epilogue (alongside male writers), while women are allocated just two of nine chapters in Jahan Ramazani’s *Poetry of Mourning* (with Sylvia Plath alone receiving a dedicated chapter, the other being shared between Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich and Amy Clampitt).

problem with Sacks's analysis, his focus on castration as central to works of mourning a reading which must, necessarily, mean that female elegists are sidelined?<sup>79</sup> Similarly, though funerary ritual may no longer, in most cases, be subject to exclusively male authority, one does not need to search too thoroughly to find an example where female mourners are absent from pivotal moments of the ceremony, even in the late twentieth century. At the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales in 1997, the gun carriage bearing her coffin was accompanied by an entirely male party of mourners, which included her by-then-ex husband and father-in-law. Although more actively involved in the funeral service, Diana's two sisters and mother are noticeably removed from this most public expression of grief. Carson repeatedly returns to notions of 'muteness' in the text, from the extended metaphor of the story of Lazarus,<sup>80</sup> to the fact that eventually she and her mother 'didn't talk of' Michael<sup>81</sup>, to Carson's word choices in her translation of poem '101',<sup>82</sup> Catullus's elegy for his own brother with which she is wrestling during the composition of *Nox*. Given these ongoing 'gaps and silences' within the archives of elegiac and funerary convention, it is fitting therefore that *Nox* represents not just an 'epitaph' for Michael, but also a reclaiming of tradition. This allows Carson – and, by extension, a community of female mourners (including Carson's mother who is both a mourner and is mourned in the text) to be present,

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<sup>79</sup> 'Howe cites Peter Sacks's book *The English Elegy* in her working notes: "The movement from loss to consolation requires a deflection of desire – with the creation of a trope both for the lost object and for the original characters of the desire itself". She remarks, "But if Sacks says castration lies at the core of the work of mourning what about women elegists?" [Will Montgomery, *The Poetry of Susan Howe History, Theology, Authority* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 190.]

<sup>80</sup> Carson, '8.4'.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, '4.3'.

<sup>82</sup> 'so I could give you the last gift owed to death/and talk (why?) with mute ash' [*Ibid.*, Catullus '101', trans. by Anne Carson, '7.2'.]

to fully document her grief – even if this means exposing emotions which may be uncomfortable both for the reader and for Carson herself.

Like Nelson with Jane, Carson must first establish a sense of who her brother was in order to memorialise him, to mourn him adequately, but Michael remains elusive and undocumented, having maintained a peripatetic existence, living under aliases to evade drugs charges. In the light of this persistent refusal, Carson's quest, perhaps inevitably, demonstrates a departure from elegiac convention by revealing something of the mourner's self as well that of the mourned. However, I would argue that this is representative less of what Peter M. Sacks has described as 'the American elegy's more overt and uneasy focus on the isolated self of the griever'<sup>83</sup> than a desire to fully participate in a process in which women all too often have been overlooked or ignored. Drawing on a 'masculine imaginary' in which a word-by-word translation (complete with dictionary definitions) of Catullus '101', is collaged alongside fragments of family documents and multiple intertextual references, Carson's personal memorial also shines a light on wider issues of absence attendant on a genre which, as Andrea Brady has observed, memorialises 'the existing social order, whose power relations, gender imbalances and competitive dynamics – articulated in and through the funeral – they replicate in a literary context'<sup>84</sup> as much as it memorialises the dead. Through a close reading of the text which also references its key intertextual source from the classical and elegiac archives, Catullus '101', I will examine Carson's employment of this genre's conventions before going on to discuss her appropriation of funerary ritual as a form of 'usable past', positing that *Nox* speaks not just to personal grief but also more broadly, to the assertion of the female mourner's right to a place at the table.

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<sup>83</sup> Sacks, p. 313.

<sup>84</sup> Brady, p. 136.

***'making it new but making it old'***<sup>85</sup>

Though Carson might lay claim to elegy as a genre she makes it equally clear from the outset that *her* particular elegy is not going to be one which conforms to the centuries-old, masculinist tradition recorded in the archive that is poetry. For example, the definition of poems not with titles but rather paragraph numbers ('1.0', '3.2') characteristic of bureaucratic reports or formal documents – ironically, the very type of papers which are absent from her record of Michael's life – immediately signposts a subversive intent, which disrupts not only literary convention but also a scholarly one. In a text which additionally has no page numbers, how does the student of *Nox* correctly cite its content? One begins to develop one's own methods of categorisation and cataloguing, mirroring Carson's efforts to find new ways of articulating her mourning, ways which circumvent the elegiac archive's perpetuation of gendered absence. While not without its frustrations for the reader, this device nonetheless evokes empathy – for Carson's abortive attempts to locate Michael's self, but as well for what it represents for women mourners. The numbering is redolent of an anonymity which reflects the legacy of absence in the female grieving experience and is all the more affecting *because of* its impersonality.

In one of the myriad contradictions which inhabit *Nox*, Carson juxtaposes this subversion with the apparently conformative elegiac device of repetition. Designed to reinforce the reality of death and ultimately to become 'a form of verbal "propping"' which almost replaces the deceased,<sup>86</sup> repetition may also be gendered, with 'women's reiterated cries, statements of death and appeals by name to the dead'<sup>87</sup> being integral to classical

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<sup>85</sup> See Note 21, p. 97.

<sup>86</sup> Sacks, p. 26.

<sup>87</sup> Brady, p. 48 [referencing Margaret Alexiou].

Greek lament. In Catullus '101', the word 'frater' (brother) appears three times in the poem's ten short lines, a repetition which is echoed in the front matter of *Nox*. Carson makes it new but makes it old, reiterating her brother's name in oversized script which covers the entire page, overlaid with a typed fragment of Latin text 'NOX FRATER NOX',<sup>88</sup> the subsequent verso being a facsimile of the ink's faded permeated imprint. Hence, Michael's name effectively appears twelve times across just two pages: a more informal resonance of Catullus's 'frater' perhaps, but no less affecting. Our sense of Michael's loss is palpable, but as Kiene Brillenburg Wurth has pointed out 'these names do not simply refer to Michael. They also bear the imprint of their author. From the start, this writer is there, writing her presence into the surface of remembering'.<sup>89</sup> However, I would add that Carson's 'imprint' functions not to draw attention to *her* self so much as her active role in the grieving process, the bold marker pen strokes signalling a rewriting, a rejection of established expressions of grief to activate ownership both of her own mourning and the woman's right to mourn. And while there is an irony that Carson still elects to use a male name when enacting this rewriting, its almost artless reproduction – rather like a child practising their handwriting – suggests a deep-rooted connectivity between the siblings, between the self mourned and the self mourning. A connectivity, moreover, whose subtle yet tangible 'impersonal passion' extends beyond Carson and Michael to also engage with the reader.

These bold strokes take on an emphatically darker tone as the text develops. Words and crudely drawn images are juxtaposed like graffiti against the numbered and neatly

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<sup>88</sup> Carson, *Nox* front matter.

<sup>89</sup> Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, 'Re-vision as Remediation: Hypermediacy and Translation in Anne Carson's *Nox*', *Image & Narrative*, 14.4 (2013), 20-33 (p. 24) <http://www.imageandnarrative.be/index.php/imagenarrative/article/view/397> [accessed 26 October 2021].

justified poems, often having the appearance of markings scratched forcefully into wax crayon – for example ‘2.1’<sup>90</sup>’s ‘WHO WERE YOU’ – its suggestion of an interior phantom text echoing the ‘gaps and silences’ sustained by gendered mourning. Elsewhere, entire poems (the opening section of ‘8.5’, for example) may be struck through with such vehement, thick marks that it is almost impossible to discern what lies beneath. These apparent straightforward subversions are again consistent with making it new but making it old, Brady having observed that the ‘decorum of privileged spaces and contexts [in this instance traditional literary convention] could not always constrain’ elegists who would find ways to challenge funerary custom ‘out of love for the dead’.<sup>91</sup> However, the violence of this personal act – which undoubtedly speaks to Carson’s loss and frustration at her inability to adequately document Michael’s self – also invites more complex questions concerning self censorship, perhaps even self-hatred for elegising Michael while having been unable to prevent his death. More on female socialisation and the propensity for guilt follows in the paragraph below, but we might consider that the brutally enforced absence of text in ‘8.5’ signposts a difficulty for female mourners in documenting male subjects either via literary genre or funerary ritual, suggesting that in order to be allowed (both by society and themselves) to grieve, they might first have to document their unworthiness.

Exposing this darker, destructive element of mourning is, like Nelson’s borrowing from the true crime genre, a potentially risky strategy – particularly given Carson’s admission that she actively ‘tore’ and ‘cut’<sup>92</sup> images from her family’s photographic archive for inclusion in *Nox*. From comparisons with the stereotypical unhinged female beloved of

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<sup>90</sup> Carson, ‘2.1’.

<sup>91</sup> Brady, p. 7.

<sup>92</sup> Eleanor Wachtel, ‘An Interview with Anne Carson’, *Brick*, 89 (10 June 2014) <https://brickmag.com/an-interview-with-anne-carson/> [accessed 29 October 2021].

the pulp writing Nelson appropriates, to gendered societal expectations regarding the acceptability (or not) of aggressive behaviour,<sup>93</sup> Carson's refusal to shy away from the violence of her response makes her vulnerable to a range of criticisms, from at best conduct unbecoming of a woman to at worst potentially being a danger to herself or others. Perhaps this is why 'the blush'<sup>94</sup> is a significant motif within the text – though Carson (personally and as a signifier for the community of female mourners) may challenge convention and assumption, it might also be that society's conditioning of women to feel guilt is in the end simply too ingrained. Hence, there is an additional risk, that of a duality in Carson's reclaiming, where empowerment brings with it a sense of shame – especially when its achievement relies on the confrontation of such intense and unsettling emotions. This duality also extends to 'the blush' itself, which at once represents tutored female shame but also Carson's flushed indignation that women who do not mourn in the approved manner are made to feel embarrassed by their actions. We might further consider whether this embarrassment, this pressure to feel guilt, leads women to try to mask their indignation but the act of masking, of untruth is yet another catalyst for 'the blush'. Trapped in a recursive cycle of shame, embarrassment, indignation and guilt, their blush may or may not be, like D'Agostini and Ficara's paradox of 'the blushing liar',<sup>95</sup> related to the truthfulness (or not) of

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<sup>93</sup> 'Aggressiveness is seen as normative for males and parents and peers alike may tolerate this type of behavior. Males are more likely than females to deny culpability for their actions and are less likely to experience ongoing, unalleviated feelings of guilt. Males feel less intense guilt with development during adolescence. In contrast, females are more likely to feel guilt about inconsiderate behavior and around family members'. [Jane Bybee, 'The Emergence of Gender Differences in Guilt during Adolescence' in *Guilt and Children, Science Direct*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/B978-012148610-5/50006-0> (Publisher Summary).]

<sup>94</sup> 'Why do we blush before death?' / 'If you are writing an elegy begin with the blush' [Carson, '7.1' and '7.2'.]

<sup>95</sup> 'Each time Victoria says some falsity she blushes. But she only blushes if what she says is false. Suppose now Victoria says:  
V = 'I am blushing'

their actions. Even more likely, maybe, given the intense and historic societal pressure surrounding female guilt, there could be multiple, simultaneous reasons that ‘the blush’ occurs, leading us to question whether women even know why they are blushing.

Finally, this appropriation of the old is manifest in Carson’s employment of collage which juxtaposes the visual – facsimiles of the photographic fragments, letters and artifacts such as postage stamps – alongside multiple intertextual references ranging from the biblical story of Lazarus to Basho’s haiku to Virginia Woolf. Though patently ‘new’ and experimental in nature, Brady has highlighted that ‘*genera mixta*... the blending of several traditions’<sup>96</sup> is also an historical feature of elegy, broadsides and pamphlets of mourning, with authors regularly undertaking ‘a trawl through the commonplaces of consolation and virtue retrieved from other poems’<sup>97</sup> to seek inspiration for their subject’s memorial. This comparison is not to diminish Carson’s careful assemblage of source documents as simply the results of a ‘trawl’, but rather to demonstrate that, in finding an alternative articulation for established devices of mourning literature, Carson is able to affirm her place, the woman’s place within this archive while at once reclaiming the genre as her (their) own. Further, it is typical of the contradictory spirit of *Nox* that the impact of the images Carson selects predominantly lies in what *can’t* be seen rather than what is visible, an empty chair or a radically cropped shot of a sea wall suffused with a sense of absent presence which leaves the reader grappling to determine who or what might lie beyond these deliberately

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If she blushes, then she cannot blush (as she does not say falsity), but if she does not, then she must (as what she says is false): so Victoria blushes if she does not.’ [Franca D’Agostini and Elena Ficara, ‘The Blushing Liar’, *Philosophia: International Journal of Philosophy*, 21.2, (June 2020) 252-266 (p. 252) [https://c4fb26e2-a44c-4aea-96c2-74fd10a43d0e.filesusr.com/ugd/dcdc59\\_b53fdc52b78c4b94974188dc1254dc00.pdf](https://c4fb26e2-a44c-4aea-96c2-74fd10a43d0e.filesusr.com/ugd/dcdc59_b53fdc52b78c4b94974188dc1254dc00.pdf)) [accessed 17 January 2025].]

<sup>96</sup> Brady, p. 11.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

imposed boundaries. Carson has observed that she ‘wanted to put the vanishing into the pictures’.<sup>98</sup> This removal, this active cutting out of the mourned subject by the mourner herself reinforces our sense not just of Michael’s elusiveness but also Carson’s absence – and that of a community of female mourners – from their own grieving experience.

### **Funerary ritual: a ‘usable past’<sup>99</sup>**

Like the missing subjects of Carson’s photographs, classical funerary ritual is also an implicit presence throughout *Nox*, whether via parallels with both the content and physicality of the text, or with the translated fragments of Catullus ‘101’ and its own author’s fulfilment of mourning tradition. This device leads us once more to elegy, evidencing Brady’s observation that elegists ‘could manipulate funerary conventions to assert their own authority and independence’,<sup>100</sup> and again established from the outset with the aforementioned repetition of Michael’s name. This archetypal elegiac characteristic in addition evokes the ‘conclamatio’ of Roman funerary custom, described by John L. Heller as calling ‘upon the deceased by name, with the idea of calling him back to life, or, rather, of proving him dead’.<sup>101</sup> Heller also notes the importance in the funeral procession of ‘bearers of the *imagines*, or masks of the family ancestors.’<sup>102</sup> In *Nox*, this role is assumed by Carson, the repeated textual portraits of hers and Michael’s parents – their dying mother’s ‘hard blue stare’,<sup>103</sup> her futile wait for Michael ‘standing at the kitchen sink scraping carrots’,<sup>104</sup> both parents ‘laid out... in bright

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<sup>98</sup> Carson, *Brick*.

<sup>99</sup> See Note 10, p. 95.

<sup>100</sup> Brady, p. 63.

<sup>101</sup> John L. Heller, ‘Burial Customs of the Romans’, *The Classical Weekly*, 25.24 (2 May 1932), 193-197 (p. 194) <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/4339101>.

<sup>102</sup> Heller, p. 195.

<sup>103</sup> Carson, ‘2.1’.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, ‘4.1’.

yellow sweaters'<sup>105</sup> – ensuring an ancestral presence, much like Catullus's 'distant mood of parents',<sup>106</sup> in her own alternative mourning ritual. Similarly, working from limited resources, Carson replicates the convention of 'carrying objects representing the deeds of the deceased',<sup>107</sup> facsimiles of the postage stamps from Michael's sporadic postcards or his 'one letter'<sup>108</sup> symbolising his overarching deeds (which amount to very little) and thus highlighting his capacity for detachment and reluctance to reciprocate communication. Though unlike Catullus, Carson was unable to attend her brother's funeral, this reworking of the classical funerary template allows her to take back some control – not only of the personal mourning process from which Michael's elusiveness caused her and her mother to be excluded, but also in terms of a woman's right to active involvement in her grief.

It is, perhaps, Carson's highly experimental decision to present *Nox* within a box which paradoxically resonates most strongly with traditional ritual. While the grey board exterior with its minimal design conjures box files typical of anonymous bureaucratic storage systems, it equally calls to mind a marbled tombstone, the 'appropriate tablet'<sup>109</sup> which, Heller explains, is the Roman equivalent of a gravestone. This is particularly apposite for a memorial to Michael, a lost soul – albeit by his own choice – whose ashes were scattered at sea (in accordance with classical custom someone lost at sea would have had instead 'a cenotaph, or empty tomb... erected in his honour').<sup>110</sup> However, as Carson remarks, 'There is no stone':<sup>111</sup> physically and emotionally distanced from the funeral ('I had no choice, I was a

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<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, '5.5'.

<sup>106</sup> Catullus '101', trans. by Anne Carson, *Nox* '7.2'.

<sup>107</sup> Heller, p. 195.

<sup>108</sup> Carson, '2.2'.

<sup>109</sup> Heller, p. 197.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

<sup>111</sup> Carson, '5.6'.

thousand miles away'<sup>112</sup>), she experiences a lack of connection with the mourning ritual and her own grief in common with the many other women before her – Diana's sisters and mother, for example – for whom geographical proximity to a deceased loved one is still no guarantee of being fully involved in their memorial. But by refusing this distance, by finding instead 'a usable past' within the masculinist world of funerary ritual, Carson is able to assert her authority – working with what limited information she herself can accumulate – to construct her own 'appropriate tablet'. Documenting at least something of Michael's self, she is able to reclaim some agency in the process which she was unavoidably denied.

Like Nelson's appropriation of true crime convention, Carson's manipulation of elegiac tradition and funerary custom is another form of *re-collecting*. It might not ultimately *recollect* much of Michael's self – as Carson's final line tells us 'He refuses, he is in the stairwell, he disappears'<sup>113</sup> – but what it does create in parallel is the recollection of the female self who mourns, its adherence to tradition allowing Carson's text to find, via the 'masculine imaginary' of these archives, a space within them while at once challenging their assumptions. It is Michael's elusiveness, his persistent absence which fuels the vehemence of Carson's response, allowing a shift in the role of the female mourner from a passive one, lamenting the death of the male hero, to an active one, who is empowered to curate the articulation of her own grief.

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<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, '5.6'.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, '10.3'.

### 3: 'Child of our history': archive and self-identification<sup>114</sup> in Susan Howe's *That This*

*'I think with women there is a fear of taking up space, of speaking at all'*<sup>115</sup>

Written by Susan Howe 'in memory'<sup>116</sup> of her husband Peter Hare, *That This*, like *Nox*, addresses the author's need to articulate her grief alongside a need to re-orient, re-collect her sense of self which has been displaced, dislocated by bereavement. In the opening section 'The Disappearance Approach', Howe encounters a cemetery official who 'politely insisted he knew Mr. Hare had a wife, but I wasn't her';<sup>117</sup> his courteous officiousness both an unintentional reminder that in reality Howe both is *and* is not – the self that is Peter's wife having been distorted by his loss – and suggestive that Howe's widowed status has brought with it not just grief but also a newly-acquired absence. Fearful, perhaps, of 'taking up space', Howe says nothing to the attendant, instead *telling herself* 'We're together, we're together',<sup>118</sup> the 'clear, utilitarian'<sup>119</sup> prose suffused with an 'impersonal passion' which emphasises the official's blunt unwitting consolidation of Howe's unbeing and renders the scene all the more affecting. This account is juxtaposed with an excerpt from the eighteenth

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<sup>114</sup> 'Susan, child of our history, come home, come on in'. [Susan Howe, 'The Disappearance Approach' in *That This* (New York: New Directions, 2010), p. 17.]

'The inward ardour I feel while working in research libraries is intuitive. It's a sense of self-identification and trust, or the granting of grace in an ordinary room, in a secular time'. [Susan Howe, 'Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives' (New York: New Directions, 2014), p. 63.]

<sup>115</sup> Susan Howe in Karen Brennan, Kathleen Crown, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Kathleen Fraser, Elisabeth Frost, Jenny Goodman, Donna Hollenberg, Susan Howe, Jeanne Heuving, Laura Hinton, Cynthia Hogue & Aldon Nielsen, 'The contemporary long poem: Feminist intersections and experiments', *Women's Studies*, 27.5 (1998) 507-536 (p. 523) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00497878.1998.9979230>.

<sup>116</sup> Howe, *That This* front matter.

<sup>117</sup> Howe, 'The Disappearance Approach', p. 29.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>119</sup> Daisy Fried, 'That This Review', *Poetry*, 198.4, (July/August 2011), 374-377 (p. 374) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23046104> [accessed 20 January 2022].

century diaries of Hannah Edwards Wetmore, part of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library's Jonathan Edwards Collection – returned to repeatedly in Howe's work – in which Hannah tells her children 'our lives are all exceeding brittle and uncertain'.<sup>120</sup> Howe has written extensively about the 'mystic documentary telepathy'<sup>121</sup> occasioned by contact with archival artifacts and documents, one which, as Will Montgomery has observed, becomes 'a way of discussing how one writer's words can be said to inhabit another'<sup>122</sup> and whose 'enduring relations and connections between what was and what is'<sup>123</sup> activate for her the previously noted 'sense of self-identification and trust'. Further, this process, Anderson et al point out, is for Howe 'intensely personal, akin to poetic inspiration, where new meaning flashes up in a way that is neither planned nor interpretable'.<sup>124</sup> Unsurprisingly then, it is to these documents she turns to help 'ease distance'<sup>125</sup> following Peter's death: in a present which shares not only the brittleness of which Hannah writes, but also a female experience based on identification in terms of a male figure<sup>126</sup> (Howe's husband, Hannah's brother Jonathan – more of which in the following paragraph). Described by Daniel Morris as 'archival task as a séance',<sup>127</sup> a "'summoning" of the dead that remain as

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<sup>120</sup> Howe, 'The Disappearance Approach', p. 30.

<sup>121</sup> Howe, 'Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives', p. 18.

<sup>122</sup> Montgomery, p. 119.

<sup>123</sup> Howe, 'Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives', p. 43.

<sup>124</sup> Linda Anderson, Mark Byers and Ahren Warner, 'Introduction: Poetry, Theory and Archives' in *The Contemporary Poetry Archive Essays and Interventions* ed. by Linda Anderson, Mark Byers and Ahren Warner (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), pp. 1-24 (p. 1).

<sup>125</sup> Howe, 'That This' in *That This*, p. 104.

<sup>126</sup> '...what relation instates women as the object of exchange, clothed first in one patronym and then another?' [Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 55.]

<sup>127</sup> Daniel Morris, "'Needing to Summon the Others": Archival Research as Séance in Susan Howe's Spontaneous Particulars', *William Carlos Williams Review*, 31.2 (Fall 2014), 175-191 (p. 180) <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/needing-summon-others-archival-research-as-seance/docview/1700974086/se-2?accountid=13828> [accessed 3 September 2024].

textual spirits'<sup>128</sup>, Howe's methodology strives for a connectivity, an opportunity for meaningful discourse with 'kindred'<sup>129</sup> souls which, the cemetery meeting intimates, may be denied in the now.

Comprising three formally distinct yet thematically connected sections (essay-style prose, type collages and 'lineated lyric'),<sup>130</sup> *That This* draws on a rich intertextual archive of informal citations including classic and classical literature, art history and ekphrasis and the Edwards Collection which, like the archives excavated by Nelson and Carson, are frequently located in a 'masculine imaginary'. This chapter, however, will focus specifically on selected elements from Hannah's diaries, which make up a tiny proportion of the Collection's vast contents, despite the Edwards women – Esther, Elizabeth, Anne, Mary, Eunice, Abigail, Jerusha, Hannah, Lucy and Martha, all of whom Howe makes sure to namecheck<sup>131</sup> – receiving the same education as Jonathan, and outnumbering their brother ten to one.<sup>132</sup> I will interrogate how the parallels between Howe's loss (of Peter and of something of her identity), the absence she experiences and the historical lost identities of the women underrepresented in the Edwards Collection speak to a wider issue of female absence, one which may well influence concerns over 'taking up space'. Via a close reading of *That This*

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<sup>128</sup> Morris, p. 176.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>130</sup> Fried, p. 374.

<sup>131</sup> Howe, 'The Disappearance Approach', p. 20.

<sup>132</sup> 'The Beinecke Library in New Haven owns a vast collection of Edwards family papers. It contains letters, diaries, notebooks, essays, and more than twelve hundred sermons; but apart from a journal kept by Esther Edwards Burr (Jonathan and Sarah's eldest daughter) after her marriage, and a few letters to and from the sisters, daughters, and Sarah, all that remains of this 18<sup>th</sup>-century family's impressive tradition of female learning are a bedsheet Esther Stoddard Edwards probably spun and embroidered herself, Sarah's wedding dress fragment, and several pages from Hannah Edwards Wetmore's private writings – along with posthumous excerpts collected and transcribed with commentary by her daughter Lucy Wetmore Whittlesey' [sic]. [*Ibid.*, p. 21.]

and the diary excerpts, informed by Howe's essay 'Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives', I will argue that the Edwards Collection, with its omissions, its 'gaps and silences', is Howe's form of 'usable past'. Yielding a new mode of documentation which looks back yet at the same time looks forward, this weaving together of past and present creates a cross-era two-way dialogue – one which functions to 'ease distance' not just between Howe and her dead husband, but also the Edwards women and the women whose absence from documentation they represent.<sup>133</sup> Further, I will posit that this dialogue extends to foster a sense of community between these women and the female reader, writer and researcher now and in the future: Howe's extensive use of intertextuality and the fragmented nature of the type collages necessitates an intense level of reader investment, the outcome being, as Rachel Tzvia Back has pointed out, that the text 'is made, in part, by her'.<sup>134</sup>

***'I admire the way thought contradicts feeling in Sarah's furiously calm letter'***<sup>135</sup>

Howe responds in this way to a letter written by Sarah Edwards following her own husband's (Jonathan's) death, the enormous pain of her loss matched by an ardent religious faith – similar, perhaps to the 'ardor' Howe feels when visiting libraries and archives – which seems at once at odds with yet entirely fitting to her grief ('A holy and good God has covered us with a dark cloud').<sup>136</sup> Howe's admiration is equally apposite given that, of the texts discussed in this chapter, *That This* arguably demonstrates the most deeply-rooted contradictions of the three. From its starting point as a memorial to a man which is also a

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<sup>133</sup> 'The past is present. We are all part of the background'. [Susan Howe, 'Encloser' in *The Politics of Poetic Form Poetry and Public Policy* ed. Charles Bernstein (New York: Roof, 1998), pp. 175-196 (p. 176).]

<sup>134</sup> Back, p. 6.

<sup>135</sup> Howe, 'The Disappearance Approach', p. 13.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, [quoting Sarah Edwards's letter of 3 April 1758], p. 11.

mechanism to address female absence; to its non-conformative use of citation; to the fragmented, destructive-yet-connective type collages, whose source materials are manipulated by Howe just as a largely masculinist literary archive has so often altered or omitted women's texts; *That This* is suffused with paradox, persistently taking inspiration from that which it seeks to challenge. Needless to say, when reflecting on moving into Peter's house, Howe notes that it is the ubiquitous, intensely masculine portraits and mementos of his first wife's ancestors<sup>137</sup> which offer a sense of belonging, the ability to locate herself in this new environment 'saying "Susan, child of our history, come home, come on in"'.<sup>138</sup>

In the roundtable discussion referenced at the start of this section, Kathleen Fraser recounts helping older women students, their work impacted by 'fragmented, broken up, interrupted time',<sup>139</sup> to recognise that it was possible, permissible even to have 'a formal acknowledgement of interruption'.<sup>140</sup> Similarly, 'Frolic Architecture', the second section of *That This*, addresses the historic interruption of female voices, layering fragments of Hannah's words with intertextual references literally cut from a 'masculine imaginary' which frequently includes classical literature.<sup>141</sup> Hannah's part-formed words suggest a struggle, maybe even an alternative language, as page after page the reader begins to hear her voice,

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<sup>137</sup> 'old family oil portraits, various objects from the China Trade, engravings of genteel nineteenth-century Episcopalian ministers, and over the dining room table a painting of "The US Squadron Commanded by Comd. S. Rodgers sailing from Port Mahon. Respectfully dedicated to M. C Perry Esq. of the U.S.N. by his most obt. Servant S. Cabrolla, Gibralta, 10 May 1826"' [Ibid., p. 16.]

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>139</sup> Kathleen Fraser, Brennan et al, p. 524.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., p. 524.

<sup>141</sup> Andrew Eastman has noted that this includes 'notably, the stories of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*'. [Andrew Eastman, "'a shadow that is a shadow of // me mystically one in another": Susan Howe's "type-collages"', *Revue française d'études américaines*, 141 (2014), 210-219 (p. 214) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43831086> [accessed 20 January 2022].]

only for it to be hijacked, diverted, wrenched to something other. The fragmented, jumbled nature of the text reveals a learned woman – whose own capacity for citation includes the Bible and works by the English theologian Isaac Watts – constantly disrupted, interrupted by a cacophony of male voices. This becomes all the more affecting when one hears Howe reading aloud that which seems almost unreadable,<sup>142</sup> the fractured syntax taking on a poignant hesitancy which alludes to a voice resigned to being, at best, partially heard; a self whose recognition, as with Howe in the cemetery, will inevitably be limited. However, it is this fragmentation which also offers opportunity for empowerment, Lynn Keller having observed that it represents ‘a politically necessary disruption of the forms of knowledge that confine us’.<sup>143</sup>

The apparent destruction of Hannah’s text invites consideration not only of her muted voice and the personal parallels this has for Howe, but also the wider absence of female voices, where documentation (as for the Edwards women) essentially amounts merely to those morsels deemed worthy of preservation. This is rendered all the more affecting when Howe reveals that Jonathan’s and his sisters’ writings were often on pages ‘homemade hand-stitched from linen rags salvaged from worn out clothing’.<sup>144</sup> Despite the women producing what Daniel Morris terms their own ‘makeshift surface for personal expression’,<sup>145</sup> their texts remain almost entirely absent, spectral suggestions of thoughts and lives – but yet ones which Howe’s ‘séance’ can at least call to the reader’s mind, even if it is not able to conjure them directly into existence. Again, a connectivity may be seen

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<sup>142</sup> Susan Howe, *Frolic Architecture performed with David Grubbs*, Harvard University 1 November 2011 <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Howe.php> [accessed 20 January 2022].

<sup>143</sup> Keller is discussing Howe’s use of fragmentation in *The Liberties*. [Keller, p. 192.]

<sup>144</sup> Howe, ‘Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives’, p. 45.

<sup>145</sup> Morris, p. 177.

between these historic absences and female unpresence in the present, Howe having noted that her own poetic work sits within a tradition that, well into the twentieth century, remained predominantly masculinist:

I work in the tradition of other poets who have inspired me; poets in the 20<sup>th</sup> century most of whom are men. Why are there so few women (until just recently) in this tradition? This tradition that I hope I am part of has involved a breaking of boundaries of all sorts. It involves a fracturing of discourse, a stammering even.<sup>146</sup>

The ‘stammering’, fragmented nature of ‘Frolic Architecture’ echoes the ‘breaking of boundaries’ described here. Although representing a marked departure from traditional lyric form it nonetheless, as Peter Nicholls has noted of Howe’s poetry, ‘grasps the very matter of lyric’ [often historically a ‘male’ genre] ‘– its sounds, cadences, and textures – as an obstacle to the movements of desire and memory that are its primary concern’.<sup>147</sup> Thus, as Back has pointed out, ‘Howe’s rejection of an authoritative’ [for this we may read male] ‘reading is a rejection also of authoritative patriarchy’.<sup>148</sup>

If Howe’s technique necessarily demands her source documents are ‘remade and therefore altered’,<sup>149</sup> however, in what way does this differ from, for example, Henry James, whom she herself cites as having ‘heavily doctored’ his cousin Minny’s correspondence after her death?<sup>150</sup> As Jessica Wilkinson notes, the selection of any archival materials must also

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<sup>146</sup> Howe, ‘Encloser’, p. 192.

<sup>147</sup> Peter Nicholls, ‘Modernism and the limits of lyric’ in *The Lyric Poem: Formations and Transformations*, ed. by Marion Thain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 177-194 (p. 187). ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>148</sup> Back, p. 5.

<sup>149</sup> Chelsea Jennings is specifically discussing Howe’s *The Midnight*. [Chelsea Jennings, ‘Susan Howe’s Facsimile Aesthetic’, *Contemporary Literature* (Winter 2015), 660-694 (p. 676) <http://dx.doi.org/10.3368/cl.56.4.660>.]

<sup>150</sup> Howe, ‘Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy Of Archives’, p. 55.

inevitably involve ‘a process of exclusion’<sup>151</sup> – does this mean, therefore, that Hannah’s words, her self have been compromised by Howe’s intervention, selecting again from what has already been selected?<sup>152</sup> In common with Nelson’s selective reproduction of Jane’s diaries, Howe may be seen to be rewriting Hannah’s archive. But again, this is not about repeating the absences perpetuated therein, rather about playing archival convention at its own game. Howe’s layering of Hannah’s text with her own represents, according to Anderson et al, ‘a careful destruction of the original that produces, via delicately murderous means, a new work of literature’<sup>153</sup> – one which, perhaps, might give her subject-collaborator a better shot at inclusion going forward. For example, if one reads carefully enough, one will find clues within the text which directly reference the location (the box number and folder number) in the Edwards Collection where what remains of Hannah’s writing is held. Once heard by Howe’s audience, Hannah’s voice is positioned to be amplified ‘re-animated, re-collected (recollected) through an encounter with the mind of a curious reader’<sup>154</sup> – an encounter which may then prompt that reader to further curiosity not just about the contents of Box 24 Folder 1377<sup>155</sup> but also which additional unheard or underrepresented female voices this and other archives might be harbouring and, indeed,

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<sup>151</sup> Jessica Wilkinson, ‘Experiments in Poetic Biography: Feminist Threads in Contemporary Long Form Poetry’, *Biography*, 39.1, (Winter 2016), 1-22 (p. 11) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/bio.2016.0021>.

<sup>152</sup> It should also be noted that the advent of digitised archives – such as that of the Beinecke Library, which enabled me to access to Hannah’s diaries – brings with it the risk of a further narrowing: ‘even as the digitisation of museum archives might lead to more democratised forms of access, these repositories impose constraints even before the research begins, including legal restrictions over data protection, the fragmentary status of many records...’ [Ana Baeza Ruiz, ‘Museums, archives and gender’, *Museum History Journal*, 11.2 (October 2018), 174-187 (p. 174) <https://doi.org/10.1080/19369816.2018.1529268>.]

<sup>153</sup> Anderson, Byers and Warner, p. 18.

<sup>154</sup> Howe, ‘Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy Of Archives’, p. 24.

<sup>155</sup> Howe, ‘Frolic Architecture’, p. 49.

whether they are adequately heard themselves. Moreover, when one learns that Hannah's words were only preserved due to a kind of manipulation – the documents in the Edwards Collection are not Hannah's originals but transcriptions created by her daughter, Lucy Wetmore Whittelsey, '(easier to read than her uncle's or her mother's earlier handwriting)<sup>156</sup> – the dual capacity of 'doctoring' as both denial *and* affirmation of self is further substantiated.

***'You could say I was intruding on another family's need to keep close'*<sup>157</sup>**

Describing her excavation of Peter's family artifacts after his death, Howe articulates here perhaps the most significant contradiction within *That This*, her decision to turn to another family's archive (predominantly the Edwards's) to explore her own loss, to relocate her self. The daughter of high-profile parents – an actor/playwright and a Harvard academic – it is not unreasonable to assume that Howe's family was well-documented, so why not seek to 'ease distance' via records which surely would have more personal resonances, rather than those of another family, and particularly one where the female voices are so grossly underrepresented? It may be that the answer lies in purely practical reasons, Howe having already extensively interrogated her familial archive in earlier work, most notably *The Midnight* (2003). But whatever the reason, it should be noted that, like Nelson and Carson, Howe too takes a risk here, leaving herself open to criticism that her focus on the Edwards archive necessarily puts Peter, the subject of the memorial, out of the reader's mind, and maybe even suggests a capacity for closeness to the Edwards women that might have been absent from her own relationships. More likely, however, is Perloff's view of citation as a

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<sup>156</sup> Howe, 'Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy Of Archives', p. 52.

<sup>157</sup> Howe, 'The Disappearance Approach', p. 18.

‘distancing device’ which allows the expression of pain, paradoxically easing distance by virtue of its distancing. When we learn that at the time of Peter’s death, Howe had a transcription of Sarah’s ‘furiously calm letter’ pinned up by her desk, her strategy seems entirely appropriate. It appeared, she notes, ‘a premonition’<sup>158</sup> – a sign, perhaps, that ‘another family’s’ archives, which have for so long been a source of ‘self-identification’ can now not only be a place of comfort, but one which also helps Howe to come to terms with her new, bereaved self.

Sarah’s impassioned language, its rather epic style and intense Christian devoutness, is the antithesis of Howe’s economical, pragmatic prose, yet the reader senses an empathy, a connectivity, gleaned from parallels of experience both separated and joined by centuries. Like the ancestral portraits who welcome Howe, which are ‘as tender grass springing out of the earth’,<sup>159</sup> the past is old yet new, its inhabitants dead yet as current, as alive as the ‘paperwhites... blooming wonderfully’<sup>160</sup> in the room between Howe’s and Peter’s workspaces and which remind her of his absence while also representing for her the ‘breath or spirit of life’.<sup>161</sup> Howe may not ‘hear God in’<sup>162</sup> Sarah’s words, but still there is a comfort there, her observation that ‘We can’t be limited to just this anxious life’<sup>163</sup> suggesting she has nonetheless been given pause to consider that some form of continued connection with the dead – even if not via the traditional Christian concept of an afterlife – may, perhaps, be possible.

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<sup>158</sup> Poets.org, ‘An Open Field: Susan Howe in Conversation’, *poets.org*, 7 September 2011 <https://poets.org/text/open-field-susan-howe-conversation> [accessed 27 January 2022].

<sup>159</sup> Howe, ‘The Disappearance Approach’, p. 17.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

Further, several commentators have postulated that Howe and Hannah are in fact interchangeable, Andrew Eastman citing the opening poem of 'Frolic Architecture' as suggestive 'that Hannah Edwards is to be seen as a "shadow" or "type" of Howe herself':<sup>164</sup>

That this book is a history of  
a shadow that is a shadow of

me mystically one in another

Another another to subserve<sup>165</sup>

An examination of a small sample of Hannah's diary content<sup>166</sup> reveals parallels not only in the aforementioned preoccupation with intertextuality – often, it seems, in an effort to seek comfort, to reaffirm the existence of something beyond 'this anxious life' in the face of loss<sup>167</sup> – but also unwitting echoes of her own absence and in turn its evocation of Howe's burgeoning 'sense of being present at a point of absence'<sup>168</sup> which encompasses Peter's loss, Hannah and the Edwards women and her own dislocated self. Hannah's references commingle with the Protestant New England language of her diary entries, just as Howe's intertextual sources bleed into her words in the type collages. This notion of interchangeability is further suggested in the physicality of each text, Hannah's writing at some points being faded to illegibility, with all that remains a shadow, a phantom text which

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<sup>164</sup> Eastman, p. 212.

<sup>165</sup> Howe, 'Frolic Architecture', p. 39.

<sup>166</sup> Box 24 Folder 1377 and Box 24 Folder 1380, Jonathan Edwards Collection, Yale University Library Digital Collections [accessed 7 February 2022].

<sup>167</sup> For example, Isaac Watts's elegies 'On The Sudden Death of Mrs Mary Peacock' and 'On The Death Of An Aged And Honoured Relative, Mrs M. W. July 1693'. [Hannah Edwards Wetmore, *Diary, 1736-39, copy in the hand of Lucy Wetmore Whittelsey*, Jonathan Edwards collection, Yale University Library Digital Collections, Box 24 Folder 1377, 1-40 (pp. 32-34) [accessed 7 February 2022].]

<sup>168</sup> Howe, 'The Disappearance Approach', p. 31.

poignantly evokes the ‘gaps and silences’ underpinning the Edwards archive. This sense of being-yet-not-being is echoed in Howe’s own text, in ‘Frolic Architecture’s’ most extreme examples of fragmentation and in James Welling’s accompanying photograms, whose blurred and mottled appearance is suggestive of ancient, water-damaged paper, the content of which can only be guessed at. The reader – either by Hannah’s accident or Howe’s design – has little option but to try to navigate their way through, the mutual absence within the disappeared content conjuring a connectivity *between* the two women, alongside a sense of solidarity *with* them: something which may not have been achieved so successfully had Howe turned to her own private family documentation. By electing to ‘intrude’ on another family’s archive, one which is in the public domain, Howe is able to begin to articulate the absence she experiences following Peter’s loss not just as a personal journey but also as part of a universal continuum of female unpresence. This in turn activates reader consideration that Howe’s situation is just one element of a much bigger picture – a network of historic female absence, of which Howe and the Edwards women are a significant but ultimately very small part.

***‘Is one mind put into another... to ease distance’<sup>169</sup>***

Howe’s arrangement of *That This* into three formalistically distinctive sections might be viewed as antithetical in a text which strives to foster notions of connectivity. However, in a further contradiction, a close reading of the apparently divergent segments reveals an understated interrelatedness which is once more suggestive of a dialogue across history. This is exemplified in ‘The Disappearance Approach’ and ‘Frolic Architecture’ by Howe’s

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<sup>169</sup> Howe, ‘That This’, p. 104.

repetition of a key phrase from Hannah's diaries, first as conventional essay-style quotation and then embedded within 'Frolic Architecture's' fragmented intertextuality. Hannah's observation that 'our lives are all exceeding brittle and uncertain'<sup>170</sup> appears first in the longer direct quotation which follows Howe's account of her visit to Peter's grave, then reappears as a type collage fragment in 'Frolic Architecture'.<sup>171</sup> Through this constant shifting between Hannah's past and her own present, Howe 'puts one mind into another', establishing a *mise en abyme* of discourse with Hannah's writing and her own. This functions not only to ease the distance, the absence caused by loss but also again encourages the reader to consider their own role as a link in the cross-era conversational chain, drawing attention to the voices of women which have been overlooked, or who may not have spoken for fear of 'taking up space'. And while the final section, 'That This', abandons the direct use of citation, one feels that it is never far away, operating in the background as a phantom text, whose biblical tone – 'The way music is formed of/cloud and fire'<sup>172</sup> and 'Grass angels perish in this/harmonic collision'<sup>173</sup> – echoes the fervent spirituality of Sarah's letter or Hannah's diary entries to further reinforce connectivity and complete the circle.

Finally, it is noteworthy that in the aforementioned type collage Howe should also select the line 'Remember Lot's Wife' from Hannah's diaries.<sup>174</sup> Used by Hannah to illustrate how we should move on after loss – or, like Lot's wife, looking back will destroy us – we might interpret Howe's inclusion of this specific line to suggest that she seeks guidance from what she finds in the archives, a connectivity with Hannah in the same way that Hannah

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<sup>170</sup> Hannah's diary, Box 24 Folder 1377, p. 17.

<sup>171</sup> Howe, 'Frolic Architecture' in *That This*, p. 63.

<sup>172</sup> Howe, 'That This' p. 100.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>174</sup> Hannah's diary, Box 24 Folder 1377, p. 21.

feels a connectivity with the story of Lot's wife, which allows Howe to orient herself and find ways to deal with her present loss. However, there is also a potential co-existing, darker meaning for its selection and a warning to the reader. Looking back to the past, to what is archived without keeping the present in mind also carries with it a risk that those who do will presume the patriarchal assumptions inherent in the biblical archive, the absences, 'gaps and silences' to be the truth.

Like *Jane: A Murder and Nox, That This* interrogates the pain, the impact on self caused by loss and absence at both a micro and macro level. Of the three texts, it is Howe's in which perhaps this is achieved most emphatically because – not in spite of – its contradictions, in particular its reliance on another family's archive to articulate its concerns. Peter M. Sacks has observed that 'few elegies or acts of mourning succeed without seeming to place the dead, and death itself, at some cleared distance from the living'.<sup>175</sup> In an echo of Merleau-Ponty's assertion that both 'A past and a future spring forth when I reach out towards them',<sup>176</sup> delving into the Edwards Collection and undertaking what Morris has termed the 'rebleeding of ghosts', the 'resuscitation of living voices'<sup>177</sup> of the women trapped in its 'gaps and silences' enables Howe to 'ease distance' from Peter's death, manage her own present and mitigate for what is yet to come. By drawing wider attention to the historic female absence she unearths, and inviting the reader to 'surrender to the unfamiliar and the unknown'<sup>178</sup> (which may include both the Edwards archive and her challenging use of form), Howe activates a cross-era dialogue, a sense of female community,

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<sup>175</sup> Sacks, p. 19.

<sup>176</sup> M Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* trans. by Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), p. 421.

<sup>177</sup> Morris, p. 187 [Morris points out that Howe is following William Carlos Williams's thinking in *Paterson* "The Library"].

<sup>178</sup> Back, p. 7.

a reanimation of lives and thought. In this way, women both living or dead, who fear ‘taking up space’ or ‘speaking at all’ can, to borrow from Back, find ‘a voice – new and forceful – with which to speak’.<sup>179</sup>

**non-being cannot be ‘this’<sup>180</sup>**

Through the medium of memorial, Nelson, Carson and Howe invite the reader to look afresh at the female self mourned and consider the impact on the female self mourning of a traditional ‘gendering of grief’, traversing ‘personal, cultural and historical layers of meaning’<sup>181</sup> to galvanize a dialogue about female absence and underrepresentation.

Fundamental to all three works is the locating of a ‘usable past’ in the ‘masculine imaginary’ of the archives they excavate – something which leaves the authors open to criticism that, whatever their intentions, by electing to work with these sources they are further cementing their legitimacy by repeating the established methodologies they set out to critique. As Eelyn Lee and Désirée Reynolds have discussed,<sup>182</sup> however, what might appear on the surface to be simply conformity to convention can also be a powerful mechanism to initiate activism and change. Via the appropriation of the contents and procedures of the masculinist literary, classical and historical archives they explore, Nelson, Carson and Howe expose their curated selectivity, perhaps best summed up by Carolyn Pinet and Carol Pinet’s

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., p.7.

<sup>180</sup> Howe, ‘That This’, p. 102.

<sup>181</sup> Montgomery, p. 131 [referencing the work of Howe].

<sup>182</sup> Eelyn Lee & Désirée Reynolds, *Harsh Light*, Bloc Projects 16 February 2022 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oWkrBHGWO\\_0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oWkrBHGWO_0) [accessed 30 March 2022].

phrase ‘the ficticity of the master narrative’,<sup>183</sup> to shine a light on the ‘gaps and silences’ the ‘non-being’ which ‘cannot be this’ on which archival authority rests. The clear message from all three writers is that we can learn as much from interrogating what is not there as by studying what is.<sup>184</sup> Thus, these memorials move beyond ‘rememoration, an act of recalling’ to construct, to borrow from Peter M. Sacks, ‘a virtual presence in the space of absence’,<sup>185</sup> not just of their subjects but a cross-era community of women. Moreover, this presence diffuses out from those contained within the archives interrogated to the three female authors who are here informing that content and so to those who read and research their texts – an example of Denise Riley’s assertion that the dead ‘chatter away as the inner speech of the living’.<sup>186</sup> Through works which stand together in solidarity with living and dead, writer and reader, the unseen, the unspoken and the unheard are re-collected, reclaimed so that ‘Silence becomes a Self’<sup>187</sup> (and selves). We can then reframe that dialogue to echo Riley’s insistence that ‘Now we will be “women” – but now we will be persons, not these “women”’:<sup>188</sup> visible, vocal and heard.

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<sup>183</sup> Carolyn Pinet and Carol Pinet, Retrieving the Disappeared Text: Women, Chaos & Change in Argentina & Chile After the Dirty Wars, *Hispanic Journal*, 18.1, (Spring 1997), 89-108 (p. 90) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44284507> [accessed 11 April 2022].

<sup>184</sup> ‘Identity can be created in a vacuum of recorded memory, it can incorporate the lack, and the pressure of the absence shapes and informs the group’s knowledge of itself.’ [Rodney G S Carter, ‘Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and Power in Silence’, *Archivaria* 61 (Spring 2006), 215-233 (pp. 221-222) <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2518923413/abstract/213455E7E7254518PQ/1> [accessed 10 May 2023].]

<sup>185</sup> Sacks, p. 312 (discussing Geoffrey Hill’s ‘Veni Coronaberis’).

<sup>186</sup> Denise Riley, ‘A Voice without a mouth’: Inner Speech’ in Jean-Jacques Lecercle and Denise Riley, *The Force Of Language* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 19.

<sup>187</sup> Howe, ‘Encloser’, p. 182.

<sup>188</sup> Riley, *Am I That Name: Feminism and the Category of ‘Women’ in History*, p. 113.

## 2: 'NOTES ON THE STATE OF WHITENESS'<sup>1</sup>: DOCUMENTING WHITE SUPREMACY AND SYSTEMIC RACISM IN CLAUDIA RANKINE'S *CITIZEN* AND *JUST US*

### 'a white centred framework'<sup>2</sup>

Speaking at the Internationales Literaturfestival Berlin 2022, Claudia Rankine states that while she would not define herself as an activist, she nonetheless believes 'any work that you do that pushes against ideas that white people are in a position of power naturally is a form of activism'.<sup>3</sup> Her preferred terminology, as referenced by Lauren Laverne in Rankine's *Desert Island Discs* interview (2023) is 'archivist', a role which, according to Rankine, allows her to interrogate 'the questions we should be asking both of the past and of the present'.<sup>4</sup> This chapter will examine how such an activism underpins Rankine's *Citizen* (2014) and *Just Us* (2020). Through her interaction with and disruption of conventions from the poetry, academic, media and historical archives, I will argue that Rankine illuminates the 'white centred framework' which shores up a continuum of systemic racism routinely unseen, unacknowledged and avoided by progressive white liberals. It should be recognised at the outset, however, that undertaking this task as a white critical writer is, therefore, fundamentally problematic. I share concerns, voiced by Ari Banas and Arielle Greenberg in Rankine's co-edited essay collection *The Racial Imaginary*, that my analysis will be 'overly

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<sup>1</sup> Claudia Rankine, *Just Us: An American Conversation* (London: Penguin, 2021), p. 107.

<sup>2</sup> Claudia Rankine, 'big little lies' in *Just Us*, p. 187.

<sup>3</sup> Internationales Literaturfestival Berlin. 2022. *Claudia Rankine*, online video recording, YouTube, 17 September <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W0qJFwrUFps> [accessed 3 October 2022].

<sup>4</sup> Claudia Rankine, BBC Radio 4, 'Claudia Rankine', *Desert Island Discs*, BBC Radio 4, 11 June 2023 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m001msyr> [accessed 16 June 2023].

simplistic... superficial’;<sup>5</sup> that it could be ‘offending someone’<sup>6</sup> or, as Beth Loffreda has observed, seemingly seeking ‘an A for effort’ for being ‘brave’<sup>7</sup> in discussing the subject at all. Further, will the inclusion of Rankine in a thesis in which all the other primary texts are written by white authors appear a tokenistic gesture, where ticking a diversity box is the prime concern? Equally, however, if as white critical writer one eschews writing about the work of Black writers, about race and racism, one is not only ignoring the dominance of whiteness but is also complicit in its perpetuation. I concur with Banas and Greenberg’s respective reflections then, that rather than shying away from saying ‘what’s presumably known’,<sup>8</sup> the white critical writer can and should add another voice to the voices already drawing attention to structural discrimination but crucially while at once ‘point[ing] at them’ should ‘call [themselves] out on them’.<sup>9</sup> Hence, I would like to acknowledge that the following assessment of Rankine’s texts, though written in solidarity with the author and those she documents will, inescapably, be one which is shaped and constrained by my own whiteness.

This chapter will hypothesise that the archives Rankine interrogates are controlled by ‘a culture that is set up to keep them [white people] ignorant of their ignorance’,<sup>10</sup> part of a network of institutions designed to preserve white privilege and which, to borrow from

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<sup>5</sup> Ari Banas, ‘What Do We See? What Do We Not See?’ in *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*, ed. by Claudia Rankine, Beth Loffreda, Max King Cap (Albany: Fence Books, 2016), pp. 37-42 (p. 37).

<sup>6</sup> Arielle Greenberg, ‘Response to Call for Writing About Writing About Race’, in *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*, pp. 79-82 (p. 82).

<sup>7</sup> Beth Loffreda, ‘Open Letter’, in *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*, ed. by Claudia Rankine, Beth Loffreda, Max King Cap (Albany: Fence Books, 2016), pp. 208-211 (p. 209).

<sup>8</sup> Banas, p. 37.

<sup>9</sup> Greenberg, p. 82.

<sup>10</sup> Rankine, ‘evolution’ in *Just Us*, p. 59.

Jean-Jacques Lecercle, 'secrete ready-made utterances which their subjects endlessly repeat and through which they recognise themselves: the public metaphors and clichés we live by...' <sup>11</sup> I will discuss how Rankine's reframing of these cornerstones of white supremacy shine a light on institutionalised normalisation, the 'silences and denials surrounding privilege' <sup>12</sup> which impact Black identities and the precarious state of what she terms 'living while black'. <sup>13</sup> Firstly, I will consider the archive that is poetry, specifically Rankine's decision, in *Citizen*, to employ the lyric (whose 'I', Mary-Jean Chan notes, 'is often assumed to be white unless otherwise stated'), <sup>14</sup> alongside a broader assessment of the significance of form in both texts. Secondly, I will reflect on Rankine's adherence to and/or subversion of scholarly conventions drawn from the academic archive – which, as Rankine herself highlights in *Citizen*, operates on the same assumptions <sup>15</sup> – in particular how citation

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<sup>11</sup> Jean-Jacques Lecercle 'The Concept of Language We Need' in Jean-Jacques Lecercle and Denise Riley, *The Force Of Language* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 112-170 (p. 142).

<sup>12</sup> Peggy McIntosh, 'White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies' 1-17 (p. 13) [https://www.nationalseedproject.org/images/documents/White\\_Privilege\\_and\\_Male\\_Privilege\\_Personal\\_Account-Peggy\\_McIntosh.pdf](https://www.nationalseedproject.org/images/documents/White_Privilege_and_Male_Privilege_Personal_Account-Peggy_McIntosh.pdf) [accessed 14 September 2022].

<sup>13</sup> 'Though the white liberal imagination likes to feel temporarily bad about black suffering, there really is no mode of empathy that can replicate the daily strain of knowing that as a black person you can be killed for simply being black: no hands in your pockets, no playing music, no sudden movements, no driving your car, no walking at night, no walking in the day, no turning onto this street, no entering this building, no standing your ground, no standing here, no standing there, no talking back, no playing with toy guns, no living while black.' [Claudia Rankine, 'The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning', *New York Times*, 22 June 2015 <https://repeatingislands.com/2015/06/24/claudia-rankine-the-condition-of-black-life-is-one-of-mourning/> [accessed 15 September 2022].]

<sup>14</sup> Mary-Jean Chan, 'Towards a Poetics of Racial Trauma: Lyric Hybridity in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*', *Journal of American Studies* 52.1 (2018), 137-163 (p. 152) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817000457>.

<sup>15</sup> 'At the end of a brief phone conversation, you tell the manager you are speaking with that you will come by his office to sign the form. When you arrive and announce yourself, he blurts out, I didn't know you were black!' [Claudia Rankine, *Citizen* (London: Penguin, 2015), p. 44.]

functions in each work. The final section will explore Rankine's inclusion of content from an expansive intertextual archive of source materials which, in common with Maggie Nelson's *Jane: A Murder*, comprises 'a broad range of allusions to "high" and "low" cultural sources'<sup>16</sup> – from 'the voices who have impacted on [her] own thinking'<sup>17</sup> and the eighteenth century writings of Thomas Jefferson to contemporary sports journalism, Twitter posts and hair product packaging. For the purposes of this chapter, my analysis will, for *Citizen*, concentrate on Rankine's sources from the media archive, in particular coverage concerning the tennis player Serena Williams and the murder of James Craig Anderson; and, for *Just Us*, the historical archive, as represented by Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*. I will propose that, by observing conventions from sectors whose voices are habitually presumed to be white, and by incorporating content (recontextualised but often without comment) from archives built upon impermeable whiteness, Rankine exposes systemic racism through its own mechanisms, which work to legitimise self-perpetuating unawareness and refusal. The result is an alternative record which prompts readers to think, to start a conversation, not just with society but, perhaps more importantly, with themselves.

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<sup>16</sup> Anthony Reed, *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), p. 100. ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>17</sup> Maya Caspari (quoting Claudia Rankine), 'Writing Whiteness: A Conversation with Claudia Rankine', *Wasafiri* 103 (13 October 2020) <https://www.wasafiri.org/article/writing-whiteness-a-conversation-with-claudia-rankine/> [accessed 6 October 2022].

**‘Repetition is insistence’:<sup>18</sup> a note on white supremacy and the structural racism of archives**

Prior to the analysis of Rankine’s texts, it should be acknowledged that if this thesis is based on the assertion that ‘poetry’, ‘academia’ or ‘media’ are archives, it is not unreasonable to assume that management of these – be it officially or unofficially – should be governed by the same principles as national archives, which have been widely documented as ‘always already colonial and imperial, always already white supremacist’.<sup>19</sup> For example, Hilary Jenkinson’s *A Manual of Archival Administration* (1922) was still considered a mainstay for frameworks of archival theory and practice late into the twentieth century, despite its author’s role as a colonial administrator.<sup>20</sup> Further, decolonisation, rather than loosening the grip of whiteness on these archives, created an additional stratum of systemic racism by seeking to suppress materials which would attest to the brutality of colonial regimes,<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Rankine, ‘social contract’ in *Just Us*, p. 151. [Rankine is alluding to Gertrude Stein’s concept of repetition as ‘insistence’, through which the ‘composition we live in changes but essentially what happens does not change’

Gertrude Stein, ‘Portraits And Repetition’, *Lectures In America* (London: Virago, 1988), p. 195.]

<sup>19</sup> J J Ghaddar and Michelle Caswell, “‘To Go Beyond’: Towards a Decolonial Archival Praxis’, *Archival Science* 19 (2019), 71-85 (p. 76) <https://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10502-019-09311-1>.

<sup>20</sup> Karen S M Macfarlane, ‘How do UK archivists perceive ‘white supremacy’ in the UK archives sector?’, *Archives and Records: The Journal of the Archives and Records Association*, 42.3 (2021), 266-283

(p. 270) <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23257962.2021.1995708>.

<sup>21</sup> Linebaugh and Lowry give the following example of British actions when facing expulsion from Kenya: ‘officers across the colony were instructed to sift through classified files and identify any material which would cause the UK or any other European government embarrassment, incriminate any colonial collaborators under an independent administration, or privilege any national political party over one another. Administrators would either destroy, remove or redact files according to these criteria. Officers across the British empire participated in this purge, leading to the destruction of an unknowable number of documents and the removal of over 20,000 files from 37 ex-colonies (referred to as the Migrated Archives). These records were stored secretly in maximum security facilities in and outside of London until 2011 following a lawsuit against the British government for the use of torture in Kenya leading up to independence.’ [Riley Linebaugh and James Lowry, ‘The archival colour line: race, records and postcolonial custody’, *Archives and Records: The*

formalising its bequeathed silencing of marginalised voices and narratives. Though British, Jenkinson's methodologies have undoubtedly been and continue to be significantly in play in the American culture of *Citizen and Just Us*. An 'honorary member' of the Society of American Archivists, Jenkinson's *Manual* 'became a Bible... assigned to and read by students in all classes in archival administration in the United States',<sup>22</sup> likely part of an ongoing process of absorption and mimicking of European colonial culture as identified by Frantz

Fanon:

Two centuries ago, a former European colony decided to catch up with Europe. It succeeded so well that the United States of America became a monster, in which the taints, the sickness and the inhumanity of Europe have grown to appalling dimensions.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, as in the UK, US archival practices were founded not on Jenkinson's claimed impartiality but rather on what Michelle Caswell has identified as 'the view from a large government bureaucracy attending to an increasingly vocal working class and women's movement at home and active resistance to imperialism in far-flung colonies across the world' rendering them ineluctably 'complicit in colonialism and its attendant racial capitalism and patriarchy'.<sup>24</sup> A priori, it would follow that the 'invisible systems'<sup>25</sup> whose roots are

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*Journal of the Archives and Records Association*, 42.3 (2021), 284-303 (p. 293)  
<https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23257962.2021.1940898>.]

<sup>22</sup> Oliver W Holmes, 'Sir Hilary Jenkinson 1882-1961', *The American Archivist*, 24.3 (1961), 345-347 (pp. 345, 346) <https://meridian.allenpress.com/american-archivist/article/24/3/345/22175/Sir-Hilary-Jenkinson-1882-1961> [accessed 22 November 2022].

<sup>23</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Constance Farrington (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 252.

<sup>24</sup> Michelle Caswell, 'Dusting For Fingerprints: Introducing Feminist Standpoint Appraisal', *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, 3.2 (2021), 1-36 (p. 16) <https://journals.litwinbooks.com/index.php/jclis/article/view/113> [accessed 7 December 2022].

<sup>25</sup> McIntosh, p. 13.

traceable to the imperial and colonial mythologies institutionalised in formal archives are also at work in the more informal intertextual archives which Rankine excavates. The result is a recursive loop of ‘active not knowing’<sup>26</sup> wherein racism is deemed to be an individual and not a structural issue – as Rankine has pointed out, ‘White people have the gift of being in the moment without understanding how the moment was formed’<sup>27</sup> – hence, its continuation is assured.

### **1: The Poetry Archive: the lyric, white space and ‘white’ space**

This section will examine the impact of Rankine’s decision to locate *Citizen* within the traditionally white-centric domain of lyric poetry, before considering the form of both texts, specifically the significance of white space in each. Subtitled ‘An American Lyric’, *Citizen* engages with the genre from the outset while at once hybridising it, Rankine’s deployment of techniques more conventionally associated with experimental poetry immediately redefining what the lyric can be. I will consider how the perceived ‘white’ space of the lyric and the physical white space in *Citizen* and *Just Us* speak to systemic racism’s perceptions of societal white spaces and notions of ‘white fragility’,<sup>28</sup> and how this contributes to Rankine’s curation of an archive which not only documents Black identity and experience wilfully undocumented by the dominant culture of whiteness, but also the

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<sup>26</sup> Sarah Blake, ‘Just Us: An American Conversation’, *Politics and Prose Live!*, PBS, 5 December 2020 <https://www.pbs.org/video/just-us-an-american-conversation-xjajw/> [accessed 14 September 2022].

<sup>27</sup> Claudia Rankine, *Politics and Prose Live!*

<sup>28</sup> ‘This insulated environment of racial protection builds white expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress, leading to what I refer to as White Fragility.’ [Robin DiAngelo, ‘White Fragility’, *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3.3 (2011), 54-70 (p. 54) <https://www.robindiangelo.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/White-Fragility-Published.-1.pdf> [accessed 14 September 2022].]

unacknowledged structural discrimination at the heart of this undocumenting. The difference between convention and the archive should again be acknowledged at this point: the following discussion posits lyric *convention* as a component of the sub-genre ‘lyric’ within the overall archive that is poetry, rather than suggesting that lyric traits in themselves constitute archival tradition.

In the essay ‘Interview With An Empire’, M. NourbeSe Philip notes ‘the tradition of the solitary voice of the poet—often male, a white male, who embodied the wisdom of the society, and who spoke for, on behalf of and to *his* society or culture. In a voice of authority.<sup>29</sup> This voice is, in common with the allegedly impartial voices of the architects of archival practices, rooted in imperialist ideologies which suppress and deny Black identity. When one considers colonialism’s systematic over-writing of Black voices, crucially the forcing upon them of English, a language, Philip stresses, ‘that bore us no love and nurtured our non-being’,<sup>30</sup> it feels inevitable that the poetry archive should not only have become founded on white supremacist structures but also that poetic culture in the twenty first century continues to be one of ‘assumed and unnamed whiteness’.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, Philip singles out the lyric voice in particular as being ‘one of the tools used to further the ends of colonialism’<sup>32</sup> because, perhaps, it is within its song-like intimacies that a more sinister

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<sup>29</sup> M. NourbeSe Philip, ‘Interview With An Empire’ in *Blank: Essays and Interviews* (Toronto: Book\*hug Press, 2017), p. 61.

<sup>30</sup> Philip, ‘Jammin’ Still’ in *Blank: Essays and Interviews*, p. 15.

<sup>31</sup> Banas, p. 42.

Substantiation of this point can be found in Francisco Aragón’s essay ‘And Here He Comes Smiling Intending No Harm: A Poetics of the Invisible’— which includes a discussion of ‘T.O.C. (Table of Contents) anxiety’ with reference to the under-representation of Latinx authors in poetry journals. [*The Racial Imaginary*, pp. 185-195.]

<sup>32</sup> Philip, ‘Interview With An Empire’, p. 62.

agenda is able to hide in plain sight.<sup>33</sup> We might take as an example Ben Jonson's 'Song From

*The Silent Woman*:

Still to be neat, still to be dressed,  
As you were going to a feast;  
Still to be powdered, still perfumed:  
Lady, it is to be presumed,  
Though art's hid causes are not found,  
All is not sweet, all is not sound.

Give me a look, give me a face,  
That makes simplicity a grace;  
Robes loosely flowing, hair as free;  
Such sweet neglect more taketh me  
Than all th' adulteries of art:  
They strike mine eyes, but not my heart.<sup>34</sup>

At first glance, this appears to be an appeal from the speaker (whom, we assume, is male) that his lover should not concern herself with fine clothes and cosmetics, as he loves her for herself. However, his demand to 'Give me a look, give me a face' seems not so much a plea but an order, one which very much chimes with the authoritarian male poet of Philip's analysis – particularly when one considers the poem in the context of Jonson's play, where it is introduced by the character Clerimont as his response to frustration at that 'now-a-days' a woman will not permit an audience with a man 'till she be ready... till she has painted, and perfumed, and wash'd and scour'd'.<sup>35</sup> By contrast, his friend Truewit replies that he would rather wait in order to see a woman that is 'complete and finish'd'.<sup>36</sup> In either event, locating

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<sup>33</sup> 'Infinite prejudices are shown packed into the sweet little whitewashed room of the lyric.' Adam Piette discusses this concept in his review of Andrea Brady's *Poetry and Bondage*. [*Blackbox Manifold* 28 (Summer 2022) <https://blackboxmanifold.sites.sheffield.ac.uk/issues/issues-21-28/issue-28> [accessed 1 December 2022].]

<sup>34</sup> Ben Jonson, 'Song From The Silent Woman', in *Epicoene; or, The Silent Woman*, Project Gutenberg eBook plain text file, released 1 May 2003 (updated 25 January 2020), Act I, Scene i.

<sup>35</sup> Jonson, *Epicoene; or, The Silent Woman*, Act I, Scene i.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, Act I, Scene i.

this poem within the play itself suggests that, far from being the romantic gesture we might expect of lyric it is, in reality, about male control over female behaviours, a desire to dictate how women present themselves in accordance with individual male preferences. Further, the assumption that the female subject would wish to be ‘powdered’ in order to look her best may be seen to reflect the historic use of face powder where ‘a whitened face and a smooth complexion signalled a woman of high status’, its perceived implication of beauty reinforced by the prevalence of ‘whitened, unblemished skin’ in Renaissance artworks<sup>37</sup> contemporaneous with Jonson’s writing. Four centuries later, while thick white face powder may no longer be in fashion, the emphasis placed on white skin as a signifier of status persists in present-day ‘shadism’ – the valuing of lighter skinned Black individuals more highly than those with darker skin tones – as its exploitation by manufacturers of the multiplicity of skin-whitening products available online attests.<sup>38</sup> In Jonson’s twelve short lines we see the capacity for maleness to control, and whiteness to be idealised. Why, then, would Rankine, a Black woman, choose as her medium a form dominated by the white male voices which speak for others, and what is the impact of her decision? In the following section, I will explore how Rankine excavates the white space of the poetry archive, repurposing the lyric conventions of intimate address and arrangement of text on the page to speak back to themselves, to carry – as Denise Riley has observed of Blake’s use of lyric –

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<sup>37</sup> Wikipedia ‘Face powder’, *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Face\\_powder&oldid=1195432300](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Face_powder&oldid=1195432300) [accessed 4 September 2024].

<sup>38</sup> Rankine reproduces screenshots of selling copy for such a product in ‘whitening’, *Just Us*, p. 308.

‘a savagely distressed content’<sup>39</sup> which clearly signposts the correlation between racist microaggressions and physical violence. Zeroing in on white fragility, she invites readers to make connections between private and public and so to ask questions of themselves.

Despite its subtitle *An American Lyric, Citizen*, as Keegan Cook Finberg has observed, ‘contains all the hallmarks of experimental writing: borrowed text, multiple or fractured voices, constraint-based systems of creation, ekphrastic cataloging, and acute engagement with visual art’.<sup>40</sup> It can, of course, be said that the incorporation of these experimental elements into the lyric form is what makes the work subversive; however, I would argue that this is an over-simplification and, rather, that this subversion occurs most strikingly not in Rankine’s experimentation but in her adoption of convention. Further, far from being the antithesis of Rankine’s experimental style, the lyric may be seen as an apposite vehicle for her own particular brand of activism, Jonathan Culler having noted its historic role as ‘a potent form of social action’,<sup>41</sup> one which ‘contributes to the construction of a world and works to resist other forms of world-making’.<sup>42</sup> This resistance may be found, for example, in Rankine’s account of a train journey in which other passengers have refused to travel alongside a man whom the speaker sits next to:

From across the aisle tracks room harbor world a woman  
asks a man in the rows ahead if he would mind switching  
seats. She wishes to sit with her daughter or son. You hear  
but you don’t hear. You can’t see.

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<sup>39</sup> Denise Riley in Romana Huk ‘in Conversation with Denise Riley’, *PN Review* 103, 21.5 (May-June 1995) [https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item\\_id=1912](https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=1912) [accessed 17 January 2025].

<sup>40</sup> Keegan Cook Finberg, ‘American Lyric, American Surveillance, and Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen*’, *Contemporary Women’s Writing*, 15.3 (November 2021), 326-344 (p. 330) <https://dx.doi.org/10.1093/cww/vpab037>.

<sup>41</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 320.

<sup>42</sup> Culler, p. 8.

It's then the man next to you turns to you. And as if from inside your own head you agree that if anyone asks you to move, you'll tell them we are travelling as a family.<sup>43</sup>

Rankine's clear, plain language states the unavoidable fact that white space is everywhere – not just 'across the aisle' but on any mode of transport, in any room. Every space, we understand, is white space. The lyric's traditional associations with white authorship thus make it a powerful tool with which to resist white world making, the speaker's assertion that they and the man are 'travelling as a family' suggesting not only a sense of solidarity but also a reclaiming of white space which works to construct a world in which everyone has an equal right – not just to be in the space but just to be.<sup>44</sup>

Similarly, the lyric's association with 'intimate address'<sup>45</sup> is, as Chan has observed, key for Rankine in opening up channels for 'eventual dialogue',<sup>46</sup> as illustrated by the following retelling of a meeting between two academics:

A woman you do not know wants to join you for lunch. You are visiting her campus. In the café you both order the Caesar salad. This overlap is not the beginning of anything because she immediately points out that she, her father, her grandfather, and you, all attended the same college. She wanted her son to go there as well, but because of affirmative action or minority something – she is not sure what they are calling it these days and weren't they supposed to get rid of it? – her son wasn't accepted.<sup>47</sup>

Despite these individuals' shared status both as educated, middle class professionals and human beings (simply yet effectively conveyed by their choice of the same lunch), the

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<sup>43</sup> Rankine, 'Making Room' in *Citizen*, pp. 132-133.

<sup>44</sup> Claudia Rankine, 'At what point can I just be?' [Siobhan Burke, 'Yes, You're Being Watched', *New York Times*, 26 April 2017 [accessed 15 September 2022]. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.]

<sup>45</sup> Chan, p. 141.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>47</sup> Rankine, *Citizen*, p. 13.

colleague's unquestioning entitledness and absolute unawareness that her behaviour is in any way racist exposes the ultimate unwillingness of whiteness, however apparently liberal, to cede access to spaces it has been socialised to consider its right.<sup>48</sup> The location of this microaggression in an academic setting is especially impactful, given the sector's positioning of itself as being progressive in its ethos. While intimate, personal experience such as the above is typical of lyric convention, it at once reads like a prose piece, creating parallels with public documents such as the media reports which feature prominently throughout the collection, a constant reminder of the racism embedded in 'state apparatuses'. In this way, the intimacy of classic lyric is repurposed to be both inward-looking yet outward-facing, exemplifying Marjorie Perloff's observation that 'in our own information age the lyric self is increasingly created by a complex process of negotiation between private feeling and public evidence'.<sup>49</sup> The text therefore becomes a microcosm of society, the documenting of such encounters serving to delineate how the normalisation of individually articulated racist microaggressions is symptomatic not merely of personal prejudice but rather the handed-on mythologies of colonially-based structural racism.

Much has been written about Rankine's use of the second person in *Citizen*, her decision to adopt a 'lyric you' apparently at odds with the more predominantly acknowledged 'I':

You are in the dark, in the car, watching the black-tarred street being swallowed by speed; he tells you his dean is making him hire a person of color when there are so many great writers out there.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> 'Their socialization fundamentally affects people of color, whether or not individual whites are present for the institutionalization of racist decisions and omissions.' [Rankine, *Just Us*, p. 59.]

<sup>49</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius: poetry by other means in the new century* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 101.

<sup>50</sup> Rankine, *Citizen*, p. 10.

However, this may again be seen also to represent an adherence to lyric convention, Culler having noted the existence of a “blurred you”, which gestures toward the reader but is also plausibly taken as either the poet himself or someone else.<sup>51</sup> An alternative reading would be that to say ‘I’, as Andrea Brady has suggested, ‘lays claim to the privileges of subjectivity from which some categories of people have been historically excluded’,<sup>52</sup> and would perhaps therefore constitute a step too close to the authoritarian white male lyric voice discussed earlier. Rankine herself, in an interview with *Guernica*, offers a more nuanced explanation: that while her choice was made in part due to the fact that ‘some of the situations were mine and some belonged to other people... The real issue was, the second person for me disallowed the reader from knowing immediately how to position themselves. I didn’t want to race the individuals’.<sup>53</sup> This fluidity is demonstrated in Rankine’s reading of the above poem at Harvard University’s Woodberry Poetry Room. In the post-reading Q&A, a member of the audience asks a question which assumes the speaker of this segment to be Black: Rankine replies that the friend whose story this is, is white.<sup>54</sup> Once more, lyric tradition (albeit a less prominent element thereof) becomes a means to encourage readers to question assumptions and expectations, its repeated polyphonic ‘you’ being, as Maureen

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<sup>51</sup> Culler, p. 194.

<sup>52</sup> Andrea Brady, *Poetry and Bondage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 24. Cambridge Core ebook.

<sup>53</sup> Meara Sharma, ‘Claudia Rankine on Blackness as the Second Person’, *Guernica*, 17 November 2014 <https://www.guernicamag.com/blackness-as-the-second-person/> [accessed 28 September 2022].

<sup>54</sup> Harvard University, ‘The Making of Citizen: Claudia Rankine, Woodberry Poetry Room’, online video recording, YouTube, 4 May 2015 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8RyIFX9OG54> [accessed 12 September 2022].

Gallagher has remarked, 'a key pedagogical strategy for decentering whiteness',<sup>55</sup> through which Rankine might (as noted by Philip of her own approach) force the lyric 'to share the page with other voices'<sup>56</sup> which it historically refused and silenced. Additionally, I would argue that this 'you' also carries with it a sense of intimacy, the conversational tone of an interaction between two parties (reader and speakers/reader and society/reader and their own self) which fosters proximity in a way that 'I' might not – thus heightening the capacity for the personal to create a dialogue about the public.

Rankine's use of 'you' may further be seen to observe the lyric convention of repetition, functioning as a kind of overarching refrain within which individual discrete repetitions operate. Culler has outlined the significance of this device not just as means of embedding words into the minds of readers but also in demonstrating how such a sticking in the memory comes 'to play a role in thought and action'.<sup>57</sup> This is apparent in *Citizen's* much-quoted 'Stop-and-Frisk', where the speaker relates their latest experience in a lifelong recursive loop of racial profiling by the police:

And you are not the guy and still you fit the description  
because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting  
the description.<sup>58</sup>

The simple yet insistent repetitions, embedded in the reader's memory by Rankine's frequent and persistent circling back to them throughout the poem, are also key in prompting consideration of a cascade of issues this simplicity almost belies. Initially, one

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<sup>55</sup> Maureen Gallagher, 'The Didactic and Elegiac Modes of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*', in *Revisiting the Elegy in the Black Lives Matter Era*, ed. by Tiffany Austin, Sequoia Maner, Emily Ruth Rutter and darlene anita scott, (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 51-65 (p. 55). ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>56</sup> Philip, 'Interview with an Empire', p. 65.

<sup>57</sup> Culler, p. 305.

<sup>58</sup> Rankine, 'Stop-and-Frisk' in *Citizen*, p. 105.

sees the obvious injustice of the stop and search, but the re-emerging refrain soon becomes exhausting, locking the reader into the speaker's gruellingly endless cycle of frustration, anger and – most overwhelmingly – fatigue integral to 'living while black'.<sup>59</sup> Also layered within these repetitions is the notion that there is only 'one guy', an allusion, perhaps, to institutionalised racist mythologies which assume homogeneity via a legacy of baseless stereotypes and tropes rooted in colonial thought-systems (more of which in Section Three). The reader, like the speaker, has no escape, and perhaps might therefore be moved from feeling 'temporarily bad about black suffering'<sup>60</sup> and being unaware of the repeated erasure of Black identities to 'channeling thought in particular ways'<sup>61</sup> – towards the 'action' of meaningful awareness and a willingness to change.

Throughout *Citizen*, the theoretical white space of the lyric works in partnership with the physical space of the text, where, Chan has noted, 'blocks of black letters appear to be resisting the white borders that surround the words like a ring fence'.<sup>62</sup> When one considers Brady's observation that the 'notion of lyric as a genre whose aesthetic or formal constraints are voluntary... arises through acts of erasure',<sup>63</sup> the initially comfortable familiarity of the white space begins to represent a challenge to these notions, becoming instead a stark reminder of the absences resulting from exclusion and refusal, a visual aide memoire of what Rankine has described as a 'legacy and the myth of meritocracy fixed in white'.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> The constant presence of this fatigue is clearly signposted from the outset, as illustrated by the opening line of *Citizen*: 'When you are alone and too tired even to turn on any of your devices' [Rankine, 'I' in *Citizen*, p. 5.]

<sup>60</sup> See Note 13, p. 140.

<sup>61</sup> Culler, p. 305.

<sup>62</sup> Chan, p. 148.

<sup>63</sup> Brady, p. 179.

<sup>64</sup> Rankine, 'sound and fury' in *Just Us*, p. 179.

Moreover, Dan Chiasson has pointed out that *Citizen's* 'rectilinear language blocks',<sup>65</sup> while typical of the conventions of prose poetry, also reflect the form of documents associated with more official archives, for example, 'the police log'.<sup>66</sup> This may be illustrated by examining the physicality of Rankine's text alongside an example police report template:

James Craig Anderson is dead. The pickup truck is a figure of speech. It is as the crown standing in for the kingdom. Who told you it was a crown? Did we tell you the pickup was as good as home? You are so young, Dedmon. You were so young.

James Craig Anderson is dead. What ails you, Dedmon? What up? What's up is James Craig Anderson is dead. So sorry. So angry, an imploding anger. It must let you go. It let you go.

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<sup>65</sup> Dan Chiasson, 'Color Codes: A poet examines race in America', *New Yorker*, 20 October 2014 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/10/27/color-codes> [accessed 12 September 2022].

<sup>66</sup> Chiasson, as above.

<sup>67</sup> Rankine, 'In Memory of James Craig Anderson' in *Citizen*, p. 95.

## Satellite Beach Police Department Report



Case Number: 010004

Date: 08/09/2010

On first January 01, 2001 at 0310 hrs, I was dispatched to 962 loggerhead island drive in reference to a disturbance between the occupants. Upon arrival of OFC HEINZ and myself, we met with Vicki R. BRISTAL.

She states she and her hny friend were at a friend's house. Earlier this evening and argued about child custody matters from her previous marriage. Buchan left the gathering went home. Upon BRISTOL'S arrival home she noticed some of her personal items and had been boxed up and placed by the front door. According to BRISTOL, she attempted to go into their bedroom and get some other belongings but was unable because BUCHAN had locked the door and would not let her enter. She also stated that incident did not involve any physical altercation.

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Reporting Officer: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Sworn to and subscribed before me this \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_, 2010. Total Pages: \_\_\_\_\_

Notary/Law Enforcement Officer: \_\_\_\_\_

Supervisor Approval: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

[www.reporttemplates.org](http://www.reporttemplates.org) 68

The juxtaposition of poem and official document serves to clearly delineate the visual similarities between these two sets of clean and concise prose blocks, but there is also an additional stratum of meaning at work here. Both images depict words enclosed and constrained by white space, but to see that space so emphatically aligned with an object which represents the white dominated space of law enforcement – specifically the recording of data about individuals – throws into sharp relief the connections between the Black

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<sup>68</sup> [templatelab.com](http://templatelab.com) '20+ Police Report Template & Examples [Fake / Real]', <https://templatelab.com/police-report/> [accessed 15 November 2022]'.

words and lives Rankine documents and the way in which they are at once restricted and surveilled by that which surrounds them.

On first reading, it may appear that Rankine's arrangement of the text in *Just Us* – in a recto-verso format, with detailed explanatory notes, fact checks (more of which in Section Two) and images on the verso – makes the white space less constraining, a less deliberate device than in *Citizen*. I believe, however, that when we do encounter white space – at the end of sections or occasionally in the middle of a section (page 46, for instance, is completely blank) – this makes it surprising, perhaps even more arresting than in *Citizen*. Situated as it is among citations and visual elements drawn from a range of formal and informal archival sources, I would argue that Rankine's employment of white space here extends the thinking demonstrated in *Citizen* to signpost also the 'gaps and silences' which Susan Howe identified as being inherent in archival structures<sup>69</sup> but which also then cascade into the socialisation processes governing everyday interactions. Especially impactful is Rankine's account, in 'social contract', of a dinner party during which – as the only Black guest – her attempt to discuss the role of racism in the 2016 US presidential election is deflected by a woman suddenly acclaiming the 'beautiful'<sup>70</sup> brownies on the dessert tray, her white fragility unable to cope with 'the guest who brings all of herself to dinner'.<sup>71</sup> Having asked aloud 'Am I being silenced?',<sup>72</sup> Rankine goes on to observe 'I stay silent because I want to make a point of that silence. Among white people, black people are allowed to talk

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<sup>69</sup> 'Knowledge, no matter how I get it, involves exclusion and repression. National histories hold ruptures and hierarchies.' [Susan Howe, 'Encloser' in *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy* ed. by Charles Bernstein, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (New York: Roof, 1998), pp. 175-196 (p. 178).]

<sup>70</sup> Rankine, 'social contract' in *Just Us*, p. 151.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

about their precarious lives, but they are not allowed to implicate the present company in that precariousness<sup>73</sup> (a thread which re-emerges in both texts). When one turns overleaf, one is confronted on the verso with over half a page of white space, followed by a reproduction of Gerry Winograd's photograph *Laughing Woman with Ice Cream Cone* at its base.<sup>74</sup> The sandwiching of the white space between Rankine's meditation on silencing and the image of the carefree woman, the epitome of privileged white freedom, directs the reader to consider again a connectivity between public and private. Traced back from a public-facing archival document (the photograph) through the white space of structurally racist systems and the silences which inhabit them to the exchange at the dinner party, this episode exemplifies how whiteness strives at every turn to protect 'its' spaces from the intrusion of voices which question and disrupt its authority.<sup>75</sup> By drawing on conventions such as lyric traits and the use of white space, then, Rankine manipulates content from the 'white space' of the poetry archive, undertaking from within her own act of activism-

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

In his essay 'Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and Power in Silence' Rodney G S Carter notes the potential power of silence when an active choice by marginalised individuals: 'silence can be a method used by the marginalized to deny the archives their records as a way to exercise their power over the powerful.' [Rodney G S Carter, 'Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and Power in Silence', *Archivaria* 61 (Spring 2006), 215-233 (p. 215) <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2518923413/abstract/213455E7E7254518PQ/1> [accessed 10 May 2023].]

<sup>74</sup> Rankine, 'social contract' in *Just Us*, p. 156.

<sup>75</sup> Sara Ahmed draws attention to this point in her book *Willful Subjects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014). ProQuest Ebook Central.

'To speak out of anger about racism is to be heard as the ones who are stopping or blocking the flow of communication, who are preventing the forward progression sometimes described as reconciliation.

When we talk about racism we become the cause of the problem we reveal. Racism is treated as a foreign(er) word: as imposing our will on what would otherwise be a happy situation.' [Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, (p. 167).]

documentation – not just of the acts of racism and denial of identity she describes but also the routinely unacknowledged structural nature of their existence.

## **2: The academic archive: 'white' space and ivory towers**

Section Two will focus on Rankine's reframing of practices from the academic archive in each text, again highlighting the employment of convention as subversion. While it should clearly be acknowledged that the academic community is by no means exclusively white, the fact remains, as Banas has pointed out, that 'if you look at this group as a whole you gaze on a sea of white people'.<sup>76</sup> Further, in spite of the sector's professed liberality, this allegedly diverse space, as we saw earlier in Rankine's account of the meeting between the two academics, belies an ingrained white fragility beneath, where the scholarly environment, Audre Lorde has observed, historically offers its Black staff and students 'opportunities to misname yourselves, to forget who you are, to forget where your real interests lie'.<sup>77</sup> As an academic herself, it is particularly significant, then, that Rankine should choose to manipulate or incorporate scholarly convention, representing once more her technique of exposing structural racism through the traditions of the very institutions responsible for its perpetuation. Beginning with *Citizen*, I will consider the impact of Rankine's rejection of established mechanisms of citation in favour of a much more informal namechecking and refusal of categorisation, as well as her borrowing from the formal academic procedures of

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<sup>76</sup> Banas, p. 39.

<sup>77</sup> Audre Lorde, 'Learning from the 60s' in *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), p. 142.

‘micro-observational techniques developed in the social sciences’,<sup>78</sup> before going on to reflect on the function of the highly detailed referencing methods adopted in *Just Us*.

Reviewing *Citizen*, Holly Bass notes ‘The book is divided into seven sections with no index or table of contents’ and with no ‘titles to separate and ground them’<sup>79</sup> – a straightforward subversion of academic convention which, I would argue, demonstrates a will to over-write formal, white-dominated means of recording to create a new documentation which resists labelling and racist mythologies. This approach extends to the myriad intertextual references from Black writers and thinkers which punctuate the text, voices which have impacted Rankine’s thinking (see Note 17, page 141) but whose names appear (as in the segment ‘World Cup’)<sup>80</sup> alongside the text on the facing page, rather than as traditionally numbered footnotes or endnotes. The decision not to document quotations from prominent figures including Ralph Ellison, Frantz Fanon, James Baldwin and Frederick Douglass, for example, in line with received scholarly practice could be viewed as representing an historic side-lining or overlooking of Black thought, a suppression of Black scholarly identity, within academia’s unacknowledged white spaces. Ronald A. T. Judy has observed, for example, ‘The scientific universities were concerned with Blacks only as objects of analysis and not as thinking, cultured subjects’;<sup>81</sup> while Audre Lorde, writing in the

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<sup>78</sup> Heather Love, ‘Small Change: Realism, Immanence and the Politics of the Micro’, *Modern Language Quarterly* 77:3 (September 2016), 419-445 (p. 424)

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1215/00267929-3570678>.

<sup>79</sup> Holly Bass, ‘How It Feels To Be Black In America’, *New York Times*, 28 December 2014 <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1941453486/abstract/708506572EAF43BFPQ/3> [accessed 12 September 2022]. Proquest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>80</sup> Rankine, ‘World Cup’, in *Citizen*, pp. 120-129.

<sup>81</sup> Ronald A. T. Judy, ‘Untimely intellectuals and the university’, *Boundary*, 27.1 (Spring 2000), 121-133 (p. 127)

<https://www.proquest.com/docview/236798885/abstract/13A063292DA8438FPQ/1> [accessed 30 November 2022]. ProQuest One Literature. [Also referenced by Brady.]

1980s, pointed out a reluctance among white (largely female) academics to teach works by Black women authors, on the grounds that ‘they come out of experiences that are “too different”’<sup>82</sup> (though they will, she adds, happily include texts informed by ‘the vastly different experiences of Shakespeare, Molière, Dostoyefsky [sic], and Aristophanes’).<sup>83</sup> However, I would suggest that Rankine’s placement of these names – on the recto page with almost no other text and in the same type size as the poems themselves – also functions as a re-documenting, which actually creates more prominence than would be achieved by conventional citation. Further, by positioning the quotations among racist slurs directed at French footballer Zinedine Zidane – drawn from ‘Accounts of lip readers responding to the transcript of the [2006] World Cup’<sup>84</sup> – Rankine locates their authors squarely within the context of overt racism which scholarly white liberal ‘privilege of unknowing’<sup>85</sup> fails to recognise in the structure of its own ivory towers.<sup>86</sup>

Similarly, Chan has highlighted the absence of captioning alongside *Citizen’s* multiple photographic images and reproductions of artworks, leaving the reader ‘to ponder the meaning of each image in relation to the surrounding text’.<sup>87</sup> This device is perhaps used most impactfully in the juxtaposition of the archival photograph *Public Lynching*<sup>88</sup> (without a

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<sup>82</sup> Audre Lorde, ‘Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference’ in *Sister Outsider*, p. 117.

<sup>83</sup> Lorde, p. 117.

<sup>84</sup> Rankine, ‘World Cup’, p. 127.

<sup>85</sup> Lauren Berlant, ‘Claudia Rankine’, *Bomb*, 1 October 2014 <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/claudia-rankine/> [accessed 14 September 2022].

<sup>86</sup> Brady gives an excellent example of this unknowing in an account of M. NourbeSe Philip’s performance of *Zong!* at Queen Mary University London (Brady’s own institution). The venue for the performance contains a foundation stone laid by King Leopold II of the Belgians, which, Brady notes, becomes symbolic of ‘the pervasion of spaces of working, living and studying by white supremacist violence and genocide.’ [Brady, p. 201.]

<sup>87</sup> Chan, p. 151.

<sup>88</sup> Rankine, *Citizen*, p. 91.

title, and altered by Rankine's husband and collaborator John Lucas to remove the bodies of the Black men) on the facing page to her Script for Situation video 'In Memory of Trayvon Martin', killed by a white neighbourhood watch captain in 2012. The true horror of what the picture depicts is clued in Rankine's repetition of the phrase 'hang up'<sup>89</sup> in the text opposite, but the reader likely will need to undertake some research, cross-referencing with the list of images in the end matter in order to fully appreciate this. Once an understanding of this alteration is achieved, Rankine and Lucas are then positioned to be able to activate a dialogue about invisibility versus hypervisibility. The absent bodies of the murdered Black men represent the erasure of Black lives and the ever-present, ongoing racial violence to which they have been and continue to be subjected. In parallel, this also allows Rankine and Lucas to place the white crowd in a locus of hypervisibility, in a reversal of the surveillances under which Black lives are routinely lived<sup>90</sup> and which were a catalyst for Martin's murder. Here, then, while Rankine herself refuses academic convention, this refusal simultaneously prompts the reader to follow the scholarly path of fact-finding, thus directing them to formulate a thesis which recognises Martin's murder as part of the same unrelenting continuum of racist violence as the lynchings.

One aspect of *Citizen* which does embrace standard academic practice is the adoption of methodology from the social sciences, specifically the 'fine-grained description'<sup>91</sup> characteristic of microsociology through which Rankine communicates the racist microaggressions which permeate and pollute everyday settings:

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<sup>89</sup> Rankine, 'In Memory of Trayvon Martin' in *Citizen*, p. 90.

<sup>90</sup> Invisibility and hypervisibility are discussed in more detail by Jerzy Kamionowski. ["By [some] other means": Talking (about) Racism and Race through Visual Arts in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*', *Text Matters*, 10 (2020), 392-407 (p. 401) <https://dx.doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.10.21>.]

<sup>91</sup> Love, p. 424.

The man at the cash register wants to know if you think your card will work. If this is his routine, he didn't use it on the friend who went before you. As she picks up her bag, she looks to see what you will say. She says nothing. You want her to say something – both as witness and as a friend. She is not you; her silence says so. Because you are watching all this take place even as you participate in it, you say nothing as well. Come over here with me, your eyes say. Why on earth would she? The man behind the register returns your card and places the sandwich and Pellegrino in the bag, which you take from the counter. What is wrong with you? This question gets stuck in your dreams.<sup>92</sup>

Rankine's meticulously detailed account – we even learn the exact brand of sparkling water the speaker is attempting to purchase – plays out almost in slow motion, serving to heighten reader awareness of the tensions inherent in something as mundane as buying lunch, if you happen to be 'living while black'. Further, it is through such micro-observation that the continuous surveillance of Black lives is again highlighted, as what Rankine's observation reveals is more observation: the man at the cash register observing the speaker; the speaker's friend observing the speaker but refusing to step in; the speaker observing the friend, willing her to step in; and the author observing all of these interactions and the unspoken racism underlying them. The episode is loaded with the language of scrutiny – 'looks', 'watching', 'eyes' – its occurrence in the apparently benign setting of the shop a reminder of how it is such unthinking, casually racist actions that plant the seeds of more extreme behaviours which lead to hatred, physical violence and murder.<sup>93</sup> In parallel, Rankine at once draws the reader's attention to another form of watchfulness, that of the speaker, which delineates Lorde's assertion that 'in order to survive, those of us for whom

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<sup>92</sup> Rankine, *Citizen*, p. 54

<sup>93</sup> Rankine explains her decision to include these 'everyday' microaggressions alongside accounts of violence and murder: 'It's one thing to tell a single story but another thing to understand that if a thing happens again and again and again and again that the management of that will have a cost.' [Rankine, *Desert Island Discs*.]

oppression is as american as apple pie have always had to be watchers'.<sup>94</sup> The ultimate irony is that this should be exposed via the observance of processes and conventions drawn from scholarly structures which are themselves fundamentally racist, a zeroing in on 'minute details... gestures, words, and glances'<sup>95</sup> which 'turn quotidian social worlds into scenes of horror'.<sup>96</sup>

Whereas *Citizen* shuns formal methods of citation, *Just Us* is crammed with a ubiquity of notes, sources and fact checks, its verso pages teeming with statistics, maps, graphs and pie-charts which almost threaten to overwhelm the reader in their abundance. The following is characteristic of the level of detail to which Rankine stretches, here expanding on the popularisation of the term 'white privilege':

**Text** *The phrase "white privilege" was popularized in 1988 by Peggy McIntosh<sup>97</sup>, a Wellesley College professor who wanted to define "invisible systems conferring racial dominance on my group."*

**Fact Check** Yes. The term was put in circulation prior to McIntosh.

**Notes and Sources** Theodore W. Allen was conducting an analysis of what he variously called "white skin privilege," "white racial privilege," and "white privilege" in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s. See his text *The Invention of the White Race*. For a thorough discussion of the term's use prior to McIntosh, see Jacob Bennett, "White Privilege: A History of the Concept" (master's thesis, Georgia State University, 2012), [https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/history\\_theses/54](https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/history_theses/54).<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Lorde, 'Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference', p. 114 [Lorde's capitalisation].

<sup>95</sup> Love, p. 435.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., pp. 435-436.

<sup>97</sup> Referenced on pages 140 and 143 of this chapter.

<sup>98</sup> Rankine, 'liminal spaces i' in *Just Us*, p. 26 [quotation not indented to preserve original lineation].

It is noteworthy that the phrase was also used in the 1950s, by Joshua Nkomo in his 1959 essay 'The Crucible of Privilege: Southern Rhodesia', *South Africa History Online* <https://www.sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/archive-files2/asjul59.12.pdf> [accessed 13 December 2022].

Notwithstanding that some element of practicality influenced this approach (Rankine was required to fact check what became this section in its original incarnation as an article for the *New York Times Magazine*)<sup>99</sup>, I would argue that this near-over solicitous and highly conventional referencing functions on two levels. On one hand, it prompts the reader to consider that Black experience is saturated with a perpetual need to ‘fact check’ oneself, one’s statements and actions in order to satisfy the demands of white fragility. Conversely, however, it may also be seen as a means of Black authorship reclaiming agency within white dominated spaces, one which provides a counterpoint to myths and stereotypes of the white narrative which persist as ‘fact’ despite having no factual basis (more of which in Section Three) due to ongoing colonially-based structural and archival bias. Rankine herself has asserted that she ‘really wanted the book to perform thinking’,<sup>100</sup> its layout offering the reader an instant and inescapable means of making connections between the often anecdotal accounts on the recto and the scrupulously verified facts on the facing page. Thus, through deployment of the norms of academia’s ‘white’ spaces, there is no place in *Just Us*, as Sarah Blake has observed, ‘for whiteness to be monolithic’.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Claudia Rankine, ‘I Wanted to Know What White Men Thought About Their Privilege. So I Asked.’, *New York Times Magazine*, 17 July 2019 <http://www.stpaulsstockbridge.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/I-Wanted-to-Know-What-White-Men-Thought-About-Their-Privilege.pdf> [accessed 12 September 2022].

<sup>100</sup> Rankine, Internationales Literaturfestival Berlin.

<sup>101</sup> Blake, *Politics and Prose Live!*.

### 3: The Intertextual Archive

#### i) *'The fiction of the facts'*:<sup>102</sup> *Citizen* and the media archive

In his essay 'Rearranging the Files: On Interpretation in Media History', Jonathan Sterne notes:

We [ie communication historians] must go about rearranging our own files, and others' as well because they have always already been arranged and rearranged before our arrival. They are already not the history they described, and so it is up to us to find linkages across documents, registers, genres, and problems to give history meaning and intelligibility for ourselves and our readers.<sup>103</sup>

This section will consider Rankine as communications archivist, undertaking her own rearrangement of media content which has locked itself into a vicious cycle of white supremacist thinking. This may be seen to occur at three interrelated levels: firstly due to systemic racism within what Althusser terms the 'communications apparatus',<sup>104</sup> leading to bias regarding what and how events are reported; secondly, through its fuelling of recursive demand from a fragile white audience for content designed to appease and protect that fragility; and thirdly via archived materials which – due to racism in the archival process – are arranged in a particular way to reinforce the biases etc, etc... Through a discussion of *Citizen* section II's interrogation of media representations of Serena Williams and the Script for Situation video 'In Memory of James Craig Anderson', I will argue that Rankine's incorporation of text and dialogue drawn directly from news reports becomes a mechanism

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<sup>102</sup> Rankine, 'Hurricane Katrina', in *Citizen*, p. 83

<sup>103</sup> Jonathan Sterne, 'Rearranging the Files: On Interpretation in Media History', *The Communication Review*, 13:1, 75-87 (pp. 85-86)  
<https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10714420903558704>.

<sup>104</sup> Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)', *marxists.org*  
<https://www.csun.edu/~snk1966/Lous%20Althusser%20Ideology%20and%20Ideological%20State%20Apparatuses.pdf> [accessed 15 November 2022].

for exposing racism in the media,<sup>105</sup> highlighting how this prompts considerations of a link between the textual violence inflicted on Williams and the physical violence against Anderson.

Following her victory at Wimbledon in the 2012 Olympic women's singles, Serena Williams broke into a 'three second celebratory dance on center court',<sup>106</sup> the resulting media coverage of which far outweighed the fact the 'she brought home two of the three gold medals the Americans would win in tennis'.<sup>107</sup> Serena's error, the media reported, was to perform not a simple dance but a 'Crip Walk', associated with Crip gang members in 1970s Compton, Los Angeles and frequently criticised as representing a glamourisation of gang violence. In her essay on Williams in section II of *Citizen*, Rankine quotes verbatim responses from a critical (white dominated) media, outraged at the encroachment of Black living on the perceived icon of whiteness, the All-England Club: "And there was Serena... Crip-Walking all over the most lily-white place in the world... You couldn't help but shake your head..."<sup>108</sup> Such quickness to connect Serena's celebration with the trope of gang warfare rather than being merely a spontaneous expression of joy stands in stark contrast to the coverage, just

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<sup>105</sup> 'I wanted to have an example where the reader can look it up for themselves... see that I am just repeating what was being said.' [Rankine, *Desert Island Discs*, explaining why she wanted to include the essay on Williams in *Citizen*.]

<sup>106</sup> Rankine, 'II' in *Citizen*, p. 33.

Serena's dance can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rUUJtL1QT7g> [Corey Buffalo, *Serena Williams crip walking after winning Olympic Gold in London 2012*, online video recording, YouTube, 4 August 2012 [accessed 14 December 2022].]

<sup>107</sup> Rankine, 'II' in *Citizen*, p. 33.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

The full quotation, from Fox Sports reporter Reid Forgrave, can be found along with a summary of other reactions to Serena's dance, here: [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/crip-walk-dance-serena-williams\\_n\\_1747593](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/crip-walk-dance-serena-williams_n_1747593) [Cavan Sieczkowski, 'Serena Williams' Crip Walk Dance Criticized As Inappropriate', *huffpost*, 6 August 2012 [accessed 13 September 2022].]

weeks later, of (white) Australian player Sam Stosur's 'victory shuffle' after her US Open second round win:

Defending U.S. Open champion Samantha Stosur is quietly cruising through the draw, dropping a mere five games through the first two rounds. Needless to say, she's feeling pretty good. So good that the normally quiet and unassuming Aussie decided to break out into a dance Wednesday after her 6-3, 6-0 victory against Edina Gallovits-Hall in the second round...

So here's your entree into the relatability of Sam Stosur: She does the funky chicken, just like us.<sup>109</sup>

As a 'quiet' and a well-behaved white woman, Stosur's reaction is taken at face value, is 'relatable', even, rather than being repeatedly analysed and picked apart, the facts spun and embellished to meet white fragility's self-protecting agenda.

The media's refusal to move on from Serena's celebration, persistently returning to it in subsequent press conferences at which she is there to discuss upcoming matches, exemplifies the recurrent 'erasure of [her] accomplishments'<sup>110</sup> consequent on a wilful foregrounding instead of dialogue about her behaviour. Visibly and understandably frustrated<sup>111</sup> at being compelled to explain herself yet again, Serena's response, however, elicits not an interrogation by the media of why she might feel the way she does but rather white fragility's defensive stock reduction of identity to the 'angry black woman

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<sup>109</sup> Courtney Nguyen, 'Stosur shuffle debuts at US Open', *Sports Illustrated*, 30 August 2012 <https://www.si.com/tennis/2012/08/30/samantha-stosur-dance> [accessed 22 September 2022].

<sup>110</sup> Trina Jones and Kimberley Jade Norwood, 'Aggressive Encounters & White Fragility: Deconstructing the Trope of the Angry Black Woman', *Iowa Law Review* (2017) 2017-2069 (p. 2028) <https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/ilr102&i=2063> [accessed 12 September 2022].

<sup>111</sup> Marc Berman, "'Crip Walk' questions steam Serena", *New York Post*, 26 August 2012 <https://nypost.com/2012/08/26/crip-walk-questions-steam-serena/> [accessed 13 September 2022].

stereotype',<sup>112</sup> routinely rolled out – as Rankine documents throughout this section – on each of the many occasions where Williams elects to call out racism in spite of the inevitable vitriol this will unleash. But, as Sara Ahmed has pointed out, 'You have to repeat yourself when you keep coming up against the same thing. You become mouthy. Perhaps we are called mouthy when we say what others do not want to hear'.<sup>113</sup> This need for repetition, Ahmed notes, for so-called 'willfulness' being only necessary for those whose will is not 'already accomplished by the general [ie white] will'.<sup>114</sup>

Rankine revisits this stereotype in the subsequent segment of *Citizen*, this time recounting an anonymous speaker's experience, which serves to demonstrate that these accusations of anger are not simply directed, as the media would have us believe, towards prominent figures whose actions – rightly or wrongly – inevitably attract a certain level of scrutiny:

A friend tells you he has seen a photograph of you on the Internet and he wants to know why you look so angry. You and the photographer chose the photograph he refers to because you both decided it looked the most relaxed. Do you look angry? You wouldn't have said so. Obviously this unsmiling image of you makes him uncomfortable, and he needs you to account for that<sup>115</sup>.

As Audre Lorde has pointed out, 'it is the members of oppressed, objectified groups who are expected to stretch and bridge the gap between the actualities of our lives and the

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<sup>112</sup> 'Through history, culture, and media, Black women have most often been portrayed in some combination of three images: (1) as highly maternal, family oriented, and self-sacrificing Mammies; (2) as threatening and argumentative Sapphires; and (3) as seductive, sexually irresponsible, promiscuous Jezebels (Collins, 1990; Sims-Wood, 1988; Weitz & Gordon, 1993).' [Carolyn M West, 'Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel: Historical images of Black women and their implications for psychotherapy', *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, 32.3 (1995), 458-466 (p. 459) <https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0033-3204.32.3.458>.]

<sup>113</sup> Ahmed, p. 154.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>115</sup> Rankine, 'III' in *Citizen*, p. 46.

consciousness of our oppressor',<sup>116</sup> there being an expectation that the oppressed will 'extend to them the understanding so lacking in themselves'.<sup>117</sup> Moreover, white fragility in addition demands that if people of colour wish to highlight racism then they must 'explain white racism in the "right" way. The right way is generally politely and rationally, without any show of emotional upset'.<sup>118</sup> To do otherwise (as Williams does) it is implied, will result in the automatic unhearing and twisting of this explanation.<sup>119</sup> By presenting content from the 'white' space of the media archive directly and without comment in parallel with the individual testimonies of racist microaggressions elsewhere in the text, Rankine again encourages the reader to make connections between publicly documented and privately encountered demonstrations of white supremacy – and thus, to question the validity of official reports. Further, this device also allows Rankine to shine a light on the self-perpetuating nature of these behaviours, where the unacknowledged white fragility underlying the undocumented microaggressions feeds a need for public 'justification' through media coverage, which in turn feeds the incidence of microaggressions, and so on. Juxtaposed with Rankine's anecdotal examples, the accepted [white] interpretation of events begins to lose credibility through its own text, without the need for further elaboration from the author.

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<sup>116</sup> Lorde, 'Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference', p. 114.

<sup>117</sup> Lorde, 'Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface' in *Sister Outsider*, p. 63.

<sup>118</sup> DiAngelo, p. 61.

<sup>119</sup> Audre Lorde gives the following example: 'I speak out of direct and particular anger at an academic conference, and a white woman says, "Tell me how you feel but don't say it too harshly or I cannot hear you". But is it my manner that keeps her from hearing, or the threat of a message that her life may change?' ['The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism' in *Sister Outsider*, p. 125.]

Similarly, in 'In Memory of James Craig Anderson', Rankine incorporates language lifted directly from news reports of Anderson's brutal murder, specifically that which describes his killers as "'just teens", no gang, "just a teen," "with straggly blond hair," "a slight blond man"'.<sup>120</sup> These depictions seem to suggest a fragility, almost an innocence on the part of the perpetrators as if that might explain, if not excuse the violence they commit due to their youth. This theory is bolstered by a comparable example from *Just Us*, which quotes a *GQ* profile of Dylann Roof (responsible for the 2015 Charleston shootings) as being part of an online community who are "'almost always painfully undereducated or somewhat educated but extremely socially awkward. That is, until their eyes are opened to the fact that within the world of white supremacy they can find friends"'.<sup>121</sup> It is hard to imagine a group of young Black men not being labelled a 'gang', or their behaviour being mitigated in any way by disadvantage. Similarly, the word choices deployed by the media to describe the 'Jena Six', whose story follows Anderson's in *Citizen*, is drawn from the formal legal lexicon reserved for proceedings against adults<sup>122</sup> – indeed, one of the Six, Mychal Bell, was initially tried as an adult, despite being younger than Anderson's killer Deryl Dedmon at the time of the hearings. This disparity in treatment exemplifies the prejudice at work via

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<sup>120</sup> Rankine, 'In Memory of James Craig Anderson' in *Citizen*, p. 94.

This is typical of the language used in the CNN report into Anderson's murder, for example, which can be found here:

<http://www.cnn.com/2011/CRIME/08/06/mississippi.hate.crime/index.html> [Drew Griffin and Scott Bronstein, 'Video shows white teens driving over, killing black man, says DA', *CNN* [accessed 13 September 2022].]

<sup>121</sup> Rankine, *Just Us*, p. 128.

<sup>122</sup> For example, Reed Walters refers to the young men as 'the defendants' in a New York Times op-ed piece on the trial. [Reed Walters, 'Justice in Jena', *New York Times*, 26 September 2007

<https://www.proquest.com/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/848037979/abstract/F7366CDF6BB54CBBPQ/1> [accessed 14 September 2022]. Proquest Historical Newspapers.]

‘adultification’<sup>123</sup> of young Black people at the hands of a structurally racist justice system.

The media’s obsessional focusing on white killers over the killed Black individuals is further emphasised in the following passage, inspired by CCTV footage of Anderson’s murder:

In the next frame the pickup truck is in motion. Its motion activates its darkness. The pickup truck is a condition of darkness in motion. It makes a dark subject. You mean a black subject. No, a black object.<sup>124</sup>

The movement of the truck reflects the movement of Rankine’s thought processes, the shift from the ‘dark subject’ matter of the poem to the ‘black subject’ of the poem to his reframing as ‘a black object’ reflecting how a fragile white-dominated media strips away Black identity, hence Anderson becomes not subjected to violence but rather an object on which it is inflicted.<sup>125</sup> Rather than opting to re-write these racist behaviours, Rankine deliberately ends the passage with the word ‘object’, refusing to let whiteness off the hook by suggesting that the media would, realistically, depict him in any other way. Further, Rankine’s juxtaposition of the public lexicon of news reports with the more intimate simple

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<sup>123</sup> ‘Adultification is a form of bias where children from Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic communities are perceived as being more ‘streetwise’, more ‘grown up’, less innocent and less vulnerable than other children. This particularly affects Black children, who might be viewed primarily as a threat rather than as a child who needs support (Davis and Marsh, 2020; Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2019).’ [NSPCC, ‘Safeguarding children who come from Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic communities’, NSPCC, 2022 <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/safeguarding-child-protection/children-from-black-asian-minoritised-ethnic-communities#skip-to-content> [accessed 27 October 2022].]

<sup>124</sup> Rankine, ‘In Memory of James Craig Anderson’ in *Citizen*, p. 93.

<sup>125</sup> In his essay ‘What is an Archive?: An Apparatus Model for Communications and Media History’, Jeremy Packer substantiates this view, noting that communications historians should ‘look for cases in which as subject is turned into an object. By what process and according to whom does a person become a patient, a child become a delinquent, a woman become a hysteric, a driver become a road rager, a viewer become a couch potato, or a citizen become a bomb?’ [*The Communication Review*, 13:1, 88-104 (p. 103) <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10714420903558720>.]

lyric refrain 'James Craig Anderson is dead'<sup>126</sup> places the media's language in sharp white relief, the white narrative articulating through its own words the biases inherent in its recording. This repetition underscores the relentless cycle of white violence against Black bodies, which again is evocative not so much a reclaiming of Anderson's identity as subject but rather a reinforcement of Rankine's assertion that 'for African-American families, this living in a state of mourning and fear remains commonplace'.<sup>127</sup> Once more, it is through turning the lens of white supremacist thinking back on itself that Rankine, in the role of communications historian, is able to undertake the task of 'questioning the apparatus'.<sup>128</sup> Moreover, when considered in parallel with Rankine's documentation of the treatment of Serena Williams, this questioning activates for the reader a whole other dialogue about the way in which the textual and verbal violence hiding in plain sight and which continue to be given column inches and airtime<sup>129</sup> work, in Foucauldian terms, as a 'form of indirect murder'<sup>130</sup> to amplify racist ideologies which so often result in physical violence and death.

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<sup>126</sup> Rankine, 'In Memory of James Craig Anderson', p. 95.

<sup>127</sup> Rankine, 'The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning'.

<sup>128</sup> Packer, p. 100.

<sup>129</sup> For example, at the time of writing, Meghan, Duchess of Sussex's refusal to be silenced on issues of institutional racism in the British Royal family and UK press has resulted in vicious racist and misogynistic coverage, which speaks to a level of virtual violence not just against Meghan, but against all Black lives.

<sup>130</sup> 'When I say "killing", I obviously do not mean simply murder as such, but also every form of indirect murder: the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or, quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection, and so on.' [Michel Foucault, 'Society Must be Defended', *Lectures at the College de France* trans. by David Macey (New York: Picador, 1997), p. 256.]

ii) **'historied out':<sup>131</sup> *Just Us* and the historical archive**

In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler points out that *'the historical time that we thought was past turns out to structure the contemporary field with a persistence that gives the lie to chronology'*<sup>132</sup> [Butler's italics]. In this final section, I will examine how Rankine highlights the way in which Black lives are suppressed, diminished, 'historied out' of the white narrative through the endurance of racist mythologies in archived (and archived in) historical documents which continue to influence both institutional and individual behaviours in twenty first century society. In *Just Us*, this is epitomised in Rankine's facsimile reproduction of Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, retitled as 'Notes on the State of Whiteness'. The significance of the decision to use such an iconic text by one of the Founding Fathers of the American nation as a mechanism to comment on systemic racism cannot be overstated. Rankine presents Jefferson's words again without comment but as a redacted version which – an examination of the original text reveals – strips away the cloak of official language so that what remains is a set of stereotypes, slurs and assumptions which speak themselves to the racist thought processes underlying Jefferson's liberal abolitionist image. The first page of this section, for example, contains only the below text in bold (with Jefferson's original surrounding paragraphs included here, for context):

The plan of the revision was this. The common law of England, by which is meant, that part of the English law which was anterior to the date of the oldest statutes extant, is made the basis of the work. It was thought dangerous to attempt to reduce it to a text: it was therefore left to be collected from the usual monuments of it. Necessary alterations in that, and so much of the whole body of the British Statutes, and of

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<sup>131</sup> Rankine, *Just Us*, p. 7.

<sup>132</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London, New York: Verso, 2006), p. 54.

acts of assembly, as were thought proper to be retained, were digested into 126 new acts, in which simplicity of style was aimed at, as far as was safe. The following are the most remarkable alterations proposed:

**To change the rules of descent, so as that the lands of any person dying intestate shall be divisible equally among all his children, or other representative, in equal degree.**

**To make slaves distributable among the next of kin, as other moveables.**

To have all public expences, whether of the general treasury, or of a parish or county, (as for the maintenance of the poor, building bridges, court-houses, &c.) supplied by assessments on the citizens, in proportion to their property.

To hire undertakers for keeping the public roads in repair, and indemnify individuals through whole new lands new roads shall be opened.

To define with precision the rules whereby aliens should become citizens, and citizens make themselves aliens.

To establish religious freedom on the broadest bottom.<sup>133</sup>

Removed from its insulating framework – between the bureaucratic detail behind the changes to the law and a list of actions necessary to effect these changes – Jefferson’s description of slaves as ‘distributable’ and ‘moveables’ brings into sharp relief the dehumanising treatment of these individuals as property, as opposed to this being normalised (and therefore hidden, legitimised) within a list of commodities. It also serves as a reminder that, despite his professed liberality, Jefferson was himself a plantation owner and slave-holder who ‘continued to hold human beings as property his entire adult life’<sup>134</sup>. By pulling out and highlighting these lines, Rankine makes them impossible to ignore. As

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<sup>133</sup> Rankine, ‘Notes on the State of Whiteness’ in *Just Us*, p. 110/ Thomas Jefferson *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (1794), Gale Eighteenth Century Collections Online (pp. 198-199).

<sup>134</sup> Monticello, ‘Jefferson & Slavery’, *Monticello*, <https://www.monticello.org/thomas-jefferson/jefferson-slavery> [accessed 14 December 2022].

with the manipulated image *Public Lynching*, white supremacy is positioned front and centre but also here as traceable back to the genesis of the United States and therefore indisputably embedded within its constitution. No additional explanation is needed.

Similarly, Rankine also calls the reader's attention to dangerous mythologies and stereotypes that impact Black identity and Black living, reducing 'black people not to a single black person but to a single imagined black person',<sup>135</sup> for example Jefferson's assertions – again isolated from their surrounding cushion of text – that Black people 'seem to require less sleep'<sup>136</sup> or 'Their griefs are transient'.<sup>137</sup> Given the earlier highlighted persistence of colonial and imperialist thought in processes of recording, as well as the continued country-wide ubiquity of Jefferson's presence in monuments and in the names of public buildings across the US,<sup>138</sup> it is unsurprising that widely-read and revered historical documents such as this one would continue to influence white supremacist behaviours in the present day. This can be seen not only in the personal encounters recorded in *Citizen* ('when the woman with the multiple degrees says, I didn't know black women could get cancer'<sup>139</sup>) but also, more shockingly, in how this thinking found its way into and remains a factor in public health policy,<sup>140</sup> written and re-written into the archives over centuries. Moreover, Rankine's

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<sup>135</sup> Rankine, 'boys will be boys' in *Just Us*, p. 259.

<sup>136</sup> Rankine, 'Notes on the State of Whiteness' in *Just Us*, p. 114.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>138</sup> It should be noted that, following the Black Lives Matter protests, a process of change and re-consideration may slowly be under way. CNN reported in 2021 that a statue of Jefferson had been removed from New York City Hall. [Sara Smart, 'A statue of Thomas Jefferson is removed from New York City Hall after 187 years', *CNN*, 24 November 2021 <https://www.cnn.com/2021/11/24/us/thomas-jefferson-statue-removed/index.html> [accessed 15 November 2022].]

<sup>139</sup> Rankine, *Citizen*, p. 45.

<sup>140</sup> Rankine cites the following from Linda Villarosa: "Over the centuries, the two most persistent physiological myths – that black people were impervious to pain and had weak lungs that could be strengthened through hard work – worried their way into scientific

decision to 're-write' the page numbers from Jefferson to correspond with the page numbers of her text (but in the style of the original) suggests a blurring between past and present, directing the reader to consider, to borrow from Saidiya Hartman, 'the detritus of lives with which we have yet to attend, a past that has yet to be done, and the ongoing state of emergency in which black life remains in peril'.<sup>141</sup> This blurring refuses to accept whiteness's standard excuse that such microaggressions and bureaucratic violences as isolated or atypical occurrences, instead clearly signposting that they are rooted in the same continuum of archived systemic racism through which 'the narratives are being given over and over again'.<sup>142</sup>

In addition, it is noteworthy that Jefferson also represents an overlapping of narratives with the poetry archive (and specifically extreme right wing political ideologies therein), having been the subject of Ezra Pound's *Cantos* 'XXXI' – 'XXXIII', along with *Jefferson and Mussolini*, which compares the leadership styles of the two. Michael O'Driscoll has remarked on Pound's role as 'an archivist/poet'<sup>143</sup>, the *Cantos* themselves being a 'compendium of archival documents and textual fragments' which is 'populated' with archivists.<sup>144</sup> However, he goes on to observe not only the selective nature of Pound's archiving, its 'exclusivity, not inclusivity'<sup>145</sup> but, further, that this approach is something

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consensus, and they remain rooted in modern-day medical education and practice'' [Rankine, 'social contract' in *Just Us*, p. 152.]

<sup>141</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Venus in Two Acts*, *small axe* 12.2 (June 2008) 1-14 (p. 13) <https://www.proquest.com/docview/195789319/abstract/66781B656DEA4B38PQ/1> [accessed 25 May 2023].

<sup>142</sup> Rankine, Internationales Literaturfestival Berlin. 2022.

<sup>143</sup> Michael O'Driscoll, 'Ezra Pound's *Cantos*: "A Memorial to Archivists and Librarians"', *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 32.1 (Spring 1999), 173-189 (p. 173) <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1303457823/fulltextPDF/FDE69373E8234934PQ/1?accountid=13828&sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals> [accessed 17 January 2025].

<sup>144</sup> O'Driscoll, p. 173.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

which the poet has in common with Jefferson himself ('also very much an archivist' who equally 'carries out the process of cultural selection').<sup>146</sup> Considering this information alongside Rankine's own use of selectivity – the presenting of a redacted version of Jefferson's text – adds another layer of interpretation to 'Notes on the State of Whiteness'. As well as drawing attention to the inherent racism in Jefferson's original and its ongoing repercussions, it may, moreover, be seen as a comment on the selective nature of both the historic and the poetry archives, effected by adopting the same methods employed by Jefferson, which in turn spill over into the poetry archive via his connection to the work of Pound. Pound may have intended for 'his readers to follow up his references and seek out the material texts to which he points',<sup>147</sup> but it is not unreasonable to assume that Rankine should have a similar intention. One which leads the reader to a rather different sort of perception of the source content and its dangerous legacy, exemplifying O'Driscoll's assertion that 'our understanding of how texts interrelate and how we manage those interrelations bears upon questions of ideology and power'.<sup>148</sup>

***'broadening the joining'***<sup>149</sup>

In *Citizen* and *Just Us*, then, Claudia Rankine interrogates multiple formal and informal archives which serve and reinforce the white narrative, mining their practices for content which, through its own text, images and conventions uncovers the structural frameworks that enable white supremacy's continuation. What results is a new 'archive of the

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p. 184.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p. 184.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., p. 187.

<sup>149</sup> Audre Lorde, *Just Us* front matter.

construction of whiteness'<sup>150</sup>, which goes beyond the redocumenting of denied Black lives and identities to create a record of the systemic racism and white fragility responsible for the violence – both physical and non-physical – enacted upon them. Central to the success of Rankine's particular form of activism is her conformity to convention from one final element of the poetry archive, that of docupoetry's ability to produce 'a perspective, response, and critique that neither a personal, expressive (or purely ludic and aleatory) poetry nor a scholarly historical account could provide',<sup>151</sup> a 'broadening of the joining' which encourages readers to take note, ask questions and join a conversation, to 'open a door to one's internal investigation'.<sup>152</sup> To borrow again from Hartman, it may be 'too late' for Rankine's accounts of these violences to prevent other violence, 'too early... to halt other crimes'<sup>153</sup> but her bringing together of private and public in a way that places white fragility front and centre within scenarios across an historical archival continuum offers a timely starting point for Culler's 'channeling thought in particular ways'. By asking that the reader not just recognise these histories, this fragility but also take ownership of that recognition, Rankine encourages a shift in white thinking from one which traditionally places the onus on Black individuals 'to educate white people as to our humanity...' thus enabling 'the oppressors [to] maintain their position and evade responsibility for their own actions'.<sup>154</sup> 'It doesn't need to pass through me,' Rankine tells her audience in Berlin, 'you should be seeing it yourself'.<sup>155</sup> It is not my

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<sup>150</sup> Toby Ashraf, Internationales Literaturfestival Berlin. 2022.

<sup>151</sup> Joseph Harrington, 'Docupoetry and Archive Desire', *Jacket 2* (27 October 2011) <http://jacket2.org/article/docupoetry-and-archive-desire> [accessed 7 October 2021].

<sup>152</sup> Rankine, *Guernica*.

<sup>153</sup> 'It is much too late for the accounts of death to prevent other deaths; and it is much too early for such scenes of death to halt other crimes.' [Hartman, p. 14.]

<sup>154</sup> Lorde, 'Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference', p. 115.

<sup>155</sup> Rankine, Internationales Literaturfestival Berlin.

intention to suggest, however, that this constitutes a happy ending,<sup>156</sup> a neat solution whereby whiteness fully understands and openly acknowledges the enormity of its violences, its privilege and fragility; owns its complicity in both historic and ongoing racism and resolves to actively agitate for change going forward. Nor do I mean to imply that this chapter in any way offers a comprehensive analysis of systemic racism in the archives Rankine excavates, or should be applauded for discussing this. I will end by reiterating that this section is written in solidarity, but also in the recognition that I am ultimately adding another white voice to a chorus of white voice whose analyses will always be shaped and limited by their whiteness. It might be another small beginning, another step towards the 'seeing it yourself' that Rankine calls for. But for such steps to be meaningful, white writers must be willing to accept, without defensiveness, being asked by a person of colour 'to recognize that their racial imaginings might not be perfect'.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Andrea Brady makes this point in her reading of *Zong!*: 'in telling a story, there is a temptation always to supply a happy ending... But I have learned enough from reading *Zong!* to be sceptical that such endings are happy, or even really endings.' [Brady, p. 207.]

<sup>157</sup> Beth Loffreda and Claudia Rankine, 'Introduction' in *The Racial Imaginary*, p. 19.

### 3: 'USING LANGUAGE TO HIT THE POST':<sup>1</sup> ARCHIVES, INTERTEXTUALITY AND FALSE FLAGS<sup>2</sup> IN JEFF HILSON'S *LATANOPROST VARIATIONS* AND *ORGAN MUSIC*<sup>3</sup>

*'it is in my best interest'*<sup>4</sup>

Interviewed by S J Fowler for *3:AM Magazine*, Jeff Hilson notes that 'one of the tasks of the poet is to break into official languages whatever and wherever they are... I take great pleasure in misusing terminologies or deploying what might be called counter-terminologies.<sup>5</sup> Hilson's remarks may be seen as an act of solidarity with Judith Butler's observation that 'Language assumes and alters its power to act upon the real through locutionary acts, which, repeated, become entrenched practices and, ultimately, institutions',<sup>6</sup> which is realised through the poems in *Latanoprost Variations* and *Organ Music*. These works set out to disrupt the agendas of institutions and the privileged plutocratic elite who often dominate them, their own act of 'assuming' and 'altering' making language a means of diversion, pacification, surveillance and control. The terminologies which permeate both these collections are drawn from perhaps the most diverse range of

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<sup>1</sup> Jeff Hilson, 'Poem About Grounds' in *Latanoprost Variations* (Norwich: Boiler House Press, 2017), p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> 'even two/man of war daddies with gripping hands are wet after/a storm wet & then dry like a flag this time a false flag' [Jeff Hilson, 'Side 6' in *Organ Music* (London: Crater Press, 2020), p. 64.]

<sup>3</sup> This chapter is the result of an ongoing interest in Jeff Hilson's work which began during my MA (University of Sheffield, 2020), for which I produced a paper on "'Impersonal Passion" in Jeff Hilson's *Latanoprost Variations*'. While engaging with some of the same reference materials, this work extends my earlier thinking on Hilson's writing, focusing specifically on concepts of archive.

<sup>4</sup> it is in my best interest to buy a white knight condenser tumble dryer' [Hilson, 'The Wogan Poem' in *Latanoprost Variations*, p. 10.]

<sup>5</sup> Jeff Hilson, quoted in S. J. Fowler, 'Maintenant #92 – Jeff Hilson', *3:AM Magazine*, 22 April 2012 <https://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/maintenant-92-jeff-hilson/> [accessed 21 June 2022].

<sup>6</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York, London: Routledge, 2007), p. 158.

intertextual sources of all the works interrogated in this thesis, again mining the high- and low-brow – from music streaming algorithms and payday loan reviews to heraldry and the mechanics of the organ; where lyrics from late twentieth century popular music co-exist with allusions to seventeenth century verse and song; and where a poem may be composed entirely from the clinical vocabulary of record-keeping. This chapter sets out to extend my examination of the intertextual archive to explore notions of what Ana Baeza Ruiz has termed ‘the archive as governmental space’.<sup>7</sup> While acknowledging that language itself is a whole other archive within which these intertextual references sit, I will argue that Hilson’s pre-occupation with its ‘misuse’ demonstrates how Derrida’s ‘archons’ attempt to exert influence not just through formal, official documents but also through more informal intertextual archives which underpin the fabric of mass culture.

What results is a hijacking of identity based on what Trevor Owen-Jones, in *The Non-Library*, terms ‘positive remembering (sentimentality)’ and ‘negative forgetting (repression of trauma)’<sup>8</sup> – as carefully curated by the ruling elite. Both these constructs are key in the development of an archive which has been engineered to record the actions of those in power in a very particular way, Jones having also noted Derrida’s observation that ‘There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory’.<sup>9</sup> In texts which critique how this recording may be distorted through, to give just a few examples, misinformation, omission or media manipulation, the depth and breadth of Hilson’s intertextual sources lends weight to these concepts and the extent to which they covertly permeate our

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<sup>7</sup> Ana Baeza Ruiz, ‘Museums, archives and gender’, *Museum History Journal*, 11.2 (October 2018), 174-187 (p. 175) <https://doi.org/10.1080/19369816.2018.1529268>.

<sup>8</sup> Trevor Owen-Jones, *The Non-Library* (New York: Punctum, 2013), p. 14. Project MUSE Open Access Books.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, ‘Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression’ *Diacritics*, 25.2 (1995), 9-63 (p. 11) <https://doi.org/10.2307/465144>.

existence. Both collections return time and again to a low-key insistence that language is being used to do something other than that for which it was intended (as exemplified in the quotation borrowed for the title of this chapter – we should, one assumes, be using language to score, not to ‘hit the post’). Hilson’s line from ‘Poem About Grounds’ could be interpreted as a meta reference to his own deliberate misuse of language or, conversely, how this misuse is a response to what Butler has termed ‘the power that misuses language’.<sup>10</sup> Notwithstanding the inevitable mutability of language,<sup>11</sup> we nonetheless should not underestimate the role of its articulators in moulding it to the best of their abilities to serve their own agendas. It is reasonable to suppose, therefore, that in the hands of the ruling elite Hilson satirises, its primary concern – be it drawn from a payday loan company website or political rhetoric – is the creation of ‘false flags’. Traditionally adopted in nautical warfare so that a ship may ‘hide which country it comes from or which side it is fighting for’,<sup>12</sup> I will use the term in this chapter to denote how a range of particular lexicons – for example those prevalent in mass culture (selling copy), niche (often elitist) pursuits (heraldry) or official documentation – may be appropriated, ‘misused’ by those in power as misdirections to mask the very different ‘flags’ of their actual agendas. These lexical ‘false flags’ exploit our ‘passive familiarity with a... range of registers’<sup>13</sup> to peddle products and services, excavate our data, cast doubt on the validity of what is being reported and ultimately keep privileged

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<sup>10</sup> Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence* (London, New York: Verso, 2021), p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> ‘language is a performance because words never completely represent what their speaker intends, even if, as we cannot, we could assume that they are accurately heard by a listener’. [Charles A Knight, *The Literature Of Satire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 119.]

<sup>12</sup> Cambridge Dictionary, ‘false flag’, *Cambridge Dictionary* <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/false-flag> [accessed 13 June 2025].

<sup>13</sup> Geoffrey N Leech, *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry* (Harlow: Longman, 1969), p. 9.

individuals secure in their positions. All while claiming to have the ‘best interests’ of the individual (consumer) or a country/continent at their heart.

Writing about such concerns brings with it the risk of appearing overly earnest or moralistic, and so potentially jeopardising any buy-in from the reader. As the comedian and activist Mark Thomas has noted, however, ‘just because something is a political work doesn’t mean it should be dour. Silliness is a wonderful weapon against the powerful’.<sup>14</sup> Suffused with deadpan humour and, if one hears Hilson read, delivered in a correspondingly deadpan style, Hilson’s texts demonstrate the doubleness of satire as both a symptom of and a means of resistance to reactionary culture, which draws attention its toxic behaviours while also functioning as a liberating force, to effect, to borrow from Charles A Knight, ‘a release from repression’.<sup>15</sup> Further, these poems, while experimental in nature, may be seen as part of a continuum of satiric tradition which encompasses classical literature, the Augustan satires of Pope and the social philosophy of Marx and Engels.<sup>16</sup> Discussing Lucian’s *Lexiphanes*, Paul Martin has observed that in this tradition, literary texts may be ‘conceived as a kind of *pharmakon*, either a medicine or a poison’,<sup>17</sup> where satire is ‘an emetic whose parrhesiastic force has a curative effect’.<sup>18</sup> Further, it may even be used as a means of what

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<sup>14</sup> Sarksi Anderson, ‘Mark Thomas: ‘Silliness is a wonderful weapon against the powerful’’, *Bristol24/7*, 26 September 2022 <https://www.bristol247.com/culture/comedy/mark-thomas-silliness-is-a-wonderful-weapon-against-the-powerful/> [accessed 29 August 2023].

<sup>15</sup> Knight, p. 20.

<sup>16</sup> Keston Sutherland discusses the role of bathos and satire in the works of Pope and Marx and Engels in his essay ‘What is *Bathos*?’ [Keston Sutherland, ‘What is *Bathos*?’, in *On Bathos: Literature, art music*, ed. by S. Crangle and P. Nicholls (London: Continuum, 2010). Ebook Central Literature and Language.]

<sup>17</sup> Paul Martin, ‘Cleansing the Palate: Vomit and Satire in Lucian’s *Lexiphanes*’, *Illinois Classical Studies*, 43.2 (Fall 2018) 507-520 (p. 507) <https://doi.org/10.5406/illiclasstud.43.2.0507>.

<sup>18</sup> Martin, p. 507.

Martin terms 'diagnosing drivel'<sup>19</sup> and so can also function in a 'preventative'<sup>20</sup> capacity, to counteract people 'believing their own bullshit'.<sup>21</sup> I contend that both *Latanoprost Variations* and *Organ Music* set out to 'diagnose the drivel' spewed by a plutocratic ruling elite and its state apparatuses such as mass culture and the media, which seeks to pacify, to suppress individuality of thought.

While Hilson's poems might not be able to prevent those in power from 'believing their own bullshit', what they can do is draw attention to it, thus exposing, to borrow from Keston Sutherland, 'the person whose account of reality must invariably be destitute of truth'.<sup>22</sup> Hilson's intertextual 'misuse of terminologies' is key in his achievement, the 'imitating [of]... conventional genre'<sup>23</sup> in *Latanoprost Variations* and *Organ Music* placing these texts firmly within an established satiric tradition which, Knight tells us, utilises 'effectively a pre-existent form in order to represent [its] object in such a way as to make its objectionable qualities apparent'.<sup>24</sup> There is undoubtedly a dark, uneasy side to some of the humour in these poems (a more detailed discussion of which follows later in this chapter) but it may, nonetheless, be seen as a unifying factor in Hilson's work, one which chimes with Henri Bergson's observation that laughter is 'always the laughter of a group'.<sup>25</sup> In this way, Hilson is able to foster a kind of community spirit among readers (in the same way perhaps that Susan Howe strives to create a community of women readers, writers and researchers

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 508.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 514.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 514.

<sup>22</sup> Sutherland, p. 22.

<sup>23</sup> Knight, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> Henri Bergson, Chapter I 'The Comic In General - - The Comic Element In Forms And Movements - - Expansive Forces Of The Comic', *Laughter: An Essay On The Meaning Of The Comic*, trans. by Cloudesley Brereton, Fred Rothwell. Project Gutenberg eBook plain text file, released 1 August 2003 (updated 27 December, 2020).

as discussed in Chapter 1) who, along with the poems' speakers, are almost metaphorical exiles within their own country,<sup>26</sup> standing against establishment manipulation. Hence, although the situations these poems highlight may make us shocked, or sad, or angry, the manner of their execution enables us to see that positivity may also be achieved through laughter's ability to be freeing. As Mark Thomas points out when asked if it is 'more useful to make people angry, or to keep them feeling positive' – 'it is possible to be both'.<sup>27</sup>

The following sections will examine Hilson's 'misuse of terminologies' and conventions collected from the archives that are poetry, mass culture, specialist languages and the language of reporting and documentation. Hilson's weaving into his text of terminologies consistently found in establishment communication – in the past, now, and likely in the future – is at once an understated yet powerful device<sup>28</sup>, where the very words designed to create misdirection and set political agendas become instead a means to expose these behaviours. Via a close reading of selected poems from both collections, alongside comparable examples from real life sources, I will consider how Hilson turns the tables on the 'the power that misuses language', adopting its own lexicon to create, if not a 'Non-Library', then perhaps an archive of the now which also functions as a kind of 'anti-archive'.

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<sup>26</sup> Notions of exile are again part of the satiric tradition. For a detailed examination of the concept of 'satiric exile' see Knight, Chapter 3.

<sup>27</sup> Anderson, *Bristol* 24/7.

<sup>28</sup> 'Dustin Griffin appropriately argues that the functions of satire are inquiry and provocation rather than moral instruction and punishment'. [Knight, p. 5.]

## 1: Structured unstructure and ordered disorder: The Poetry Archive and the language of form

In common with the other poets discussed in this thesis, Hilson's work explores notions of archive in experimental ways. *Latanoprost Variations* and *Organ Music* both employ characteristic conventions, the 'language' of experimental poetry (if, indeed, being unconventional by definition *can* be a convention) such as collage, a fluidity of form, the borrowing from and mixing of registers. These co-exist, however, with devices and methodologies perhaps more readily associated with those areas of the poetry archive that we might typically label 'traditional' (observance of a specific form, consciously 'poetic' exposition) and which can be found hiding in plain sight in each text. This section will reflect on Hilson's use of form in the two works, arguing that his subtle deployment of conventional techniques and structures within unconventional frameworks extends beyond a straightforward subversion of poetic norms which one might expect to find in experimental works. If we consider that poetic form may in its own way operate as a kind of specialist language, Hilson's disruption of our expectations – for example, by employing constraints within or alongside what at first glance appears to be a fluid structure – it is possible to see the presentation of the poems in these collections as a formal echo, a complement to the 'misuse' of linguistic terminologies.

Although apparently not directly linked to a specific form found within the poetry archive in the same way that are elegy or the lyric (as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2), I would argue there is, nonetheless, some consistency of structure underlying the apparent fluidity in both *Latanoprost Variations* and *Organ Music*. Examples from Hilson's earlier work indicate an interest in more formal frameworks – sonnets in *In The Assarts*; the 33-line constraint of the *stretchers* – though any suggestion that this might have been undertaken in

an act of reverence for poetic form may be swiftly dispatched. In the closing essay of *stretchers*, Hilson observes:

Each stretcher is nominally a 33-line unit. The decision to use a 33-line form was ultimately banal, based on my age at the time of writing the first set of them...

though not all the poems are 33 lines long because sometimes I miscounted.<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, the (largely) unpunctuated prose blocks of *Latanoprost Variations*, while not exactly uniform in terms of line count, follow an approximate length pattern of three and a half pages per poem. The main exception to this – apart from the ‘Slates’, which function as a kind of epilogue to the collection – is ‘A Final Poem With Full Stops’ (discussed in more detail in Section Three of this chapter), Hilson’s devastating examination of migrant deaths as a result of the actions of ‘Fortress Europe’<sup>30</sup> which, at three pages, is slightly shorter, as well as being prodigiously punctuated. In his review of *Latanoprost Variations*, Colin Lee Marshall has remarked that this abrupt and striking switch ‘starkly arrests the freedom of movement that characterized the previous poems, setting up textual borders as sites of unceremonious detention in a way that formally alludes to the wider concerns of the poem’s harrowing subject matter’.<sup>31</sup> This is particularly noticeable when one considers the final lines of the previous text (‘Optotypical Poem Including Art Garfunkel’) alongside the opening lines of ‘A Final Poem’:

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<sup>29</sup> Jeff Hilson, ‘Why I wrote stretchers’ in *Stretchers* (Hastings: Reality Street Editions, 2006), pp. 70-71.

<sup>30</sup> Amnesty International, ‘The human cost of Fortress Europe: human rights violations against migrants and refugees at Europe’s borders’, *Amnesty International*, (9 July 2014) [The human cost of Fortress Europe: human rights violations against migrants and refugees at Europe’s borders - Amnesty International](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur12/001/2014/07/09/) [accessed 6 March 2023].

<sup>31</sup> Colin Lee Marshall, ‘Latanoprost Variations’, *Chicago Review* (January 2019) <https://www.chicagoreview.org/jeff-hilson-latanoprost-variations/> [accessed 28 February 2023].

the eyes are mine in each of these poems  
one after another I see your glowing hands are shaking  
thank you art garfunkel thank you after all the eyes are  
fine<sup>32</sup>

suicide. suicide by drowning or suicide by hanging.  
suicide by jumping off a bridge. & died. roma. died or  
killed. died in a fire. died jumping from a train. & drowned.<sup>33</sup>

While I concur with Marshall's assessment, I would contend in addition that this sudden and startling break with form, along with emphasising the barriers imposed upon the migrant community, also gives the reader pause to reflect on whether constraint, albeit of a far less brutal kind, might too exist in the seemingly more liberated environment of the preceding poems. They may 'talk the talk' of unpunctuated freedom but, I would argue, in reality that freedom is limited, a 'misuse' of the terminology of form. While the text may not evoke the formatting of official documents quite as directly as do Rankine's capitalised and punctuated prose blocks, situating it within a justified prose block framework with its almost identical page lengths has a similar echo of restriction, which may be considered to reflect the establishment's capacity to make individuals believe they have more freedom than in fact they actually do. With that in mind, one might begin to see, for example, the increasingly bizarre recommendations of 'The Incredible Canterbury Poem's' music streaming algorithm not just as a comedic malfunction, but also as a mask for its growing desperation to keep fulfilling its data mining and profiling remit; or 'The Wogan Poem's' payday loan reviews citing ease of access to funds and consumer goods as a diversion from the financial climate which exacerbates a 'need' for such services. A more comprehensive analysis of these

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<sup>32</sup> Hilson, 'Optotypical Poem Including Art Garfunkel' in *Latanoprost Variations*, p. 34.

<sup>33</sup> Hilson, 'A Final Poem With Full Stops' in *Latanoprost Variations*, p. 35.

poems, in connection with everyday language and the intertextual archive, follows in Section Two.

*Organ Music*, by contrast, appears at first reading to operate within a significantly less formal framework. The collection is a kind of Benjaminian odyssey through political and cultural references – the title itself could be an allusion to the ‘organ of the state’ and its ‘mood music’ – plucked from the 2000s and 2010s zeitgeist. Rendered in shifting combinations of free verse, prose blocks and excerpts from ‘playscripts’, this fluctuating format is suggestive of the chaotic nature of life and government in the UK in the wake of ‘ten years of the Tory regime which began with austerity and ended most recently with Brexit, with a whole lot more in between and, inevitably, to come’.<sup>34</sup> Amid this disorder, however, sit 15 ‘Interludes’, which occur either singly or in twos, threes or fours at varying intervals, all bar two being exactly 19 lines long. Given Hilson’s earlier noted comments about the form of *stretchers*, and the fact that the outliers have 18 and 20 lines, it is not unreasonable to assume that he was working to a 19-line constraint, but perhaps ‘miscounted’ again. Technically, this means that the ‘Interludes’, like Hilson’s sonnets in *In The Assarts*, conform – at the very least in terms of the number of lines – to a named structure within the archive that is poetry: the villanelle. This verse form feels especially apposite for *Organ Music*, its etymological origins as a ‘rustic song’<sup>35</sup> mirroring the collection’s referencing of traditional songs and rhymes: ‘Side 6’, for example, contains multiple text fragments from ‘Oranges and Lemons’ as well as phrases from ‘Mary, Mary Quite Contrary’.

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<sup>34</sup> Hilson, ‘Foreword’ in *Organ Music*, p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> ‘villanelle: poetic form’, *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/art/villanelle> [accessed 17 March 2023].

It should be noted, however, that when I put this hypothesis to Hilson, he offered, as with *stretchers*, a more prosaic explanation: 'In the case of *Latanoprost Variations* and *Organ Music*, the length or shape of the first poem became a kind of template for the rest. It's as simple as that... The length was much more random'.<sup>36</sup> He does agree, though, that form can play a role in communicating power dynamics: 'Poets often have their own agendas when they decide to use a particular form which is in many instances a power thing, for sure. Form is an agent as much as a payday loan company is!'<sup>37</sup> This invites consideration not only of form as a means of pushing political and other agendas, but also of the potential power of the poet over language. While this may be a positive force, as evidenced in the 'misuse of terminologies' deployed by Hilson to draw attention to exploitation of language by governments and 'state apparatuses', it may, conversely, also represent another example of 'the power that misuses language' (see Chapter 2, pages 176-177 re Ezra Pound). Although Hilson's response clearly points to a very straightforward intention, then, I would still contend that a reading where the 'terminology' of form can be 'misused' to critique establishment behaviours in the same way as does the 'misuse' of linguistic terminologies is an interesting one. Further, what is not in doubt is Hilson's signaling in both collections that the establishment not only stands at the heart of the current chaos, but also that such disarray and its architects are in themselves traditional, part of a continuum, where whoever is in power will seek to manipulate the ways in which their behaviours are recorded ('when the wind changes it didn't mean the head changes'<sup>38</sup>). It is, as Andrew Spragg writes of

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<sup>36</sup>Jeff Hilson, quoted in A J Moore, 'Jeff Hilson interview', *Blackbox Manifold* 30 (Summer 2023) [Blackbox Manifold - JeffHilsonInterviewBM30 \(sheffield.ac.uk\)](https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/blackbox-manifold-jeff-hilson-interview-bm30) [accessed 1 August 2023].

<sup>37</sup> Hilson, *Blackbox Manifold*.

<sup>38</sup> Hilson, 'Side 6' in *Organ Music*, p. 64.

*Latanoprost Variations*, 'no more a sign of the times than a recognition of these times having always been here'.<sup>39</sup>

As previously noted, the intertextual archive will be explored more fully later in the chapter, but it is worth mentioning here the impact of Hilson's juxtaposition, in *Organ Music*, of borrowings from seventeenth century works of the 'courtier poets' alongside commonplace language of the now. For example, on the opening page of 'Side 1', the speaker observes:

I am such a silly bee  
(it was a time when silly bees could speak)  
buzzing in & out the water  
slender & shutmouthed  
but the showiest commonest most widespread  
bee<sup>40</sup>

Hilson's notes tell us that 'it was a time when silly bees could speak' is sourced 'From a poem attributed to Robert Devereux, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Essex. Set to music by John Dowland in 1603'.<sup>41</sup>

It was a time when silly bees could speak,  
And in that time I was a silly bee,  
Who fed on time until my heart 'gan break,  
Yet never found the time would favour me.  
Of all the swarm I only did not thrive,  
Yet brought I wax and honey to the hive.

Then thus I buzzed when time no sap would give:  
Why should this blessed time to me be dry,  
Sith by this time the lazy drone doth live,  
The wasp, the worm, the gnat, the butterfly?  
Mated with grief I kneeled on my knees,  
And thus complained unto the king of bees:

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<sup>39</sup> Andrew Spragg, 'Some Notes on 'Latanoprost Variations (Abandoned)' (Abandoned)' in *HilsonHilson*, ed. by R.T.A. Parker (London: Crater Press, 2020), pp. 139-140 (p. 140).

<sup>40</sup> Hilson, 'Side 1' in *Organ Music*, p. 13.

<sup>41</sup> Hilson, 'Notes – Sides 1-10' in *Organ Music*, p. 115.

My liege, gods grant thy time may never end,  
And yet vouchsafe to hear my plaint of time,  
Which fruitless flies have found to be a friend,  
And I cast down when atomies do climb.  
The king replied but thus: Peace, peevisch bee,  
Thou'rt bound to serve the time, the time not thee.<sup>42</sup>

The nod to this seemingly poignant meditation on disappointment at not being treated well by 'time', may, of course, represent no more than an opportunity for Hilson to namecheck a text he admires. If one delves further, however, there is evidence that the works of Dowland, Essex and their contemporaries – far from being simply benign diversions, poetic 'interludes' in court entertainments – were often, as Kirsten Gibson has noted, designed to further 'personal and political gain',<sup>43</sup> particularly to enable their authors to re-establish favour (and so their position at court) if they had displeased the queen. When read with this information in mind, we might contemplate that Essex's seemingly heartfelt and rather sentimental words also function as a kind of lyrical veneer for a rather more calculated purpose, which allow him – through the poem's speaker – to present himself as possessing a winning combination of the tortured artistic soul ('my heart 'gan break') and the subservient subject ('I kneeled on my knees'). An exercise in misdirection as a means of self-preservation.

In reproducing the opening line of Essex's work, I would argue that Hilson is adopting his own form of misdirection, a 'misuse' of poetic terminology which invites the reader to consider alternative interpretations of what appears, on the surface, a nostalgic and somewhat whimsical bucolic image. Having already hinted that we are not inhabiting an

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<sup>42</sup> Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, 'It was a time when silly bees could speak', Oxford International Song Festival, <https://oxfordsong.org/song/it-was-a-time-when-silly-bees-could-speak> [accessed 29 August 2023].

<sup>43</sup> Kirsten Gibson, 'John Dowland and the Elizabethan courtier poets', *Early Music*, 41.2 (May 2013), 239-253 (p. 239) <https://doi.org/10.1093/em/cat024>.

idyllic, romanticised past ('its not easy being a fancy organist/in uncertain time'<sup>44</sup>), Hilson juxtaposes these gentle seventeenth century borrowings with a series of stacked up functional superlatives ('showiest commonest most widespread'). Harder edged and much more contemporary in tone, this line suggests a time shift has occurred to the 'uncertain' present, where 'silly bee' may instead be associated with its colloquial meaning. Further, the notion of 'showiness' calls to mind the 'showy', upper-class-heavy 2010s Tory regime Hilson references in his Foreword, where performing a role is as important a mechanism for political self-preservation and the pushing of particular agendas as it was for Essex and his peers (more of which in relation to Boris Johnson's positioning himself as the affable court jester follows later in this section). While the reader may well not recognise the historical and cultural locus of the Essex reference, it's juxtaposition with what follows is jarring enough to encourage a questioning of what might lie beneath its unthreatening exterior.

Additionally, the courtier poets' thematic preoccupation with 'withdrawal or exile from court'<sup>45</sup> may also be seen to have resonances with a collection where the poems' speakers seem to exist in a kind of metaphorical exile. Trapped in what Knight has called 'the permanent status of temporary residence'<sup>46</sup> within their own country, they are controlled through political violences such as Brexit while being pacified by its fixations on consumer goods and anodyne celebrity (to be explored in Section Two). Hilson's segues into highly conventional, self-consciously 'poetic' language such as Essex's text, then, work against ingrained reader expectations of an idealistic past captured in verse carrying, like their source documents, political undertones within the lyric asides. Situating these lines

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<sup>44</sup> Hilson, 'Side 1' in *Organ Music*, p. 13.

<sup>45</sup> Gibson, p. 250.

<sup>46</sup> Knight, p. 84.

alongside informal language of the now prompts the reader to consider not only the contemporary establishment agendas Hilson dissects, but also places these behaviours within the context of an historical continuum. As Tim Atkins has pointed out, 'There is a nostalgia operating in the work yet it's not one that feels nostalgic for a lost, better past. He's always aware how corrupt and absurd life was at any point in human history'.<sup>47</sup>

Lastly, Hilson's use of collage is also integral to his interrogation of the structures which disguise themselves behind the apparently unstructured façades of these poems. In fact, the technique may be said to exemplify this concept, being itself an accepted convention of the modernist and post-modernist poetry archive, yet at once by its very nature unconventional. In *Organ Music* 'Side 9', Hilson makes what might be seen as another meta reference to his methods, with the speaker's declaration:

*'with my old school tie on  
I made the English organ  
out of any old iron'*<sup>48</sup>

This suggests, perhaps, that the collection itself ('the English organ') was assembled from the 'any old iron' of collaged references which inhabit its pages. The phrase 'old school tie', however, clues a far more sinister interpretation: the largely public school educated upper echelons of 2010s Tory government (or, indeed, ruling classes historically), who set out to assemble a national identity with a lack of care, due diligence and little regard for the consequences of their methods, driven by an unshakeable belief both in the right of their class to govern, and govern in a way which furthers their own agenda. Thus, 'the English organ' could perhaps also reference the English heart, a rose-tinted patriotic construct pushed by the ruling elite to mask the distortions deployed to control and exclude while in

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<sup>47</sup> Tim Atkins, 'Elf Portrait No. 25' in *HilsonHilson*, pp. 5-14 (p. 8).

<sup>48</sup> Hilson, 'Side 9' in *Organ Music*, p. 97.

reality, as Virginia Woolf recognises in her 1938 work *Three Guineas*, ‘the heart of England’ is where ‘the voices of Dictators’ can be heard.<sup>49</sup> Hilson’s manipulation here of lyrics from the traditional music hall song ‘Any Old Iron’ is particularly apt. Popularised originally by variety performer Harry Champion, and later revived by Stanley Holloway, the song is part of a tradition of work ‘synonymous with people’s interpretation of what Cockney humour is... often used to illustrate a stereotype as perceived by non-cockney people’.<sup>50</sup> One can easily imagine Boris Johnson incorporating something similar into his ‘cheeky chappie’ schtick in an attempt to connect with [his view of] the proverbial ‘ordinary man in the street’. However, this image conjures not so much a happy-go-lucky rendition of an idealised past as the cringe-making routines of John Osborne’s grotesque washed up comedian Archie Rice in *The Entertainer*. Like Hilson’s poems, Osborne’s play also contains ‘interludes’,<sup>51</sup> excerpts from the failing end-of-the-pier act which are often used as a vehicle for Rice’s jingoistic pronouncements about ‘Good old England’.<sup>52</sup> Reminiscent of Rice’s attempts to look back to a British Empire long gone, the ‘any old iron’ of ‘Side 9’ becomes symbolic of the frenzied scrambling of those in power to maintain ‘the English organ’ – and so their positions – by pulling the next diversion from their expansive bag of tricks, in an act which, as Marjorie Perloff has observed of collage, ‘is a way of undermining the authority of the individual self’.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1990), p. 53.

<sup>50</sup> Wikipedia, ‘Harry Champion’ [referencing *In The City – A Celebration of London Music* by Paul Du Noyer], *Wikipedia* [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Harry\\_Champion&oldid=1268310507](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Harry_Champion&oldid=1268310507) [accessed 20 January 2025].

<sup>51</sup> John Osborne, *The Entertainer* (London: Faber, 1995), p. 12.

<sup>52</sup> Osborne, p. 32.

<sup>53</sup> Marjorie Perloff, ‘Collage and Poetry’, *Marjorie Perloff Modern and Postmodern Poetry and Poetics*, <https://marjorieperloff.blog/essays/collage-and-poetry/> accessed 14 March 2023].

It still bears pointing out, however, that both *Latanoprost Variations* and *Organ Music* are also – barring a few exceptions<sup>54</sup> – hugely funny collections. Hilson even goes so far, in *Organ Music*, to use a title which not only carries with it obvious innuendo but also, as becomes immediately apparent via the first epigraph to the opening poem ‘Side 1’, has clear connotations as a comment on the unnamed ruling elite figures alluded to throughout the text:

I have broken more Elton John records, he seems to have a lot of records. And I, by the way, don’t have a musical instrument. I don’t have a guitar or an organ. No organ.  
*Donald Trump, speaking at a Republican rally in Montana, July 2018*<sup>55</sup>

In this way, as well as being part of an historic satiric tradition, Hilson’s poetry also sits comfortably alongside the work of contemporary satirists such as Stewart Lee (whom Hilson references in the *Blackbox Manifold* interview), whose habit of adopting ‘the tactics of those he targets in order to highlight their hypocrisy’<sup>56</sup> has clear parallels with Hilson’s ‘misuse of terminologies’. While there is not space within the parameters of this chapter to undertake a detailed discussion of the whole other category of the poetry archive that is humorous verse, it is worth noting the following from Hilson’s responses to *3:AM Magazine*: ‘Humour in poetry is a very tricky area. In Britain at least it has unfortunate associations with the worst aspects of ‘light’ verse and is not therefore taken seriously... humour at its best is a

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<sup>54</sup> Most notably ‘A Final Poem With Full Stops’. Colin Lee Marshall discusses the significance of this poem within such a humorous collection in his review of *Latanoprost Variations*.

<sup>55</sup> Hilson, ‘Side 1’ in *Organ Music*, p. 11.

<sup>56</sup> Sean O’Hagan, ‘Interview: Stewart Lee’, *Observer*, 6 December 2009  
<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2009/dec/06/stewart-lee-comedy-interview>  
[accessed 14 September 2023].

means of generating surprise’<sup>57</sup> – something on which Lee has also remarked.<sup>58</sup> In each of these texts, I would argue, part of this surprise is that Hilson’s distinctive humour co-exists with an insistent, incremental sense of unease,<sup>59</sup> consistent with Alfie Bown’s assertion that with humour ‘there is anxiety within every laugh, or that when we laugh, anxiety is never far away’.<sup>60</sup>

In ‘Latanoprost Variations (Abandoned)’, for example, one’s immediate reaction is to chuckle at the McGonagall-esque tortured rhymes and clunky cod rap rhythms:

I hear of a man in a see  
through box but how can this be/he is not in my book/  
dear sheila jordan this is funny//richard is stranger than  
judy’ but you won’t know this without you have seen a tv/<sup>61</sup>

However, when one considers the political background to the composition of this poem (outlined in Hilson’s essay ‘On Latanoprost Variations’ which closes out the collection) it becomes clear that its surreal absurdity is a mechanism to underline the tactics of diversion and pacification inherent in contemporary wall-to-wall coverage of primetime celebrity taste-making and faux displays of endurance. While, Hilson notes, ‘the armed conflict in Iraq was producing atrocities that were increasingly impossible to ignore’,<sup>62</sup> the public, it seems, are offered (manipulated into) an endless suite of opportunities to do just that. If the benign ubiquity of daytime tv influencers ‘Richard Madeley and Judy Finnegan, who were to exert unprecedented power over the reading habits of the population throughout the decade

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<sup>57</sup> Hilson, *3:AM Magazine*.

<sup>58</sup> ‘I like to be taken by surprise’. [Stewart Lee, quoted in Sophie Quirk, ‘Preaching To The Converted? How Political Comedy Matters’ *Humor*, 29.2 (2016), 243-260 (p. 253) <https://doi.org/10.1515/humor-2015-0046>.]

<sup>59</sup> Discussed with Hilson in *Blackbox Manifold*.

<sup>60</sup> Alfie Bown, *In the event of laughter: psychoanalysis, literature and comedy* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), p. 1. VLeBooks.

<sup>61</sup> Hilson, ‘Latanoprost Variations (Abandoned)’ in *Latanoprost Variations*, p. 50.

<sup>62</sup> Hilson, ‘On ‘Latanoprost Variations’’ in *Latanoprost Variations*, p. 58.

with their so-called ‘Book Club’<sup>63</sup> doesn’t work for you, perhaps the derring-do of ‘the man in the see through box’ (‘the American illusionist David Blaine who had in late 2003 lived for 44 days without food in a plexiglass cube suspended above the Thames at Tower Bridge...’<sup>64</sup>) might instead do the trick. As Hilson continues: ‘This narcissistic display of privation masquerading as heroism seemed to me obscene in the light of more pressing incarceration and torture in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay’.<sup>65</sup> Hilson’s essay adds weight to the notion of metaphorical exile in his work, which is mirrored in the deliberate awkwardness of ‘Latanoprost Variations (Abandoned)’. Though this clumsiness is undoubtedly humorous, it also evokes a sense that something is ‘off’<sup>66</sup> – which often, Knight notes, underpins the ‘satiric frame of mind’<sup>67</sup> – prompting the reader to consider what anxieties might underlie the apparently comic exterior.

Similarly, in *Organ Music* ‘Side 7’, Hilson juxtaposes references to ‘the hong kong laundrymen’ killed in the 1982 Falklands conflict with lyrics from Marvin Gaye’s hit of the same year, ‘Sexual Healing’. The use of uneasy humour here – which chimes with Stewart Lee’s assertion that he likes ‘to create a feeling of confusion in the room where people don’t really know if they’re supposed to be laughing or not’<sup>68</sup> – is a means to express Hilson’s

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., pp. 58-59.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>66</sup> Zoran Rosko has noted of *Latanoprost Variations* ‘There’s something wrong in every poem, which is turned over and over’ [Zoran Rosko, ‘Jeff Hilson Latanoprost Variations’, Zoran Rosko Vacuum Player (19 January 2018) <https://zorosko.blogspot.com/2018/01/jeff-hilson-theres-something-wrong-in.html> [accessed 28 February 2023].]

<sup>67</sup> ‘The satiric frame of mind may not be rooted in a disposition as definite as doubt. It may lie in a discomfort at the perception that something is wrong in the world of discourse, that the connections between words and ideas and between ideas and appearance have been broken.’ [Knight, p. 272.]

<sup>68</sup> Stewart Lee, quoted in Quirk, p. 249.

contempt for the ‘active racism’<sup>69</sup> implicit in mainstream British media coverage engineered, we assume, to comply with establishment requirements to maintain a spun, one-dimensional archive of their actions. Hilson elaborates in *Blackbox Manifold*:

At the outbreak of war, in spite of being given the opportunity to leave, both men decided to remain on board their ships down below, and were thus deemed to be on active service (laundrymen were otherwise effectively treated as independently employed). Whilst a big hoo-ha was made in the red tops out of any Argentinian attack on a British ship, especially one leading to casualties among ‘Our Boys’, the deaths of these Hong Kong citizens were, to my knowledge, never mentioned.<sup>70</sup>

Again, there is an implication of certain lives being ‘more grievable’ than others and again the reader is prompted to consider this style of reporting as part of a continuum of behaviours and their resulting skewed documentation. Writing in the 1930s, Woolf noted the handed on British trait of viewing its men going to war as “superior” to the men of other countries<sup>71</sup> – a belief clearly still very much being disseminated by the right wing media of the 1980s and which doubtless persists into the 2020s. While Hilson admits that he has ‘often mulled over the ethics’<sup>72</sup> of this poem, I would contend that the humour derived from the absurd juxtaposition of references to the conflict with Gaye’s raunchy lyrics, while creating some of the confusion of which Lee speaks, also acts as a catalyst which prompts the reader to delve further into the stories of these men.<sup>73</sup> Individuals who – unlike ‘chief petty officer flanagan’<sup>74</sup> whose shirts, presumably, they laundered – are never named, but yet are acknowledged and returned to throughout. Laughter, as Bown continues, ‘can make

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<sup>69</sup> Hilson, *Blackbox Manifold*.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Woolf, p. 108.

<sup>72</sup> Hilson, *Blackbox Manifold*.

<sup>73</sup> Bergson points out that it is possible to take something ‘of an odious nature’ and if ‘you make it ludicrous... you arrange so that it leaves our emotions unaffected’. [Bergson, Chapter III, ‘The Comic In Character’.]

<sup>74</sup>Hilson, ‘Side 7’ in *Organ Music*, p. 75.

us see events for what they are'.<sup>75</sup> Hence, the 'terminology' so beloved of the 'cheeky chappie' school of government, its appropriation of laughter's ability, in Bergson's words, 'to repress any separatist tendency... readapt the individual to a whole'<sup>76</sup> is turned on itself. Again, parallels may be drawn with Lee who, Sophie Quirk tells us, 'disrupts pre-existing consensus in order to circumvent the passive compliance of the mob'.<sup>77</sup> By fixing his satirical lens on the negative, then, Hilson is able to create a positive, alternative 'whole' which is, as Bown has observed, 'threatening to *existing* hierarchy not because it is anti-hierarchical but because it creates new hierarchies'.<sup>78</sup> In Lee's work, this extends to the hierarchies both within comedy as a genre and within his particular sub-genre of comedy, where other stand ups and his own act are subject to equal scrutiny: 'Welcome to the music hall'<sup>79</sup>, he remarks sardonically of one of his gags in the show *Content Provider*. Lee's willingness to target himself might, perhaps, elicit parallels with the poet as satirist we find inhabiting Hilson's texts, which invites a questioning of the lyric as entertainment in the same way that Lee's deadpan line invites us to consider if he is really so different from the contemporary light entertainers retreading the well-worn footsteps of Archie Rice. Perhaps the ultimate example of questioning the validity of the status quo through its own devices, both may be seen as a mechanism for liberation, which encourages audiences to disengage with the establishment agendas that aim to suppress individual thought.

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<sup>75</sup> Bown, p. 144.

<sup>76</sup> Bergson, Chapter III, 'The Comic In Character'.

<sup>77</sup> Quirk, p. 259.

<sup>78</sup> Bown, p. 33.

<sup>79</sup> lastbroadcaster, 'Stewart Lee on Brexit', online video recording, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uovt1sC3rtM> [accessed 10 September 2024].

## 2: 'seeking them here & seeking them there':<sup>80</sup> 'False flags' and The Intertextual Archive

The following section will examine how sources from the intertextual archive are exposed as a vehicle for misdirection in both collections, focusing specifically on the language of mass culture and specialist languages. It is worth noting at the outset Hilson's decision, in *Organ Music*, to include a set of [self-proclaimed] 'overlong notes and resources':<sup>81</sup> a more formal acknowledgement of the scope and diversity of his sources, as opposed, in *Latanoprost Variations*, to leaving the curious reader to undertake their own research should they wish. Though he confirms a love of notes,<sup>82</sup> this gesture towards scholarly convention is not without its own element of 'misuse', Hilson observing that 'In the process of writing these resources have of course been transformed, though one might go further and say that they have been sabotaged'.<sup>83</sup> By including what he terms 'evidence of research',<sup>84</sup> Hilson could be seen to be trying to attach some form of order to the apparent disorder within the text but, equally, how meaningful is this acknowledgement if the sources are then skewed, 'sabotaged' by the work which references them? The answer to this question lies perhaps in Hilson's assertion that his approach might be best considered as follows:

One of my PhD students recently mentioned dramaturg Stephen Hornby's notion of 'historical literacy' rather than historical accuracy to describe his practice of deliberate distortion when writing plays based on historical events. I think this can be usefully applied to the kind of research I do.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Hilson, first Interlude, 'Side 7' in *Organ Music*, p. 76.

<sup>81</sup> Hilson, 'Foreword' in *Organ Music*, p. 8.

<sup>82</sup> 'I love notes at the back of books and with, say, *Organ Music*, I hope that readers spend some time looking at the references and even chasing them up, especially in the case of the music which were on occasions the genesis of a line or a line of thought'. [Hilson, *Blackbox Manifold*.]

<sup>83</sup> Hilson, 'Foreword' in *Organ Music*, p. 8.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>85</sup> Hilson, *Blackbox Manifold*.

There is again a doubleness at work here, with Hilson's use of the phrase 'evidence of research' mimicking the language of academia, its requests for the documentation [and therefore archiving] of research outputs, yet at once taking on a deeply satiric tone. This prompts the reader to reflect that compliance with such requirements does not discount the fact that this evidence, like any information recorded in both official or unofficial archives, is at risk of distortion, influenced by processes of selection and the manner of its recording.<sup>86</sup> Further, in a climate where covert sabotage – the misdirection perpetrated by establishment bodies – is rife, Hilson's apparent conformity to accepted protocol (academic form) and simultaneous fessing up to the disruptions he himself has effected within its models invites considerations as to whether this small-scale example might signal a more widespread set of behaviours, where convention is a front which seeks both to neutralise and normalise the agendas of those in power.

**i) 'in the poems of this awful country by renee or renato':<sup>87</sup> The archive that is mass culture**

In her introduction to Gertrude Stein's *Lectures in America*, Wendy Steiner notes Stein's preoccupation with 'The idea of things happening without their making any difference, of modern life battering us with endlessly repeated messages without consequences or context'.<sup>88</sup> *Latanoprost Variations* and *Organ Music* both present the reader with an environment in which they are constantly 'battered' – indeed, they themselves contribute to

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<sup>86</sup> 'When captured by an archivist, through an oral history project for example, the stories, histories, and records may no longer have the function or meaning intended by the original record creator'. [Rodney G S Carter, 'Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and Power in Silence', *Archivaria* 61 (Spring 2006), 215-233 (p. 226) <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2518923413/abstract/213455E7E7254518PQ/1> [accessed 10 May 2023].]

<sup>87</sup> Third Interlude, 'Side 7' in *Organ Music*, p. 78.

<sup>88</sup> Wendy Steiner, 'Introduction', *Lectures in America*, pp. xiv-xv.

this ‘battering’ – deploying references to the ephemera of the everyday, the products, slogans, songs, retailers and personalities which permeate all aspects of contemporary existence. However, for Hilson this ‘battering’ very much has ‘consequences’, given that popular culture in the twenty first century has assumed an archival role, being, as David Beer and Roger Burrows have written, ‘at the centre of the transformations that have facilitated the accumulation of digital data’.<sup>89</sup> Supported, enabled by a network of structures and ‘state apparatuses’ such as the media, these everyday artifacts are significant in the creation of pacifying archival gestures towards the individual (consumer), in the name of inclusivity or the offering of a bespoke service. For example, the twenty-first century obsession with documenting one’s every thought and movement is facilitated by social media platforms which drive us to share, often surreptitiously encouraging us to embellish the (mostly quite dull) minutiae of our existence. And, as Stewart Lee points out in his stand up routine about social media, ‘nothing that anyone could ever have to say could possibly be as interesting as the ongoing moment by moment documentation of your entire lives’<sup>90</sup> – which, presumably, is good news for those in power who wish to divert attention from their self-serving agendas. Additionally, this relentless photographing, filming and posting results in another manipulated archive, one of idealised content – which echoes notions of an ‘invented life’<sup>91</sup> – where reviews of anything from a take-out coffee to trekking expeditions in the Himalayas

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<sup>89</sup> David Beer and Roger Burrows, ‘Popular Culture, Digital Archives and the New Life of Social Data’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30.4 (July 2013), 47-71 (p. 48) <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276413476542>.

<sup>90</sup> Alligator Mike, ‘Stewart Lee on Social Media (Content Provider)’, online video recording, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dz9Nad0bxDU> [accessed 10 September 2024].

<sup>91</sup> Rex Ferguson, Melissa M Littlefield and James Purdon, ‘Introduction’ (referencing Andrew O’Hagan) in *The Art Of Identification: Forensics, Surveillance, Identity* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021), p. 11. Proquest Ebook Central.

manufacture a belief that everyone can have a voice, the opportunity to contribute to the crafting of a public archive, where anyone can be published.<sup>92</sup> Similarly, music streaming algorithms, as satirised in ‘The Incredible Canterbury Poem’, not only offer the customer (consumer) the tools to create a personalised archive of what they ‘like’,<sup>93</sup> but even help them develop their collection by suggesting new content which [allegedly] corresponds to their tastes. What this actually amounts to, though, is the construction of archives of a very different kind, as tools of surveillance populated by data and profiles. These digitised weapons of selling on and upselling become, in turn, another means of pacification and diversion. Obtained by a clandestine accumulation of likes and click-throughs expedited by the ‘endless stimulation, communication, and distraction’ which fosters ‘an intolerable state and a condition of will-lessness’,<sup>94</sup> this is a catalogue of consumption as compliance.

What, then, does this mean for Hilson’s strategy of recycling the language of mass culture in these texts, if they are then themselves to be sold? Critics might suggest that by drawing on this ‘lexicon of the banal’,<sup>95</sup> he too is culpable, complicit in the process he seeks to critique. Notwithstanding the unavoidable reality that sales of experimental poetry volumes – however well regarded – are unlikely to catapult their author to the top of the bestseller lists any time soon, it should be acknowledged that such an unabashed mimicking of his adversaries involves an element of risk for Hilson. Knight’s observation about the

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<sup>92</sup> Beer and Burrows also note the role of popular culture in this process: ‘Beyond the traditional print media and TV, in recent years there has emerged an additional layer of commentary on celebrity life provided by, to turn again to Turner’s (2010) phrase, ‘ordinary people’’. [Beer and Burrows, p. 55].

<sup>93</sup> Hilson, ‘The Incredible Canterbury Poem’ in *Latanoprost Variations*, pp. 3-6.

<sup>94</sup> Stuart Lindsay [referencing S Alexander Reed], ‘Disaster Theory: Vaporwave Music as a Hauntological Expression of Sociopolitical Trauma’, *English Language Notes*, 59.2 (October 2021), 109-120 (p. 111) <https://doi.org/10.1215/00138282-9277304>.

<sup>95</sup> Fowler, 3:AM Magazine.

double-edged nature of satire's approach to culture is of relevance here, in that it 'both explores and reflects the gaps and contradictions of its culture; it is both critic and representative of those contradictions'.<sup>96</sup> Hence, I would argue that this distinctive, instantly recognisable language is essential to Hilson's achievement, a 'misuse' of terminologies which functions in the same way that familiar objects function for Walter Benjamin – to extend 'our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives'.<sup>97</sup> The following close readings will examine 'The Incredible Canterbury Poem', 'The Wogan Poem' and selected excerpts from *Organ Music*, interrogating how the lexicon of mass culture becomes a mechanism not just for exposing its misdirection, the subterfuge of its archival gestures, but also how these distractions are part of a wider establishment plan to suppress individuality, thus covertly easing the promotion of its own agendas.

In his essay 'Culture Industry Reconsidered', Theodor Adorno writes 'The concoctions of the culture industry are neither guides for a blissful life, nor a new art of moral responsibility, but rather exhortations to toe the line, behind which stand the most powerful interests'.<sup>98</sup> Hilson's increasingly febrile music streaming algorithm of 'The Incredible Canterbury Poem' provides a twenty first century context for this thinking, algorithms being examples of contemporary 'pathways through which capitalist power works'.<sup>99</sup> Far from simply creating genial recommendations, the algorithm epitomises Shoshana Zuboff's concept of 'surveillance capitalism',<sup>100</sup> where a digital environment capable of meeting all

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<sup>96</sup> Knight, p. 50.

<sup>97</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), p. 238.

<sup>98</sup> Theodor W Adorno 'Culture Industry Reconsidered' in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. by J M Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 91.

<sup>99</sup> Beer and Burrows [referencing S. Lash], p. 61.

<sup>100</sup> 'Surveillance capitalism's products and services are not the objects of a value exchange. They do not establish constructive producer-consumer reciprocities. Instead, they are the

our conceivable needs 24/7 simultaneously amasses ‘vast domains of new knowledge *from us, but not for us*. They predict our futures for the sake of others’ gain, not ours’.<sup>101</sup> The poem is teeming with seemingly limitless solicitous suggestions (‘people who listen to... are also listening to’, ‘if you liken ... then try’<sup>102</sup>), terminologies inextricably woven into our consciousness through real-life services such as, for example, YouTube Music, with its promise of ‘Endless music customised for you. Always updating’.<sup>103</sup> As Robert Kiely has highlighted, Hilson’s use of the rather curious ‘liken’ is of particular interest here, given its etymology in the OED (‘Middle Low German likenen to resemble, to compare, to make equal’).<sup>104</sup> When armed with this information, the obliging provision of opportunities to extend one’s interests based on personal taste begins to take on more sinister connotations, with ‘likening as a homogenising force’,<sup>105</sup> part of a system whose connections become increasingly more tenuous (‘since you listened to throbbing gristle check out simon and garfunkel’)<sup>106</sup> in their mission to create a catalogued and classified mass of useful and compliant consumers. When one considers *Latanoprost Variations*’ later ‘The Incredible DIY Poem’ – which consists essentially of the same terminologies minus the names of the musicians – the true nature of the relentless pushiness of this language becomes even more apparent, as does the fact that one may as well insert any names into the gaps, given the

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“hooks” that lure users into their extractive operations in which our personal experiences are scraped and packaged as the means to others’ ends... We are the sources of surveillance capitalism’s crucial surplus: the objects of a technologically advanced and increasingly inescapable raw-material-extraction operation’. [Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (London: Profile Books, 2019), p. 10.]

<sup>101</sup> Zuboff, p. 11.

<sup>102</sup> Hilson, ‘The Incredible Canterbury Poem’ in *Latanoprost Variations*, pp. 3-6.

<sup>103</sup> *YouTube Music*, apple.com App Store.

<sup>104</sup> Robert Kiely, ‘A Note on “The Incredible Canterbury Poem”’, in *HilsonHilson*, pp. 117-18 (p. 117).

<sup>105</sup> Kiely, p. 117.

<sup>106</sup> Hilson, ‘The Incredible Canterbury Poem’ in *Latanoprost Variations*, p. 4.

wild inconsistencies of the recommendations. The music itself is just another product, a cog in the machinery which facilitates ‘an overthrow of people’s sovereignty’<sup>107</sup> in the name of augmenting the balance sheet. Further, notwithstanding Hilson’s signposting of his algorithm’s desperation to increase consumer traffic it is, perhaps, worth considering here that the progressively more absurd nature of the connections might also represent a pushback against this ‘endless consumerist production of supposedly real experience’,<sup>108</sup> by creating a profile so bizarre that its owner actually defies categorisation.

While we might snigger at the ridiculousness of lines which exhort the listener (consumer) to sample popular folk rock on the strength of their liking for avant garde industrial music,<sup>109</sup> it is likely that our laughter is, at least in part, rooted in a wry recognition that such outlandish or incongruous suggestions are far from unusual. Hilson’s text undoubtedly pushes the boundaries of this incongruity to the limits, but research based on a small sample from my own Amazon history would appear to substantiate this view.

Recommendations for ‘Products related to’<sup>110</sup> *These Foolish Things*, Bryan Ferry’s 1973 debut solo studio album of cover versions, for example, included recordings by the contemporary pop artists Miley Cyrus and Mimi Webb. As well as prompting the reader to consider the capitalist agenda of profiling and selling, Hilson’s use of humour – deployed via the algorithm’s unrelenting and outrageous repetitions – may also be seen as an extension of the ‘misuse’ of terminologies, (assuming that terminologies can be normative as well as

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<sup>107</sup> Zuboff, front matter.

<sup>108</sup> Lindsay, p. 114.

<sup>109</sup> Clearly it is not impossible that some crossover between these genres should exist, but in reality that section of the digital Venn diagram is probably fairly slim.

<sup>110</sup> Amazon, ‘Your Recommendations’, *Amazon.co.uk* [accessed 15 March 2023].

linguistic). The reader's growing disbelief at what they are reading or hearing<sup>111</sup> prompts along with laughter considerations of the (far less amusing) situation which underlies this mirth. Bown has pointed out that 'the humour disseminated in contemporary society demands that we be *light* and 'easy', which can be a way to encourage consumption and consumerism'.<sup>112</sup> 'The Incredible Canterbury Poem', however, though executed with Hilson's characteristic lightness and easiness of touch, invites the reader to look afresh at humour, as a means of *exposing* the sinister hidden agendas of consumption and consumerism, rather than being a vehicle for encouraging them.

Hilson revisits this subject in the subsequent 'The Wogan Poem', where the familiar terminologies of product marketing and payday loan reviews are key in this satirical interrogation of the archons' reinforcement of commodity fetishism,<sup>113</sup> ie through the sanctioned lending of money that individuals will likely struggle to pay back to buy things they have been persuaded to think they need.<sup>114</sup> The poem's relentless litany of brand and product names – 'a varta indestructible L-E-D torch', 'an aerolatte stainless steel milk frother', 'a discovery channel digital metal detector', 'a set of raymond van barnevald super star darts'<sup>115</sup> – exemplifies Guy Debord's assertion that 'social space is continually being

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<sup>111</sup> 'I think there's also something exquisitely uncomfortable about repetition. It becomes funny when you keep going, so that the reader/listener can't quite believe the repetition is being maintained'. [Hilson, *Blackbox Manifold*.]

<sup>112</sup> Bown, p. 12 [referencing Gilles Lipovetsky].

<sup>113</sup> 'A comic meaning is invariably obtained when an absurd idea is fitted into a well-established phrase-form.'

[Bergson, Chapter II 'The Comic Element In Situations And The Comic Element In Words'.]

<sup>114</sup> 'commodities – so long as you need them – lead an unconscious or unseen life, because they exist down in the unconscious of the people who use them' [Dieter Roth in *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* by Daniel Spoerri (London: Atlas Press, 1995), p. 169. This expands upon a point originally made in my MA submission.]

<sup>115</sup> Hilson, 'The Wogan Poem' in *Latanoprost Variations*, pp. 7-10.

blanketed by stratum after stratum of commodities',<sup>116</sup> signposting entrenched perceptions of material wealth and possessions as signifiers of identity. As with the out-of-control music algorithm, we are prompted to laugh, here at the overly-detailed language of selling, which amplifies its products' desirability by making a feature out of the quotidian ('stainless steel') or zeroing in on celebrity associations. Hilson's recognisable references once more have resonances with the concept of metaphorical exile, providing – as with Knight's 'satiric exiles' – an anchor point which, along with the humour, establishes buy-in from the reader<sup>117</sup> (Knight also stresses the importance of 'gaining the listener's agreement' to ensure satire is more than 'merely emotive')<sup>118</sup> from which to explore the insistent sense that something is 'off'. Thus, a device beloved of promotion itself is inverted, evoking not a desire to own these items but instead a very clear steer that, to borrow from John Berger, 'The act of acquiring has taken the place of all other actions... All other human faculties or needs are made subsidiary to this power'.<sup>119</sup> Further, Hilson's use of real, specific product names and genuine celebrity brands lends weight to this thinking, firmly locating the poem in actual experience in a way that generic or fabricated terms would not.

Similarly, the repeated, instantly recognisable hackneyed language of online reviews ('it's quite simple', 'I am always recommending you to my friends', 'thanks wogan')<sup>120</sup> enhances the comedic aspect of the piece, their accuracy easily verifiable by, for example,

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<sup>116</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994), p. 29.

<sup>117</sup> 'The creation of an alternative order that moves from history to art carries with it an intertextuality that both anchors the alternative order in the realm of literature and provides familiar and intermediate terms to assist the exiles as their own commentary translates the language of their constructs into the language of history'. [Knight, p. 95.]

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>119</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 153.

<sup>120</sup> Hilson, 'The Wogan Poem', pp. 7-10.

glancing through the Trustpilot plaudits for sunny.co.uk (whom Hilson references in his epigraph to the poem): ‘So easy and quick, would recommend to anyone’; ‘always helpful and easy to use’.<sup>121</sup> This bland, chirpy lexicon may be the antithesis of the type of specialist discourse which Hilson identifies as saying “keep out”<sup>122</sup> – more of which follows in Section Two (ii) – but I would contend that its inoffensiveness arguably makes it equally, if not more, unsettling,<sup>123</sup> its capacity to draw in the consumer having been likened by Hilson to light entertainment king Terry Wogan’s (of the poem’s titular anagram) capacity ‘to ‘draw in’ his listeners on the radio and interviewees on the telly’ with ‘the same friendly, avuncular tone’.<sup>124</sup> As Jean-Jacques Lecercle has noted, ‘language of real life is the language Marx describes in *Capital as the language of commodities*’:<sup>125</sup> when coupled with lines such as ‘it is in my best interest to buy’,<sup>126</sup> these repetitions, along with the ‘battering’ of product names, begin to suggest also a manipulation, where the speaker is a consumer who has consumed along with the goods the whole ethos of consuming, of borrowing in order to consume *and* – perhaps most chillingly – of selling on, in their recommendations to others. There is a pattern to both Hilson’s text and the examples from real-life reviews which calls to mind a kind of ‘groupthink’ and the almost automated responses this generates, the ‘synthetically produced modes of behaviour’<sup>127</sup> which, Adorno has noted, have become norms of mass culture. In this way, the everyday is

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<sup>121</sup> Trustpilot, ‘sunny’, *Trustpilot*, <https://www.trustpilot.com/review/sunny.co.uk> [accessed 13 March 2023].

<sup>122</sup> Hilson, ‘Why I wrote stretchers’, p. 75.

<sup>123</sup> ‘All language is up for grabs, and in the poem all language is equal’. Hilson, *Blackbox Manifold*.

<sup>124</sup> Hilson, *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> Lecercle, p. 128.

<sup>126</sup> Hilson, ‘The Wogan Poem’, p. 10.

<sup>127</sup> Theodor W Adorno ‘The Schema of Mass Culture’ in *The Culture Industry*, p. 78.

reframed as a mechanism for what Zuboff terms ‘a normalization of the abnormal’,<sup>128</sup> designed to secure the continuance of capitalism and the profits of those in power – not merely by fostering unquestioning conformity to acquisitive norms, but also an (illusory) sense of agency through enabling the resulting need to buy<sup>129</sup> – which pacifies (at least in the short term) while diverting attention from real issues such as the cost of living crisis threatening to disturb consumerism’s indefatigable march. The capacity for the linguistically mundane to work by stealth makes it as valuable – if not more valuable – a part of what Althusser terms ‘state apparatuses’ as are specialist terminologies, its friendly, understated effectiveness standing in stark contrast to the following account Hilson gives of the statement on wonga.com’s website (source of the reviews used in ‘The Wogan Poem’) after the company went into administration: “‘The window for submitting an unaffordability/redress complaint has now closed.” The language is obviously very different’.<sup>130</sup>

It is also worth raising the question here as to whether Hilson, as well as satirising those in power who use commodities as misdirections, is turning his lens on the consumers themselves? Is his familiar language and use of humour perhaps an attempt to elicit, rather like Lee’s acknowledgement that he is not immune to delivering ‘music hall’ level gags, a wry recognition from the reader (consumer) that their willing participation in this consumption is also partly to blame for the perpetuation of this situation? Hilson’s observation that his line in *Organ Music* ‘Side 7’ ‘nobody/knows who I’m against’<sup>131</sup> was a reference to the potential

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<sup>128</sup> Zuboff, p. 12.

<sup>129</sup> ‘the individual *is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection*’. [Louis Althusser, quoted in Knight, p. 55.]

<sup>130</sup> Hilson, *Blackbox Manifold*.

<sup>131</sup> Hilson, ‘Side 7’ in *Organ Music*, p. 73.

for complicity on the part of author and reader,<sup>132</sup> as well as the more clear-cut objects of his satire, certainly signposts that the reader's part – and, indeed, the author's – is, in both collections, as much up for debate as is that of the archons. In this respect, Hilson may be seen to be continuing in a tradition of satire which includes not only poets and entertainers but also the writings of Karl Marx (himself originally a poet and playwright), whose role as a satirist is examined by Keston Sutherland in his book *Stupefaction: A Radical Anatomy of Phantoms. The act of consumption*, Sutherland notes, '– that is, first of all, purchase – is in every case an act of cannibalism'.<sup>133</sup> For example, the reader of *Das Kapital*, thinks that they 'understand very well what commodities are' [rather like we may think we 'know' repetition<sup>134</sup>] but in fact 'We who are the readers of this book...' [and, we might also say, the readers of these poems] 'are ourselves the subject specimens of its diagnosis'.<sup>135</sup> Again, there is a doubleness at work in Hilson's texts, whereby readers might recognise themselves as complicit consumers but with that also comes the 'laughter of a group', united by their acknowledgment of that complicity.

With its unrelenting intertextual segues referencing middle-of-the-road celebrities, high street shops, popular song lyrics and consumer products, it seems at first reading that the entirety of *Organ Music* functions as an apparently indiscriminate archive dedicated to the recording of arbitrary mass cultural phenomena. In 'Side 9', for example, we encounter Cliff Richard, Richard and Judy (again), Olivia Newton-John (and fragments of lyrics from her

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<sup>132</sup> Hilson, *Blackbox Manifold*.

<sup>133</sup> Keston Sutherland, *Stupefaction: A Radical Anatomy Of Phantoms* (Calcutta [sic]: Seagull Books, 2011), p. 49.

<sup>134</sup> A caution to be mindful of repetition forms the opening epigraph of *Latanoprost Variations*:

'A great many think that they know repetition when they see or hear it but do they'.  
– Gertrude Stein, 'Portraits and Repetition'

<sup>135</sup> Sutherland, pp. 68-69.

hit song 'Xanadu') plus a gamut of retailers from M&S and BHS to Poundworld and 'Mr Fabric';<sup>136</sup> while in the third 'Interlude' of 'Side 7', the easy listening vocal duo Renée and Renato are namechecked alongside office supply outlets (Staples) and their wares (Obliterine/Gestetner drivers).<sup>137</sup> The apparent disorder of this informal catalogue, however, may be seen to reflect the often equally erratic nature of officially approved documenting, 'the ad hoc formation of the archive, in which there is no discernable difference between what is worthy of preservation and what is "merely" personal'.<sup>138</sup> As with *Latanoprost Variations*, the quantity and frequency of these references is overwhelming, and it is surely impossible that any one individual would recognise them all.<sup>139</sup> Where the later text differs, though, is that its references appear to be deployed in a kind of 'scattergun' fashion, rather than being organised thematically (the music algorithm/band name; the payday loan review/product name, etc). And while the reader might smile at those mentions which are familiar, this recognisability also gives them pause to consider that, while ever we are being constantly 'battered' from all sides with opportunities to buy, listen, watch, consume from a vast multi-platform mass cultural archive which constantly churns out, shreds, over-writes and recycles its content we will be too overwhelmed to consider that this overabundance might be an act of subterfuge. Much like the laundry products whose abrasiveness, Barthes

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<sup>136</sup> Hilson, 'Side 9' in *Organ Music*, pp. 93-99.

<sup>137</sup> Hilson, 'Interlude 3, 'Side 7' in *Organ Music*, p. 78.

<sup>138</sup> Leah DeVun and Michael Jay McClure, 'Archives Behaving Badly', *Radical History Review* Issue 120 (Fall 2014), 121-130 (p. 122) <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-2703760>.

<sup>139</sup> Hilson has observed: 'I guess these pages are a kind of archive but a specialised one really only for the text they belong to.... the archive that has gone into making that book of poems is so idiosyncratic, eccentric, unreliable, aberrant even, that there's every chance it won't make sense to anyone encountering it... Who knows how individual items from the archive will be used by readers'. [Hilson, *Blackbox Manifold*.]

points out, is 'disguised'<sup>140</sup> by advertisers focusing on the detergents' foamy luxuriousness, the barrage of benign, over-marketed consumer goods in Hilson's poems signposts how such distraction can function more broadly as an agent of social control, a pacifying 'false flag' designed to hamper the formation of individual, questioning identities.

On a more positive note, Hilson's deployment of the low-brow language of mass culture in a text which also references the high brow specialist languages discussed in the following section may also be seen as a lexical thumbing of the nose to a ruling elite whose depiction of popular culture as evidence of dumbing down and the high brow as the property the upper and upper middle classes cements and propagates divisions.<sup>141</sup> Additionally, in the same way that Jessica Mason has noted the capacity for 'unmarked' (ie uncited) intertextual references to 'encourage feelings of affinity and endearment between readers and characters when the former recognises these covert intertextual gestures made by the latter',<sup>142</sup> we might argue that Hilson's incorporation of mass cultural allusions which are more likely to be universally familiar than, say, Latin or fragments of seventeenth century verse, helps foster – in common with his use of satire as discussed in the introduction to this chapter – the sense of a readerly community united against establishment manipulation. Either way, should we be in any doubt as to who holds the halcyons of these false flags, the

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<sup>140</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Soap-powders and Detergents' in *Mythologies* (London: Vintage, 1993), p. 37.

<sup>141</sup> Jessica Mason's discussion of former Education Secretary Michael Gove's comments about the 'dumbing down' of the National Curriculum provides an excellent example of these attitudes in action: 'Gove explicitly acknowledges a hegemony of texts, maligns formal attention being given to popular culture within the classroom, and unapologetically asserts a cline of quality seemingly based on his own tastes. He argues that, objectively, Richard Wagner is better and more 'intellectually, sensually and emotionally' rewarding than the Arctic Monkeys.' [Jessica Mason, *Intertextuality in Practice*, (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2019), p. 143.]

<sup>142</sup> Mason, p. 119.

collection is interwoven with enough identifiable allusions to significant twentieth/twenty-first century political speeches ('who are fighting me on the beaches';<sup>143</sup> 'a head is forever and not just for turning left or right'<sup>144</sup>) to point us back again in the same direction: to 'the power that misuses language'. Moreover, we might also question if these establishment figures who misuse language are the sole object of Hilson's satire or whether he is also satirising the mechanical nature of the language of consumerism, as part of a wider machine of right wing language?

**ii) 'this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language':<sup>145</sup> The archive that is specialist languages**

In *3:AM Magazine*, Hilson expands on his thoughts about terminologies as follows: 'they are specialist discourses designed to confer distinction. Whilst they are sometimes necessary, or at least deemed so by their users, they are more often than not used as privileging and divisive markers'.<sup>146</sup> Interspersed with the specialist language of the 'lexicon of the banal' one finds in both collections elements of what might more conventionally be assumed to belong to this category, examples of which include the vocabulary of heraldry, technical musical terminology and classical discourse. Regardless of whether those in positions of power satirised by Hilson are wilfully using specialist languages to exclude (and, by

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<sup>143</sup> Hilson, 'Side 4' in *Organ Music*, p. 38 (alluding, one may assume, to Winston Churchill's infamous 'We will fight them on the beaches').

<sup>144</sup> Hilson, 'Side 6' in *Organ Music*, p. 63 (alluding, one may assume, to Margaret Thatcher's equally infamous 'Lady's not for turning' speech).

<sup>145</sup> Karl Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte' in *Karl Marx Selected Writings*, ed. by David McLellan (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 300. [Fabian Macpherson has noted the relevance of this essay to *Organ Music* in 'The English Countenance of *Organ Music*', *HilsonHilson*, pp. 187-200.]

<sup>146</sup> Hilson, *3:AM Magazine*.

extension, control),<sup>147</sup> or whether this usage is so intertwined with their entitled existences that they are oblivious to its impact,<sup>148</sup> the outcome is the same. This section will examine heraldic references in *Latanoprost Variations*' 'A Barry Bendy Poem', alongside *Organ Music*'s multiple borrowings from its own titular lexicon together with 'Side 8's' employment of Latin, positing that Hilson's 'misuse' of terminologies exposes language which 'confer[s] distinction' as a means of archiving the now to satisfy a reactionary, upper middle class agenda and notions of a hierarchy of culture.

'like rolf harris in the 1970s I didn't go to cambridge'<sup>149</sup>

'A Barry Bendy Poem' opens with this line, a refrain which, along with assorted heraldic terms, recurs amid a wealth of subsequent examples of the speaker's apparently contrary ability to explain the city's geography and places of interest in great detail. The namechecking of Harris at the outset is significant, at once signaling to the reader that, as with the disgraced family entertainer, the poem's apparently genial exterior cannot be taken at face value (Harris's defence – later disproved – for an assault for which he was ultimately convicted, claimed that he was not in Cambridge at the time of the attack).<sup>150</sup> In a text which, Robert Hampson notes, 'initially presents itself as a poem about Cambridge'<sup>151</sup> the

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<sup>147</sup> Jean-Jacques Lecercle: 'the class-struggle in language has one striking characteristic: its agents, or rather its mouthpieces, are not necessarily aware that it is being waged, at the very moment when, as speakers, they are actively involved in it'. [Lecercle and Riley, p. 166.]

<sup>148</sup> This capacity for oblivion with reference to the use of specialist languages is another feature of Marx's satire. Keston Sutherland notes of *The Holy Family*, Chapter 1: 'It is a satire not against jargon, which Marx enjoyed and used as much as Pope did, but against philosophers who don't know jargon when they see it, least of all their own'. [Sutherland, p. 191]

<sup>149</sup> Hilson, 'A Barry Bendy Poem' in *Latanoprost Variations*, p. 19.

<sup>150</sup> Robert Hampson gives a detailed analysis of the poem's allusions to the Harris trial in his essay "'It's behind you": 'A Barry Bendy Poem' and Cambridge in the 1970s', *HilsonHilson*, pp. 144-155.

<sup>151</sup> Hampson, p. 144.

reader is repeatedly brought up short by the insertion of heraldry's formal, unfamiliar words into quotidian musings about student life and local retailers:

the isle of ely on a  
bend wavy the men of understanding flory counter flory  
gules I should have asked but where are your outfitters  
of uniforms & sportswear not knowing in the 1970s  
because I didnt go there<sup>152</sup>

Hilson's word choices within this lexicon represent a 'misuse' of terminologies that are loaded with double meaning: 'bendy' and 'wavy' are suggestive of a bending of or wavering from the truth; 'rampant'<sup>153</sup> – as Hampson points out – has clear connotations for a case of indecent assault, while the etymology of 'engrailed'<sup>154</sup> – 'from Anglo-French *engreslé*, literally, reduced, thinned'<sup>155</sup> – might describe the impact of the attacks on those assaulted. Exemplifying *Latanoprost Variations'* wrong turns, digressions and diversions in microcosm, 'A Barry Bendy Poem's' strategically placed language works in conjunction with the aforementioned refrain of not going and the question marks planted by the mention of Harris in line one, to delineate the capacity for smokescreens and obfuscation by seemingly benign characters, ensconced for decades as light entertainment 'royalty' and as such often endorsed by [often Oxbridge alumni] ruling establishment figures.<sup>156</sup> The associations of heraldry with the physical object of the shield are additionally apposite, the shiny lure of celebrity being a metaphorical shield behind which Harris and others were able

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<sup>152</sup> Hilson, 'A Barry Bendy Poem', p. 20.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>155</sup> Merriam Webster 'engrailed adjective', *Merriam Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/engrailed> [accessed 26 April 2023].

<sup>156</sup> It is well-documented, for example, that Oxbridge graduate Margaret Thatcher was a great admirer of Harris's mawkish 1969 chart-topper 'Two Little Boys'.

to hide their true identities for so long, courtesy of the often hero-like status afforded to these personalities by mass culture.

The shield is also suffused with connotations of tradition – one of privilege, glamorous, almost mythical, and not readily accessible to everyday individuals – of which elite Oxbridge colleges are a cornerstone. In *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolf draws comparisons between ‘any society which, while professing to respect liberty, restricts it’ and ‘the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge’<sup>157</sup> – a trait which, arguably, is replicated among the ‘old boys’ and girls occupying key positions in the Conservative governments Hilson critiques. ‘The finest education in the world’, Woolf observes, ‘far from teaching the educated generosity and magnanimity, makes them on the contrary so anxious to keep their possessions... that they will not use force but much subtler methods than force when they are asked to share them’.<sup>158</sup> Such methods might include the establishment’s hyping of perceived unthreatening celebrity as part of its diversionary tactics, the pacifying, often avuncular approach of figures such as Harris normalising the treatment of audiences/citizens as children. We might also consider once more that these behaviours are ones that ‘have always been here’. The abuse of positions of power – be that national treasure or government official – to exploit the vulnerable is, clearly, not a new phenomenon.

And I ran with my organ to the estuary  
boy contra hautboy  
I was already dreaming  
of fountayne rd on the way in  
*tremulant bourdon gedackt*<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Woolf, p. 112.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>159</sup> Hilson, ‘Side 1’ in *Organ Music*, p. 13.

*Organ Music* 'Side 1' begins in this way, with Hilson's introduction of the specialist language of organ components in the first five lines of the first poem ('contra hautboy', 'tremulant', 'bourdon', 'gedackt') setting the tone not just for this piece but for the entire collection. Liable to send the vast majority of readers scurrying to Google for clarification, the text is suffused with ostensibly random appearances of these distinctly niche terminologies, while two of the poems (the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> 'ABC of Stops') are just that, solely comprising the names of organ stops, listed alphabetically. Perhaps the most sustained example of the employment of a particular discourse across the two works, it could be argued that its purpose is again one of deliberate diversion, whose consequent rabbit hole of internet searching (re)calls to mind the underlying political misdirection which never seems far away. As Hilson points out in *Blackbox Manifold*: 'After all, *Organ Music* is not a history of the organ, any more than my book *Bird bird* is a book about British birds'.<sup>160</sup> Further, given Hilson's remarks in the 'Foreword' concerning the sixteenth and seventeenth century state sanctioned destruction of organs in England as 'symbols of Popery',<sup>161</sup> I contend that the lexicon of their workings in *Organ Music* again represents a deployment of 'counter-terminologies', designed to draw parallels between this historic physical damage and more insidious forms of political violence occurring in contemporary British society.

With this reading in mind, we might also reflect that the title *Organ Music* has echoes of Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum* (1620), where *Organum* refers to 'an instrument for acquiring knowledge'.<sup>162</sup> Like the earlier discussed seventeenth century poetical references, this work of the same period may be seen to have parallels with the twenty first

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<sup>160</sup> Hilson, *Blackbox Manifold*.

<sup>161</sup> Hilson, 'Foreword' in *Organ Music*, p. 7.

<sup>162</sup> Merriam Webster 'organon noun', *Merriam Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/organon> [accessed 08 September 2023].

century world Hilson interrogates, Bacon's assertion that there exists 'in words certain degrees of distortion and error'<sup>163</sup> having clear resonances with Hilson's notion of 'using language to hit the post'. Similarly, *Novum Organum's* arguing for a rejection of established scientific and philosophical thinking in favour of a new methodology designed to counteract what Bacon terms our 'natural bias' to 'seek metaphysical explanations which are not based on real observations'<sup>164</sup>, recalls the plea in both *Organ Music* and *Latanoprost Variations* to reject a contemporary mindset based not on 'real observations' of the activities of the ruling elite and 'state apparatuses' such as the political violence of racist, pro-leave propaganda, but rather on their spun, pacifying and diversionary tactics.

By way of example, we might further consider Hilson's essay 'The God-Awful Small Affair Of The Invisible Organist: David Bowie Translated', which discusses the apparently spontaneous playing of 'Life on Mars' on church organs following Bowie's death. Our 'natural bias' directs us to see this as an uplifting and heartfelt response to 'the premature death of a rock icon who many felt, because of his otherworldly persona, would live forever.'<sup>165</sup> This easy listening makeover, however, is somewhat at odds with a song whose protagonist, Hilson tells us, is 'a lonely and misunderstood 'mousy-haired' teenage girl whose trips to the pictures lead her to question the media representations of reality',<sup>166</sup> particularly when we learn more about the origins of both this musical genre and its connections with the

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<sup>163</sup> Francis Bacon, 'Aphorism LX' in Book One: The Idols, *Novum Organum*, [https://constitution.org/2-Authors/bacon/nov\\_org.htm](https://constitution.org/2-Authors/bacon/nov_org.htm) [accessed 05 September 2023].

<sup>164</sup> Wikipedia 'Novum Organum', *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Novum\\_Organum&oldid=1157780179](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Novum_Organum&oldid=1157780179) [accessed 01 September 2023].

<sup>165</sup> Jeff Hilson, 'The God-Awful Small Affair of the Invisible Organist: David Bowie Translated', *English: Journal of the English Association* 69.267 (2020), 346-362 (p. 349) <https://dx.doi.org/10.1093/english/efaa042>.

<sup>166</sup> Hilson, 'The God-Awful Small Affair of the Invisible Organist: David Bowie Translated', p. 350.

instrument on which it is being played. Referencing the work of Joseph Lanza, Hilson describes the original role of easy listening music as being 'to create various 'moods' to induce the general public to buy more consumer goods',<sup>167</sup> while 'the first church organ recitals were early examples of mood music, designed to pacify worshippers between sermons.'<sup>168</sup> Moreover, on closer examination, the tributes were, perhaps, not all as spontaneous as our 'naturally biased' thinking would have us believe. Hilson points out that later in the interview which accompanies the YouTube clip of the St Albans Cathedral performance, organ scholar Nicolas Freestone explains 'At 4 o'clock we put out on Twitter to the local community if you're free come along for a musical tribute. And then it was filmed and put up on Facebook and YouTube.'<sup>169</sup> Far from being 'impromptu', Hilson continues, 'The whole endeavour now comes across as a stunt to boost the cathedral's social media presence...' by 'contemporary media-savvy Church of England PLC'.<sup>170</sup> Thus, the organ of Hilson's title may be seen, like that of Bacon's, as an 'instrument for acquiring knowledge', which encourages readers to begin to make 'real observations' about how 'the power that misuses language' – of which the church is undoubtedly a part – utilises the tools of consumerism to push its own agendas.

In *Organ Music 'Side 8'*, the impact of specialist terminologies is intensified by the introduction alongside them of classical Latin, a language resolutely concomitant with establishment privilege. The first half of the poem reads as a wry celebration, again punctuated with deadpan humour, of an assortment of all things Belgian, from notable buildings and architecture to renowned sporting figures (Romelu Lukaku, Kevin De Bruyne,

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., p. 354.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., p. 354.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., p. 358.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., p. 358.

Eddy Merckx) and movie stars (Jean-Claude Van Damme).<sup>171</sup> However, the ever-present terminology of the organ hovers like the ghost at the feast ('there are so many eglises with their pneumatic tubular kerkhoff patents'<sup>172</sup>) serving to remind the reader that a kind of violence has, once more, been perpetrated. It becomes clear that the speaker's huge affection for Belgium, and Brussels in particular is prompted by Britain's electing, in the 2016 referendum, to sever ties with the EU ('even the demolished hotels of the eu are better than an english referendum'),<sup>173</sup> an administrative vandalising of détente that mirrors the physical vandalism done to the English organ over four centuries earlier.

This 'battering' of the reader with Belgian references gives way, in the second half of the poem, to a 'list of all the Conservative MPs who voted 'Leave' in the June 2016 Referendum',<sup>174</sup> interspersed only with the Latin 'hic finis' (this is the end) and 'hic jacet' (here lies):

*\*hic finis  
the minister for esher & walton hic jacet the minister for  
wokingham hic finis the minster for gillingham & rainham  
hic jacet the minister for newton abbot<sup>175</sup>*

With its repetitions reminiscent of a Latin mass, the text takes on a sombre, funereal tone which, nonetheless, offers an opportunity for more uneasy humour, suggesting as it does the 'burying' of the MPs responsible ('hic jacet' could be the text from a tombstone). The unfamiliarity of these recursive phrases, however, also renders them at once distancing and exhausting. The choice of Latin is significant, conjuring as it does the British public school education system, many of whose alumni (Boris Johnson, Jacob Rees-Mogg, for example)

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<sup>171</sup> Hilson, 'Side 8' in *Organ Music*, pp. 81-88.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>174</sup> Hilson, 'Notes', in *Organ Music*, p. 120.

<sup>175</sup> Hilson, 'Side 8' in *Organ Music*, p. 86.

were key players in the Brexit outcome. Already speakers of RP English at its most extreme – a symbol of hierarchical status which, Lecerle has noted ‘lords it over the dirty dialectal rascals’<sup>176</sup> (ie the working classes) – the ruling classes’ additional command of a largely unfamiliar, inaccessible language constructs another strata of elitist linguistic affirmation. As Lecerle continues, ‘there is such a thing as the linguistic class-struggle. By which we do not merely mean that the class struggle is carried *through* language, which is obvious, but also *in* language’.<sup>177</sup> Hilson’s incorporation of Latin is, therefore, particularly apposite for reflections on the ensuing period of government, where the bulk of the population were to become increasingly distanced from a privileged minority, whose identities and agendas were placed front and centre in a manner probably more brazen than anything occurring in UK politics over the previous 50 years.<sup>178</sup> Further, given subsequent allegations and ongoing investigations into the conduct of this government, the translation ‘here lies’ assumes an additional meaning, not just as an articulation of mourning at the outcome of the referendum, but also to allude to some of the alleged misdirections which influenced the result. In parallel, the litany of British place names scattered among the alienating Latin serves to again emphasise the speaker’s status as ‘metaphorical exile’ in their own country. ‘Side 8’, then, represents perhaps Hilson’s most audacious ‘misuse’ of terminologies yet. By deploying the specialist language most directly associated with the privately educated ruling

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<sup>176</sup> Lecerle and Riley, p. 159.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>178</sup> Again, the fact that such behaviours ‘have always been here’ should be noted. The following observation about nineteenth century France, for example, might have been written with the Johnson government in mind: ‘A bunch of blokes push their way forward to the court, into the ministries to the head of the administration and the army, a crowd of the best of whom it must be said that no one knows whence he comes, a noisy, disreputable, rapacious bohème that crawls into gallooned coats with the same grotesque dignity as the high dignitaries of the Soulouque.’ [Marx, ‘The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte’ in *Karl Marx Selected Writings*, p. 324.]

elite, a language so often connected in documentation with officialdom and authenticity, Hilson writes their manipulation of the narrative, their maneuvering to achieve the UK's separation into his own alternative archive of the now. In this way, they are metaphorically 'buried', just as they have buried the country's future at the expense of their own self-interested motivations.

### **3: Opting out of reporting. 'reportedly'. 'False flags' and the archive that is official documentation**

The final section of this chapter will examine Hilson's 'misuse' of terminologies from the archive that is official documentation, through the lens of *Latanoprost Variations*' 'A Final Poem With Full Stops'. Of particular interest here is that the poem consists entirely of the type of bald, factual statements ('suffocated in a sealed container', 'found dead in a bus shelter')<sup>179</sup> one would conventionally expect to find in functional bureaucratic reports such as death certificates, while the individuals are never named or otherwise elaborated upon in any way. The epitome of control as achieved through denial, refusal and absence, this strategy exemplifies what Rodney G S Carter has described as the 'Archival violence... found in the use of documents to enforce and naturalize the state's power and in the active silencing of the disenfranchized'.<sup>180</sup> However, as Matt Martin has pointed out in his essay in *HilsonHilson*, not only is this material readily available but it is also, in many instances, possible to match the events Hilson documents to specific individuals whose identities are fleshed out where possible with names and ages, about whom we are told more than just

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<sup>179</sup> Hilson, 'A Final Poem With Full Stops' in *Latanoprost Variations*, p. 36.

<sup>180</sup> Carter, p. 219.

clinical, dispassionate basics.<sup>181</sup> As the Institute of Race Relations (IRR) notes in its paper ‘Unwanted, Unnoticed: an audit of 160 asylum and immigration-related deaths in Europe’, the majority of information sources about these deaths is compiled not from the official documents of government agencies, but ‘primarily through local media reports and communication with local migrant and anti-racist support groups’,<sup>182</sup> meaning the resulting language is softer, more anecdotal and narrative than that of Hilson’s relentlessly hard-hitting catalogue. This depersonalisation and homogenization undoubtedly, as has been widely written on, emphasises the institutional lack of regard for these lives. As with the ‘killed women’ discussed in Chapter 1, it represents another example of Butler’s concept of ‘grievability’, the absence of recording here in a society which is typically obsessed with collecting details<sup>183</sup> allowing the establishment to absolve itself of responsibility: ‘through providing no image, no name, no narrative, so that there never was a life, and there never was a death’.<sup>184</sup> The official disinterest in these deaths stands in stark contrast to the level of scrutiny to which the migrants would have routinely and repeatedly been subjected while

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<sup>181</sup> Martin cites in particular UNITED for Intercultural Action’s list of documented deaths of refugees and migrants as a ‘likely source’. [Matt Martin, “trying to cross the border. & drowned.” Appropriation and Representation in Jeff Hilson’s “A Final Poem With Full Stops” in *HilsonHilson*, pp. 126-127.]

More information can also be found in Amnesty International’s report ‘The Human Cost of Fortress Europe: Human Rights Violations Against Migrants and Refugees at Europe’s Borders’ (referenced in Hilson’s epigraph to the poem) and The Institute of Race Relations’ briefing paper ‘Unwanted, Unnoticed: an audit of 160 asylum and immigration-related deaths in Europe’.

<sup>182</sup> Reem Abu-Hayyeh and Frances Webber, ‘Unwanted, Unnoticed: an audit of 160 asylum and immigration-related deaths in Europe’, European Research Programme, *Institute of Race Relations*, Briefing No. 10, March 2015, p. 3 <https://irr.org.uk/app/uploads/2015/03/ERP-Briefing-Paper-No-10-FINAL.pdf> [accessed 17 March 2023].

<sup>183</sup> A point Jess Phillips also makes in her speech to Parliament (see Note 5, p. 71).

<sup>184</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London, New York: Verso, 2006), p. 146.

moving between countries,<sup>185</sup> where the exercise of power rests not in refusal and absence but in interaction between identifier and identified.<sup>186</sup> The following analysis aims to extend Martin's thinking, positing that in 'misusing terminologies' one might expect to have found in official archival reports *had those records been kept*, Hilson clearly illuminates for the reader the institutional culpability and denial which dismisses these deaths as being simply 'inevitable'.

Though the circumstances of each death documented in the IRR report are recounted in only a short paragraph, the level of detail included is a humanised counterpoint to the clinical one-line summaries of Hilson's poem – for example, at less than a hundred words, the following account:

**Michael Kelly (37), 17/09/2011**

A Liberian asylum seeker, Kelly was found dead in his room in Gerstungen refugee camp in Thuringia, after residents became aware of the smell of decomposition. Kelly died of pneumonia. He had been in hospital between 19 June and 7 July, but after his health improved he was sent back to the camp, which is known to be very unsanitary, with mould on the walls causing and aggravating respiratory problems. Residents blame the staff camp [sic] for negligence, highlighting their failure to discover the body earlier.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> For example, 'As recently as July 2018, for instance, the Home Office admitted to the legally "dubious" practice used in taking DNA swabs from those seeking asylum in the United Kingdom'. [Rex Ferguson, 'The Bourne Identification' in Ferguson et al, pp. 210-232 (p. 215).]

<sup>186</sup> Ferguson et al highlight Kelly Gates' interest in 'the obvious ways in which identifications are the product of social encounters—such as the fact that they take place at particular locations, like state borders, and involve an interaction between identifier and identified.' [Ferguson et al, 'Introduction', pp. 13-14.]

<sup>187</sup> Abu-Hayyeh and Webber, p. 13.

Giving information including the individual's name, age, nationality, date of death, brief medical history and background about his treatment at the camp, this entry demonstrates just how much it is possible to record within what is still a very limited word count. This brief portrait functions almost like a scaled-down obituary, telling us not only a little of who Michael was and how he died, but also giving a wider context to his death by highlighting that he was part of a community of residents, who continue to experience an ongoing lack of care and unacceptable conditions. A comparable reference from 'A Final Poem With Full Stops', however, notes only 'in a state of advanced decomposition.'<sup>188</sup> before moving on to the next death to be catalogued – a line which epitomises Ghaddar and Caswell's assertion regarding 'refugee and migrant communities whose lives often depend on the presence or absence of a record yet are considered so little in recordkeeping processes'.<sup>189</sup> Hilson's adoption of the brisk, perfunctory language of bureaucracy suggests a set of options in a multiple choice tick box list, reducing the person who has died simply to an object who must be classified as quickly as and in the broadest terms possible. Again, a manipulation of the narrative is signposted, where the archons' communication of what is perceived to be archivable becomes a blueprint for what is then archived. As Judith Butler has observed, such refusal of acknowledgement enables establishment bodies to divert the agenda away from the human beings who died and back towards what they consider to be more pressing concerns (ie the misinformation which garners support for the suppression of migration): 'if

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<sup>188</sup> Hilson, 'A Final Poem With Full Stops' in *Latanoprost Variations*, p. 37.

<sup>189</sup> J J Ghaddar and Michelle Caswell [referencing Gilliland and Halilovich], "'To Go Beyond": Towards a Decolonial Archival Praxis', *Archival Science* 19 (2019), 71-85 (p. 75)

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10502-019-09311-1> [accessed 16 September 2022].

The fact that, despite their efforts, almost half the individuals recorded in the IRR report sample of 160 deaths are 'unidentified' or 'unnamed' demonstrates the extent of this lack of consideration.

a nonliving population is destroyed, then nothing of note has happened: there is no destruction, just a certain clearing away of some curious obstruction from the path of the living'.<sup>190</sup>

The propensity for official documentation to be cursory, mechanical is further highlighted by Hilson's deployment of the repetition we are directed to consider in *Latanoprost Variations'* opening epigraph, grouping together words which reflect the manner of the migrants' deaths:

& drowned. drowned in the agean  
& drowned near lampedusa. drowned in the channel of  
otrantò.<sup>191</sup>

These recursive syntactical structures reflect both the repetitive procedures associated with the act of cataloguing and the fact that 'the losses fall into patterns and are revealed as systematic'.<sup>192</sup> Additionally, the recurrence of the word 'reportedly' throughout the text invites the reader to consider how those who control the language of bureaucratic reporting work to cast doubt on the validity of what little documentation *has* taken place through more anecdotal routes. Evidence of officials disputing the testimony of migrants can easily be found in the IRR papers, as outlined in the following example:

**Ismael (20), 22/12/2011**

An Ethiopian asylum seeker, Ismael was found dead at the bottom of a bridge in the centre of Calais. Ismael was well-known in migrant and activist circles in Calais, and his friends disagree with the Boulogne-sur-Mer public prosecutor's theory that he committed suicide, stating that the drop was not

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<sup>190</sup> Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, p. 111-112.

<sup>191</sup> Hilson, 'A Final Poem With Full Stops' in *Latanoprost Variations*, p. 37.

<sup>192</sup> John Kerrigan, 'Lampedusa: Migrant Tragedy', *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Enquiry* 8(2) (April 2021), 138-157 (p. 157)

[https://www.cambridge.org/core/product/identifier/S2052261420000410/type/journal\\_article](https://www.cambridge.org/core/product/identifier/S2052261420000410/type/journal_article) [accessed 28 February 2023].

of itself enough to kill him. An inquest and autopsy were refused.<sup>193</sup>

Echoed in Hilson's perfunctory 'reportedly jumped off the bridge & died.'<sup>194</sup> this incident is typical of Carter's observation that 'Due to a lack of power, the statements are not heeded, they are not recognized as speech acts or as records and are denied a place in the archives'.<sup>195</sup> As well as representing what John Kerrigan has called 'a shift in the meaning of "reportedly" from what is merely reported to what covers suffering up, or aims to, without deceiving anyone',<sup>196</sup> the term also becomes a 'false flag', which enables officialdom to confirm [for itself] that it has done its job, in that some basic level of recording has taken place – even while it simultaneously opts out of respectfully, or even adequately, executing this task.

Finally, Hilson's decision to anonymise the migrants brings us back to notions of the manipulation of identity, where here the reduction of individuals to a single homogenous group is bound up with nationalistic agendas designed to protect and preserve a manufactured concept, the misdirection regarding what is believed to constitute a country's character,<sup>197</sup> or the highly sinister 'values'. As with 'The Incredible Canterbury Poem' and 'The Wogan Poem', the power of selling is again under scrutiny, albeit one of an even more insidious kind, where the unnamed migrants have become simply commodities to be traded in the pursuit of racist ideologies disguised as concern. It is this preoccupation with the

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<sup>193</sup> Abu-Hayyeh and Webber, p. 11.

<sup>194</sup> Hilson, A Final Poem With Full Stops' in *Latanoprost Variations*, p. 36.

<sup>195</sup> Carter, p. 218.

<sup>196</sup> Kerrigan, p. 157.

<sup>197</sup> 'the efforts to block migrants to Europe are in part rooted in the desire to keep Europe white, to safeguard a nationality that is imagined to be pure. It hardly matters that Europe has never been exclusively white...'

'The new migrant is thus figured as a force of destruction who will engulf and negate its host'. [Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, p. 120; p. 142.]

profiling and classification of potential consumers which, as Robert Kiely has pointed out, leads from the earlier two poems 'inexorably to a poem about borders and migrant deaths'.<sup>198</sup> Once more, it is via the 'misuse' of the linguistic styles of institutions which enact these misdirections that Hilson can shine a light on alternative interpretations of their intentions. It should be noted, however, that there are still positives to be drawn from this bleak scenario. In Hilson's hands, the language of an inherently racist archive, which refuses these deaths in a way that the more informal archives do not, becomes a powerful elegiac gesture. It is, paradoxically, through the heartbreaking insistence of its homogeneity and inhumanity that we are able to see the migrants as fellow human beings and individual selves.

***'he used language/to kill the hong kong laundrymen'*<sup>199</sup>**

In *The Non-Library*, Trevor Owen-Jones references Derrida's observation that '*the archive is also a principle of consignation, that is of gathering together*',<sup>200</sup> but in considering Hilson's texts it is also worth bearing in mind Derrida's earlier assertion that 'Consignation aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration'.<sup>201</sup> As we have seen in the classification of individuals – whether through their habits of mass cultural consumption or in the reclassification of migrants as one homogenous group – both *Latanoprost Variations* and *Organ Music* are suffused with a low-key but ever-present sense of how those agencies which shape our

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<sup>198</sup> Kiely, p. 118.

<sup>199</sup> Hilson, 'Side 7' in *Organ Music*, p. 75.

<sup>200</sup> Derrida, 'Archive Fever', referenced by Owen-Jones, p. 24.

<sup>201</sup> Derrida, p. 10.

existence attempt to execute this ‘gathering together’, creating the ‘ideal configuration’ of diversion, pacification, surveillance and control. This is achieved by Hilson’s most crucial ‘misuse’ of all: a subversion of the act of gathering which, through mining the archives that are poetry, mass culture, specialist languages and official documentation for formal and linguistic conventions, mimics the archons’ archival gestures and lexical legerdemain to create an ‘anti-archive’ of revised content that as it gathers at once refuses to be gathered.<sup>202</sup> Thus, material from a vast and diverse intertextual catalogue is not just cited but, to borrow from Derrida, ‘recited’,<sup>203</sup> the terminologies weaponised by the establishment ‘used to hit the post’ and so beaten at their own game, taking on new meaning alongside that for which ‘the power that misuses language’ intends. Whether ‘battering’ the reader with references from popular culture, scattering specialist vocabulary as an idiomatic aide memoire or adopting the style of [absent] formal documentation, this strategy places establishment misdirection firmly on a continuum of behaviours which seek to mould identities that support, unquestioningly accept or, at the very least, tolerate its agendas. While this could make for bleak reading, Hilson ensures that there are some positives to be found, his trademark liberal use of deadpan humour functioning to create a sense of liberation – in the words of Bergson, ‘By laughter society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it’.<sup>204</sup> However, this alternative archive nonetheless carries at its heart

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<sup>202</sup> For example, Fabian MacPherson notes of *Organ Music* ‘Side 1’: “I am not in this together with you” is a rejection of David Cameron’s “Big Society” slogan “We’re all in it together”. [MacPherson, ‘The English Countenance of Organ Music’ in *HilsonHilson*, p. 189.]

<sup>203</sup> ‘When a word inscribes itself as the citation of another sense of the same word, when the textual center-stage of the word *pharmakon*, even while it means *remedy*, cites, re-cites, and makes legible that which *in the same word* signifies, in another spot and on a different level of the stage, poison...’ [Jacques Derrida, ‘The *Pharmakon*’, in *Jacques Derrida: basic writings*, ed. by Barry Stocker (London, New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 64.]

<sup>204</sup> Bergson, Chapter III ‘The Comic In Character’.

the clear message that structure can lie behind façades of disorder and that the establishment's carefully orchestrated 'false flags' of shiny products, trouble-free loans, erudite phraseology and selective recording have the capacity for consequences ranging from the mildly sinister to the downright inhumane. Should that capacity ever be in doubt, one need look no further than Hilson's note, in *Organ Music*, on 'the hong kong laundrymen', which feels a fitting point with which to close this chapter:

Several months after the shelling of HMS Sheffield and HMS Coventry during the 1982 Falklands War, the dead bodies of two laundry workers, Lai Chi Keung and Ben Kwo Kyu were discovered below deck. A parliamentary report confirmed that "laundrymen embarked on Her Majesty's ships are independently employed and are all volunteers. The Ministry of Defence indemnified their insurers against their liabilities because of a war risk clause in the insurance policies. Both widows have already received the full amount payable under the policies".<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Hilson, 'Notes' in *Organ Music*, p. 119.

## CONCLUSION

In his essay on Rachel Blau du Plessis's work *Drafts* (as referenced in the Introduction), Bradley J Fest observes that 'the overflowing of poetry can stretch out from the archive toward new formations, new possibilities, difference, change...'<sup>1</sup> This thesis has demonstrated the potential for poetry to challenge definitions of archive, arguing for a broader or more expansive interpretation – from historical archives in libraries to 'state apparatuses' such as police, government and media to 'theoretical archives' of literary genre and its conventions (for example, true crime writing, elegy, the lyric) which can be associated with negative archives. Through harnessing the lexicons and methodologies associated with such a variety of archives, Maggie Nelson, Anne Carson, Susan Howe, Claudia Rankine and Jeff Hilson are able to use the established prejudices and biases inherent in different means of recording not only to question the validity of the archive but to also posit new possibilities for the representation of selves. These texts, while existing within the archival realm, operate differently, incorporating diverse materials to curate a new archive. This at once shines a light on issues of state, government and right-wing means of documentation and opens up archival space to marginalised voices traditionally silenced by archives. The thesis is, in itself, also an example of this approach, collecting together works by Nelson, Carson, Howe, Rankine and Hilson to imagine what archives could and should be like. Furthermore, inspired by these authors, striving for a blended, inclusive and organic archive is something which informs my own poetic practice. The accompanying creative element of the project, my poetry collection *Reference ≠ Endorsement*, sets out to

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<sup>1</sup> Bradley J Fest, "'Is an Archive Enough?': Megatextual Debris in the Work of Rachel Blau DuPlessis', *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture*, 54.1 (April 2021), 139-165 (p. 160) <https://read.dukeupress.edu/genre/article/54/1/139/173581/Is-an-Archive-Enough-Megatextual-Debris-in-the> [accessed 5 May 2022].

add to discussions about what constitutes archival practice, positing an alternative archive of the everyday. Realised through six domestic objects – bread, candles, bookshelves, plates, bedding and a dining table – the work seeks to highlight how absences and injustices may be located and amplified from within the unremarkable and the disregarded, the unspoken and the unheard. Parallel themes between the two elements include addressing absences in the documentation of female experience and the adoption and/or repurposing of mass cultural and intertextual references in effecting its re-documentation.

Key in the achievement of all five writers is the deployment of intertextuality, which, Barbara Johnson tells us, means that ‘each “New Thing” can teach us to rewrite its history all over again’.<sup>2</sup> The significance of intertextuality for works which undertake to rewrite the archive is threefold. Firstly, the inclusion of archival materials in literary texts demonstrates that these texts may be considered part of the archive itself. Secondly, the use of citation, conventionally a mechanism for adding credibility to an argument, may be subverted to question the credibility of those who control the archive. And lastly, the intertextual interweaving of archival materials can be used to create a sense of connectivity, a readerly community which can transcend different eras and genres. For Nelson, Carson and Howe this rewriting is realised through the incorporation of elements from traditionally masculinist genres and conventions which all include important opportunities to engage with varieties of archive – from media to literary genre to professionally curated historic family records – to explore documentation as a gendered space. In *Jane: A Murder*, Nelson references elements of the non-fiction writing archive (true crime) and the media archive (crime reporting) to challenge their stereotypes and assumptions but also to position and

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 133.

repurpose these as a wider elegy shared by Jane, other 'killed women' and females subjected to male violence. Anne Carson's *Nox* takes elements from the historically masculinist oeuvres of elegy and classical funerary ritual from the archive that is poetry, re-collecting them into a complex hybrid work which examines the contradictions inherent in grief and loss and carves out a place for the female self who mourns. For Susan Howe, her own experience of grief is a catalyst for the fusing of private documents and the documenting of the patriarchally marginalised which constitutes *That This*. Collaging intensely spiritual materials from the Edwards family archive along with citations from diverse cross-era intertextual sources and her own challenging, highly experimental use of form, Howe's work requests a significant level of investment from the reader, creating a sense of connectivity with the writing, its subjects and other readers, to create active engagement with this journey of rewriting.

In Rankine's *Citizen* and *Just Us*, the re-presentation of archivally-structured texts constructed by white-dominated institutions such as the media (for example, reports into the murder of James Craig Anderson) and historical archives (Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*) becomes a mechanism to discuss documentation as being fundamentally structurally racist. This is demonstrated by Rankine's deliberate referencing of racialised conventions associated with the archives that are poetry (the 'white' space of the lyric) and education (academic scholarly practice). As well as highlighting the whiteness which underpins the fabric of state and media archival behaviours, Rankine's rewriting activates a dialogue which asks a white readership to acknowledge and own the situation, while simultaneously opening up new possibilities for expression, being and solidarity. Comparably, Jeff Hilson's exploration, in *Latanoprost Variations* and *Organ Music*, of the 'misuse of terminologies' connected with a whole range of intertextual archives – from mass

culture (as in 'The Incredible Canterbury Poem' and 'The Wogan Poem') to specialist languages (*Organ Music* 'Side 8', for example) to bureaucratic reporting ('A Final Poem With Full Stops') – allows him to expose how a powerful right-wing elite manoeuvres appropriated archival technologies and practices in order to maintain the status quo and, by extension, their own privilege. Further, Hilson's deployment of dark humour and satirical portrayal of the divisions and alienation perpetuated by this group functions both to document their actions and to offer a sense of liberation to the marginalised, by opening up a space in which their conduct may be questioned. Working from a range of archives which each encompass their own diverse documentary practices, these collections insert themselves into the fabric of the behaviours and institutions they seek to critique, acting from within to engineer a reframing of received norms which offers misdocumented, under-documented or undocumented selves the opportunity for re-collection, re-presentation and liberation.

'Misuse of terminology' – in terms of the repositioning of archival intertexts to expose absence and prejudice – is integral to the employment of intertextuality across all the works examined in this thesis. Further, this may be expanded to include the 'terminology' of form: the masculinist tradition of elegy adopted by Nelson, Carson and Howe, or Rankine's use of the lyric, for example. Particularly striking instances of 'misuse' of the original text may be found in the excerpts from Edward Keyes's true crime paperback *The Michigan Murders* re-presented by Nelson in *Jane: A Murder*, most especially the section which purports to describe the reaction of Jane's family to the news of her death. In reality the excerpt, like much of the book's content, is largely Keyes's second-hand interpretation of events recounted in the clichéd language characteristic of the genre: a 'grim' announcement, a 'beloved child', the 'horror' of the situation and the 'marvelous'

response of the family pulling themselves together as they ‘regained control’ (for full quotation, see Chapter 1, Note 43, page 103). Nelson reproduces Keyes’s paragraph without comment, but when juxtaposed with her own words in the poem ‘Dignity’ on the facing page, it soon becomes clear that a deft ‘misuse’ of the terminologies of true crime writing has been executed:

*They knew how to mourn  
with dignity,*

my mother says.  
*It’s the Calvinist way.*

As if keening on your knees  
were somehow obscene

As if there were a control  
so marvelous

you could teach it  
to eat pain.<sup>3</sup>

Pared down, real, painful, Nelson’s words expose the cynical opportunism at the heart of Keyes’s apparently sympathetic reimagining of a truly devastating moment, clearly written to feed the needs of a particular readership, hooked on salacious detail and hackneyed description – and also most likely with one eye very firmly on the sales figures.<sup>4</sup> Far from being in control, the grieving family are themselves controlled, policing themselves to ensure they respond in a way that onlookers (or readers) will deem appropriate. Particularly stinging is Nelson’s use of Keyes’s word ‘marvelous’ to talk back to him, shining a light on the calculatedness underlying his apparent admiration for the Mixers’ stoicism. Similarly,

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<sup>3</sup> Maggie Nelson, ‘Dignity’ in *Jane: A Murder* (London: Zed, 2019), p. 91.

<sup>4</sup> As substantiated by *The Michigan Murders*’ front cover blurb: ‘A gripping true life thriller in the powerful tradition of ‘The Boston Strangler’ and ‘In Cold Blood’.

Claudia Rankine ‘misuses’ Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*, redacting ‘cushions’ of historically unquestioned text to highlight the dangerous racist stereotypes which permeate its pages (see Chapter 2, Section 3 (ii)). The effect is to illuminate the flagrant white supremacy running through what the Penguin Random House (ironically, Rankine’s own publisher) website still describes as ‘a brilliant examination of the idea of freedom’,<sup>5</sup> and rendered all the more powerful by being realised through Jefferson’s words rather than Rankine’s. This unspoken ‘misuse’ of the source texts here and in the other collections explored in the thesis brings into sharp focus the ‘gaps and silences’ identified by Susan Howe as a fundamental aspect of the archive. By misspeaking the language which itself misspeaks so many of the selves trapped within the original pages, all five authors are able to turn the tables on biased archival convention, enabling the absent and the unarticulated to begin to be revealed and given voice.

Despite the ability of these rewritten records to both challenge and empower, some commentators have nonetheless indicated that the inherent potency of archival power structures is such that ‘even ‘alternative’ archives cannot get rid’ of it.<sup>6</sup> What Nelson, Carson, Howe, Rankine and Hilson can and do achieve, however, is to draw attention to the absences, misrepresentations and misdirections perpetuated through various means of recording and to open a dialogue with the reader about this (Rankine’s *Just Us* is, after all, subtitled ‘An American Conversation’). Entering into a discourse inspired by the recalibrated source texts will likely effect as well a recalibration in the reader’s own thinking, one which

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<sup>5</sup> Penguin Random House, ‘*Notes on the State of Virginia* by Thomas Jefferson’, *Penguin Random House*, <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/331112/notes-on-the-state-of-virginia-by-thomas-jefferson/> [accessed 26 February 2024].

<sup>6</sup> Kiona Hagen Niehaus and Brenda Guesnet, ‘articulating and defending our vulnerabilities’, *Feminist Review*, 120 (November 2018), 135-142 (p. 135) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26776525> [accessed 10 May 2023].

prompts them to be a different kind of citizen going forward – more informed, more questioning, perhaps more actively engaged against institutional biases and exclusions. According to Fest, the role of poetry is ‘to document the world differently’<sup>7</sup> and, arguably, there is no more convincing way to do this than via the medium of language and techniques connected to established, recognisable records and their content. Whether it is through Nelson, Carson and Howe reclaiming the female right to mourn and be mourned, Rankine calling attention to and calling out white supremacy and white fragility or Hilson highlighting the duplicitous behaviours of ‘the power that misuses language’, all five authors achieve a significant redocumenting. And while this may not happen overnight, or via the huge readerships of bestselling paperbacks, its significance nevertheless should not be underplayed. Poetry might, as Auden wrote, make ‘nothing happen’ directly but ‘it survives’<sup>8</sup>, thus although archival prejudice may continue so will the capacity for these works to activate awareness and encourage questions among new generations of readers.

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The research methodology employed was itself an act of archival practice which sought to work in solidarity with the five authors. Through a close reading of *Jane: A Murder* by Maggie Nelson, *Nox* by Anne Carson, *That This* by Susan Howe, Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen* and *Just Us* and Jeff Hilson’s *Latanoprost Variations* and *Organ Music*, alongside a selection of the source documents which they quote directly, paraphrase or allude to, the project demonstrates the challenge to and recalibrating of the archive at work in each text.

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<sup>7</sup> Fest, p. 158.

<sup>8</sup> ‘For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives’ [W H Auden, ‘In Memory of W. B. Yeats’ (*d. Jan. 1939*), *W H Auden Collected Poems* ed. by Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 248.]

Additionally, an interview with Jeff Hilson was conducted by email, which proved invaluable in clarifying (or debunking!) some of the theories I was formulating about his collections. I believe that getting close to the source texts, interacting with the same materials explored by the authors was key in attaining a deeper level of understanding regarding the intent of the seven collections as well as the impact that can be derived from incorporating ‘another’s word’ into one’s own narrative. Further, my own archival practice of blending creative text and source text also adds another voice to the alternative archive where marginalised voices can be heard, can speak out as part of the challenge to reactionary archives of state. Paying particular attention to the emotional and ethical work undertaken by the authors in reshaping the original materials, this dual close reading fostered a proximity not just to the texts but also their subjects – and so to the way in which a living archive should seek to operate.

The sense of closeness resonated most particularly with me while accessing the Jonathan Edwards Collection in the Beinecke Library’s online archive. Working back from the box number which appears in poem nine of ‘Frolic Architecture’, I was able to locate examples of text fragments incorporated by Howe as part of fully formed sentences within samples from Hannah’s diaries. Similarly, via online archives at the Ann Arbor District Library and The University of Michigan Digital Archives, it was possible to access articles from *Ann Arbor News* and *The Michigan Daily* referenced by Nelson in poems including ‘Afternoon Edition’ and ‘Never Walk Alone – Not Even in the Daytime’ (which is itself a direct reproduction of a segment from a contemporary news report). Together with an enhanced insight into both the collections and the authors’ processes, this approach was also vital in cultivating a connectivity not just with the work, but also with the authors, their subjects and a wider community of writers, readers and researchers. In a small way, this practice

opened up an appreciation of the ‘inward ardour’ Howe describes feeling when conducting her own research (see Chapter 1, Note 114, page 122). Where it was not possible to pinpoint the exact source materials referenced, the methodology was adapted to include comparable examples, such as the Trustpilot reviews of sunny.co.uk, part of the research into the language of payday loan reviews which populates Jeff Hilson’s ‘The Wogan Poem’. While drawn from a much more mundane example than an academic library or a newspaper archive, this alternative tactic nonetheless yielded its own sense of connectivity, suggesting that an ‘inward ardour’ may be experienced by interacting with everyday, unofficial archives just as much as official ones.

Finally, the significance of deliberately opting to use digital archives as the primary research source should be acknowledged. In a project which seeks to engage with new and alternative archives, it felt important that this engagement should be achieved via modern technologies and methodologies which look to the future while documenting the past. Equally, I wanted a thesis which pleads for inclusivity in the archival process to be researched through virtual archives which are available to all via the internet, and can be accessed free of charge at any public library in, to borrow from Walter Benjamin, ‘situations which would be out of reach for the original itself’, enabling ‘the original to meet the beholder halfway’.<sup>9</sup> And while Benjamin also notes that reproduction poses questions for ‘the authority of the object’ in terms of ‘the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning’<sup>10</sup> – one cannot smell the contents of a digital archive, for example, or feel the weight of its pages – he nonetheless recognises that although these objects are ‘imbedded in the fabric of tradition’,

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<sup>9</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), p. 222.

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin, p. 223.

this tradition is a living, shifting entity ‘thoroughly alive and extremely changeable’.<sup>11</sup>

Knowing that not only was I able to view the same materials which had been viewed by Howe and Nelson, for instance, but also that I was likely interacting with them in parallel with other researchers, unrestricted by opening hours, cost or availability, served only to further enhance the sense of proximity.

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The key contribution of this project is, for works that have a significant intertextual element, to encourage reader and researcher engagement with the source materials, specifically through adopting close-reading practices informed by those which one would use to explore creative texts. With the capacity to offer a much deeper insight into the author’s intent this is, surely, what any writer employing the device of citation would hope for (as explained by Jeff Hilson – see Chapter 3, Note 81, page 201). Where scholars have previously undertaken this kind of research – for example Matt Martin’s examination of ‘A Final Poem With Full Stops’ (see Chapter 3, pages 224-226) – the thesis extended the existing thinking arrived at through a side by side evaluation of the two texts. In the case of ‘A Final Poem’, this type of analysis was developed to take into account that, while Hilson deploys language consistent with official bureaucratic reporting, the majority of documentation available about migrant deaths (and accessed by Martin and myself) is drawn from charity investigations and media articles and, as such, recounted in a much softer, more anecdotal style (see Chapter 3, Note 181, page 224). My reading was, therefore, achieved by introducing an additional layer of interrogation based on a kind of implied or ghost source text, one which is written in the sort

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 225.

of clinical, anonymous language familiar from more personal documents such as family death certificates.

Following the authors' lead in widening the scope of what constitutes archival practice, the project also makes connections between conventional interpretations of archives and notions of the archive as a more expansive term, which here is used expressly to refer to a diverse range of intertextual materials (see Introduction – What Do We Mean By 'The Archive'?). Both Nelson and Carson make use of unofficial family documents not just to highlight voices that might otherwise have not been heard, but also to demonstrate the fundamental bias and lack present in their official counterparts. For example, juxtaposing Jane's diary extracts with media reports records a vital authenticity, a fleshing out of Jane's personality skewed and obscured by formulaic journalistic writing, while Carson's construction of her own archive in the absence of any official documentation about Michael helps to give her a sense of ownership of the mourning process, even though – paradoxically – that involves damaging rather than preserving some artefacts. Howe, meanwhile, chooses to articulate her grief via not her own family archives but via those of the Edwards family, specifically the female voices which constitute the smallest amount of content, sidelined in the same way as is Howe by the cemetery official she encounters in 'The Disappearance Approach' (see Chapter 1, page 122). Like Carson, Rankine also deliberately alters materials to create an archive that empowers rather than diminishes, redacting Jefferson's words from *Notes on the State of Virginia* to leave only racist stereotypes as a means of documenting the lives redacted (and which continue to be redacted) by white supremacist systems which persist in endorsing such content. In Jeff Hilson's work it is the cataloguing of quotidian items – for example, lists of consumer products and music recommendations – that would have no place in official records which tells the reader more about the society around them than

archival materials produced by agenda-driven, self-serving state and government agencies. Just as these collections push the boundaries of what it means to create an archive, this thesis also embraces possibilities of a more fluid notion of recording, where archives may be theoretical as well as physical and so literary genre, for instance, may be considered as much an archive as an indexed box of items, and where what is omitted carries equal (perhaps more) weight as what is included. With this in mind, the project has, therefore, contributed to thinking about the relevance of archive in the work of Nelson, Carson, Howe, Rankine and Hilson. Additionally, the author interview with Jeff Hilson both builds on ideas explored in S J Fowler's piece for *3:AM Magazine* and offers new insights which specifically consider Hilson's writing in relation to concepts of archive. I am grateful to Jeff Hilson for his generosity in answering my questions, and to Adam Piette and Alex Houen at *Blackbox Manifold* for publishing the interview.

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Based on an expansive view of the archive and its methodologies, experimental and hybrid work such as the texts written by Nelson, Carson, Howe, Rankine and Hilson present possibilities for a new kind of documenting, demonstrating how archives can, as Kate Eichhorn has remarked, 'in a myriad of ways, [open] up the possibility of being in time and history differently'.<sup>12</sup> Archives may be shot through with prejudice and bias, absences, overlookings and misrepresentations – but paradoxically these can be used to draw attention to themselves and, through acts of reframing, to create a living archive populated with the previously unseen, unspoken and unheard, which offers a very real potential for meaningful change. As Désirée Reynolds has observed, 'all the information is in the archives,

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<sup>12</sup> Kate Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), p. 8. ProQuest Ebook Central.

we just need to have the courage to look at it and put it where it needs to be'.<sup>13</sup> In these texts which 'document the world differently', this is precisely what Nelson, Carson, Howe, Rankine and Hilson are doing.

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<sup>13</sup> Bloc Projects, 'Harsh Light: Eelyn Lee & Désirée Reynolds', *Bloc Projects* 16 February 2022 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oWkrBHGWO\\_0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oWkrBHGWO_0) [accessed 30 March 2022].

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