

# Something Sadistic, Something Complicit

## Text and Violence in *Execution Poems* and *Thirsty*

“ . . . [W]e want poems that kill.”  
Assassin poems, Poems that shoot  
guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys  
and take their weapons leaving them dead  
with tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland.  
—Amiri Baraka, “Black Art” 223-24

This is a theatre of assault.  
—Amiri Baraka, “The Revolutionary Theatre” 215

**A**s Amiri Baraka implies above, the violent history of racism emerges and is enacted through the literary, but not necessarily in mimetic ways. Two Canadian poets, George Elliott Clarke, in *Execution Poems*, and Dionne Brand, in *Thirsty*, write stories of violence, of killing, which engage this potential violence of text that exceeds the level of that in the events they describe. Each book is a series of distinct but linked poems telling tales of execution—in Brand’s case, the shooting of an unarmed man in his own home. Some differences between them play out at the level of story: Brand’s poems are only loosely based on a historical event, while Clarke’s stay much closer to the events from which they are derived. Brand’s poems describe the relatively recent and largely unprovoked killing of an unarmed black man by a white police officer, while Clarke’s detail the trial and execution for murder of two of his extended family members, George and Rufus (Rue) Hamilton, in the 1940s. Nevertheless, both Brand and Clarke relate these stories—and their poem cycles—to ongoing cycles of violence. Yet their texts treat the nature and outcome of this narratively similar violence in divergent ways. Both suggest a communitarian framework; however, in Clarke’s text, violence begets violence between and within

communities, in a process of filiation that seems to be without consent, without hope, and without conceivable end. Brand's work, which is sometimes questioned for posing insufficient models of community and, tellingly, for its emphasis on aesthetics (which is tied, in these criticisms, to individualism), enacts a less relentlessly hopeless version of the implicit violences of text and interpretation. The reparative possibility of Brand's work, the area in which it, though clearly criticizing historical and contemporary cycles of violence, breaks from the inevitability of Clarke's filiation, is in an aesthetics tied to a different notion of community. For her, every person's complicity in our interpretive communities presents the possibility, the hope, for active—connected but individuated—changes to the interpretive acts which propagate violence. In imbuing her aesthetics with a resistance to origin—what Marlene Goldman calls “drifting” in “Mapping the Door of No Return”—Brand suggests that the unknown contingency of the reader raises the possibility for agency within the violence of text, within refusing the safety of locality. This resonates with Roland Barthes' image of the text that cruises for *its* reader.

In “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, a central figure in the genesis of queer theory, questions its disciplinary preoccupations—preoccupations shared more generally throughout progressive and anti-oppressive circles. She defines as paranoid the consensus in writing and criticism whereby the default practise faithfully executes the continual exposure of oppressive systems, examples of which reproduce themselves, appearing everywhere, leaving the critic without hope of finding something different. Like Clarke's poems, paranoid theory addresses real and important wrongs; however, the strength of this outlook serves to occlude any other affective framework. Reparative theories (and, in this case, poetics) are much more difficult to find, according to Sedgwick, as they are not only overshadowed by the paranoid faith in exposure, but their motives are suspect—“because they are about pleasure (‘merely aesthetic’) and because they are frankly ameliorative (‘merely reformist’)” (144). In neither Clarke's nor Brand's texts does violence restrict itself to the level of narrative. Rather, both Brand and Clarke relate text and violence, and they involve the reader, both implicitly and explicitly. They make us complicit in the violence as it is both textually and physically enacted. Clarke both performs and represents textual violence, materialized through poetry and through legal code. While text—particularly literature—is posed as a potential shelter or salvation from the unending violence of *Execution Poems* as a whole, language and letters

are consistently reincorporated into the historical narrative of pain and death. Clarke's text, along with his characters, seeks out beauty as a potential shelter, but ultimately the text cannot escape the historic imperative to hurt. *Execution Poems* is relentlessly overshadowed by the impossibility of positive affect. Brand's text offers more hope. In *Thirsty*, the violence and our complicity lie largely in our interpretive choices—implying the possibility for making different choices through an aesthetically engaged process of non-filiative, resolutely consensual readerly enticement.

### Something Sadistic

Clarke initially poses the saving potential of linguistic beauty that he undermines throughout *Execution Poems* in his epigraph, when he quotes Marcuse: "Beauty has the power to check aggression: / it forbids and immobilizes the aggressor" (5). Beauty occasionally rises in *Execution Poems* as a longed-for escape, but rather than immobilizing the aggression of the text, it is incorporated and implicated in the destruction, violence, and death that Clarke posits as inevitable. Poetry becomes testimony at a murder trial, teeth are typewriters as they clack against the brutal narrative, and ripe fruit turns into violent sexuality, planted and harvested by canonical authors. Clarke folds the imagery of writing, which Rue often represents as a desired shelter, back into the inevitable physical and textual harm of the narrative, which is itself scored and divided in ways that jar and alienate the reader, and do violence to the reading experience. And yet, Clarke's text knows us as readers, and knows us as violent, even as it enacts the very violence it represents as ceaseless. In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes discusses the notion of reading in a writerly manner, a manner in which the reader is an active participant in the production of meaning, in terms of a practice of disassembling the text, a process which unmakes the "naturalness" of language. He proposes a system of reading whereby we

star the text, separating, in the manner of a minor earthquake, the blocks of signification of which reading grasps only the smooth surface, imperceptibly soldered by the movement of sentences, the flowing discourse of narration, the "naturalness" of ordinary language. The tutor signifier will be cut up into a series of brief, contiguous fragments, which we shall call *lexias*, since they are units of reading. (13)

This process could be considered sadistic, since the reader does violence to the text—cuts it, divides it, in a manner that is unsettling like an earthquake, that tears apart the soldered seams of the narrative. Clarke enacts this kind of aggressive rending on his own text in a way that implicates the

reader, but disallows agency in opening *Execution Poems* with an act of linguistic violence: through sound and formatting, he punishes our desire for internal rhyme. The first line of “Negation,” “*Le nègre* negated, meager, *c’est moi*,” given the combination of French and English words and our rhythmic expectations, tempts us to read “meager” as “mègre” (Clarke 11). Just as “*le nègre*” is negated, Clarke negates our expectations of the first line, and sets the tone of a collection where the anticipated aesthetic is present to be undermined, and we are violently jolted out of our textual complacency from the outset. Barthes continues his explanation of lexias by stating that “this cutting up . . . will be arbitrary in the extreme . . .” (S/Z 13). Clarke’s immediate violence, our immediate ejection from the text, seems arbitrary—the moments of refusal throughout *Execution Poems* are all the more unsettling because they follow no regular pattern. While, in the manner of Sedgwick’s concept of paranoia, violence is always expected in *Execution Poems*, it is also always unexpected, its timing always a surprise. Instead of, or along with, beauty, Clarke’s mouth “spit[s] lies, vomit-lyrics, musty, / Masticated scripture” (11). Words are not created, but rather uneasily swallowed, spit back, chewed, musty—old. They are tainted by an unpleasant smell, aggressively regurgitated. Clarke’s goal, then, is “to take poetry apart like a heart” (11). He performs an autopsy on beauty, rending it, exploring its failure to check aggression, to immobilize the omnipresent violence of his narrative.

While the textual experience that Barthes describes as bliss in *The Pleasure of the Text* includes experiences like pain and boredom, and stems from the tearing apart of language, it is an experience that is shared by the author and reader, that unsettles their knowledge of each other and themselves. The textual relationship is enacted through a process of cruising, based on chance erotic encounters that do not allow for filiative or fixedly locational models. A text of bliss must be written in bliss—author and reader both experience pain, pleasure, boredom, the dissolve while interacting with the text in question. So there is also masochistic potential in each of these relationships. In “Coldness and Cruelty,” Gilles Deleuze calls into question the psychoanalytic fusing of sadomasochism, rigidly differentiating between sadism (the relational economy of the Marquis de Sade’s writing) and masochism (the relational economy of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s writing). One of the primary distinctions that he draws is the necessity for consent. According to Deleuze, masochism is predicated on contract—even the active role of the masochist in convincing their torturer to torture. Conversely, the sadistic economy cannot countenance consent—the willing victim inherently

undermines the sadistic act. So, according to Deleuze, the torturer of a masochist is not a sadist, and the victim of a sadist is not a masochist. Thus, within this framework, the tormentor in a blissful reading of text would not likely be a sadist—even a lexical reading of text does not *necessarily* imply sadism. However, the way in which the violence of Clarke's text is both narratively and textually arbitrary seems to imply compulsion and mutuality, but not a contract—it implies a lack of consent. We do not consent to the way in which the text resolutely cuts us, ejects us. But then, the poet does not necessarily consent to the inherent violence of the text either. Something is sadistic, and we are all somehow complicit, but no one seems to consent.

In his acknowledgements, which he refers to as a disclaimer, Clarke writes that “[t]he crime of this poetry could not have been committed without the aid of [those people he acknowledges]. However, they bear no responsibility for its harms. Only the author deserves hanging” (np). While this seems to imply that Clarke presents himself as having consensual agency in creating violent text, the representation of language throughout the poem cycle implies that creating nonviolent or consensually violent text may never be possible. When Clarke tells us that his “black face must preface murder for [us],” he plays not only with the ambiguity of “must” (does he mean that *we* must relate it to murder? Or that it must *be* related to murder?), but also the ambiguity of “face” (11). “Face” could be Clarke's face, but it could also be typeface, in which case it is the very shapes of the letters that preface murder. He continues to implicate the foundational elements of text in the violence of his poetry in the poem “Avowals,” in which the shape of each vowel is associated with a negative image, including a guillotine and a two-pronged gallows. Reproduction is incorporated back into ideas of contagion, as “U is a fetus—or crab lice” (Clarke 40). Each letter, each foundational fragment of text, is, according to Clarke, disease, pain, or death, a theme which he continues from the previous page, as the crown attorney accuses George and Rue of transforming “that sturdy ‘H’” that begins their surname into a gallows (39). The very foundations of language participate in a compulsorily reproductive system of filiation where our father's name is execution, and fetuses are indistinguishable from venereal disease. As “Avowal” seems to indicate, there is little possibility for letters to be anything other than gallows, language to be anything other than emetic. Rufus claims that he “would like very much to sing,” and his desired song is presented as pastoral, idyllic, and sweet, “but blood must expunge, sponge up, blood” (Clarke 37). While in *Whylah Falls*, Clarke explicitly undermines the pastoral tradition

through juxtaposing pastoral elements with the story of the murder of an unarmed black man and the acquittal of his killer, the ironic return to more traditionally pastoral poetry towards the collection's conclusion still serves to soften the violence and despair of the text. In *Execution Poems*, we lose this final mercy, as Rufus' poetry can only be murder and testimony, and he says of Silver, the man he has murdered, that "a rhymeless poetry scrawled his obituary"—rhymeless, like Clarke's early refusal of internal rhyme (34). His "teeth clack . . . like typewriters" only when his "words collide with walls of fists, / Collapse," and his final sentence is the absence of sentences—he says, "we will fall into our sentence: silence" (19, 41). As in "Negation," English is emetic—Rufus argues with the judge at his trial over whether he speaks "almost perfect" English (38). Rufus claims that both English and the laws that it encodes are "pitted and cankered"—that they are not his (38). Instead, he throws daggers at it, but compares this to throwing daggers at a statue (or a statute?)—something impenetrable. This is a violence that seems to deny agency, even as it is enacted—sadism without even a consenting sadist.

### **Something Complicit**

While the complicity of Clarke's text seems to involve everyone—George and Rue, historical imperative, the reader, language, text, and author—yet deny anyone agency, Brand's text implies a more active complicity. The fissures in *Thirsty* present the reader with an unsoldered break where interpretive choices must be made, without the violent ejection and return to an inevitable violent origin enacted by Clarke's text. Author and reader collaborate in negotiating lexias. We have the responsibility for nuance thrust upon us through the vagueness of Brand's punctuation and sentence construction, leaving us complicit in determining the movement, possibility, and limitation of her characters and the language itself. As Brand's text cruises us, we have the responsibility to accept or deny it, in all the myriad forms this consent or rejection might take. She makes explicit the interpretive choices we impose on every text, and through forcing an awareness of our constant participation in textual production, grants us the choice to interpret in unfixed ways. Barthes suggests that the text of bliss inflicts "a deep laceration . . . upon language itself" (*Pleasure* 12), and that the most erotic portion of the body (or the text for that matter) is where the text or "*the garment gapes*" (*Pleasure* 9). He elaborates that:

[I]t is intermittence, as psychoanalysis has so rightly stated, which is erotic: the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing (trousers and

sweater), between two edges (the open necked shirt, the glove and the sleeve); it is this flash itself which seduces, or rather: the staging of appearance-as-disappearance. (*Pleasure* 10)

The deep lacerations, the places where Brand's text gapes, seduce us, but they also compel us. Brand, for example, begins "XXIII" by stating her intention to inform us—to explain to us what she has perceived. And yet, she immediately reneges on her promise. We are told: "I'll tell you what I see here at Yonge and Bloor" (42). However, Brand does not so much tell us what she sees (except insofar as what she sees is open to interpretation) as position us in a site of possibility—offer us a collection of associated words to which we must assign meaning. Brand explicitly posits this location as a crossroads, a place where meaning is determined by our choice of direction—whether we choose to turn between words, or continue straight. She stages her poetry as appearance-as-disappearance from the outset, as this beginning echoes the beginning of the first poem of *Thirsty*, "I," where:

This city is beauty  
unbreakable and amorous as eyelids,  
in the streets, pressed with fierce departures,  
submerged landings,  
I am innocent as thresholds  
and smashed night birds, lovesick,  
as empty as elevators (1)

An eyelid is a place where the body gapes—where the eye appears and disappears, its cover "fiercely departing" upon awakening, the lids touching in "submerged landing." The writing and reading of this amorous text is not innocent. Thresholds are not innocent. Eyelids are by their very nature breakable, divisible, a site for departure, for choice—as are the thresholds that Brand delineates for us between words. These are spaces of possibility—the emptiness of elevators, where blockage results in the death of night birds trying to fly through glass.

In "XXIII," without telling us what she has seen, Brand moves the site of possibility from land to air, which is "elegiac with it / whiffs and cirri of all emotion, need and vanity/desire, brazen as killing" (42). Our mode of perception moves from sight to smell, and we are offered the opportunity to inhale all emotion, although Brand quickly contracts our focus to need and vanity, to desire, to brazenness that is like killing. The brazenness is not only of the desires Brand offers us, but also of our own audacity as we apply meaning, as we make a choice at each intersection of word and word. And we become complicit in the immobilization of language, the plate glass that

smashes birds. The eyelids touch so that we might experience, *determine* what we experience, through breath. Each desire that Brand presents us with is concrete, yet mobile. The spaces between each word are potential breaths, yet, robbed of the commas that we depend on to separate thing and thing, we must choose where to breathe, and thus select the borders of each desire. Unless we choose to breathe both everywhere and nowhere, this is a brazen, complicit act—an act of killing off meanings as we choose the limitations of our writing of Brand’s text. This is a form of limiting that Brand leads us to, slowly exposing the extent of our complicity. At first, the breaths seem obvious. When we read: “a burger a leather jacket a pair of shoes a smoke,” it seems clear that the absent commas must lie between each set of a noun and the article that follows it (Brand 42). And yet, in the next line, this automatic demarcation becomes less obvious. We are unsure as to whether “to find a job to get drunk at the Zanzibar” means “to find a job, to get drunk at the Zanzibar,” or “to find a job to get drunk at the Zanzibar” (Brand 42). Brand makes us explicitly aware of our interpretive choices as we read her list. Our choices affect our judgment, as we are likely to value “to find a job” much differently than we would “to find a job to get drunk at the Zanzibar.” This continues in the next stanza, as the subject of our readerly writing shifts from the job to the drink. We must choose whether “. . . to get drunk to get fucked to get high” means “to get drunk, to get fucked, to get high” or “to get drunk to get fucked, to get high” or “to get drunk to get fucked to get high” or, finally, “to get drunk, to get fucked to get high,” each item valued slightly differently, inscribed as a different sort of desire, depending on how we choose to breathe, on where we place the comma (42).

This explicit complicity in textual production fulfills Brand’s promise in “I,” where she asks:

let me declare doorways,  
 corners, pursuit, let me say  
 standing here in eyelashes, in  
 invisible breasts, in the shrinking lake  
 in the tiny shops of untrue recollections,  
 in the brittle gnawed life we live,  
 I am held, and held (1)

In leaving spaces, gaps that she fails to solder with commas, Brand reveals the doorways and corners we navigate as we pursue meaning in her text. Like the thresholds that we traverse, our courses are not innocent. We choose the spaces in which we cruise and how we navigate them. These spaces are brittle, but the (troubling) violence we do to them lies in the



ways in which we might choose to solder them. Our complicity continues in “XXIII,” as the desires Brand describes (our desires?) become explicitly violent. We make several choices when we decide how to breathe, how to punctuate “. . . men wanting to be beaten to be touched / and all the anonymous things that may happen / on a corner like this for instance murder” (42). Do the men want to be beaten to be touched, or is there a comma? Do the men want all the anonymous things that may happen on a corner like this, or is that another item in the list, not necessarily attributed to them? The site of violence in this series of interpretations is not as fixed as we might assume, as we might dictate without acknowledging our agency. It does not necessarily lie in the desire of the men to be beaten, but in our desire—how we try to touch the terms in Brand’s list, and how this touch inherently edits them, tends to fix them. Hold them. All the anonymous things that may happen on a corner like this are also the unacknowledged textual choices we make at these corners, at the gaps between words, reflecting the anonymous sexuality of Barthes’ cruising text—and these choices can spell murder. Only after we are brought up against our repeated complicity, the active way in which not “someone,” but *we* do the things that happen at these corners, do we return to sight. After we breathe, we read. Brand comments that, at this corner, “if you look into any face here you might fall / into its particular need” (42). However, our mode of looking is constantly coloured by the places we take our breaths—the particularity of need is read through the particularity of our own need, the desires that we desire to see.

Nevertheless, Brand’s text also holds the possibility for reciprocity. She presents breathing as a relational act, claiming in “VIII” that:

breathing, you can breathe if you find air,  
 this roiling, this weight of bodies,  
 as if we need each other to breathe, to bring  
 it into sense, and well, in that we are merciless (11)

We bear the weight of each other, we bear the weight of the text, and we contribute to it. Our search for sense may be merciless, but Brand implies that it does not have to be unkind. At Alan’s funeral, Brand does not describe his wife Julia as she is, but how we might interpret her through newsprint, through image and text, claiming “readers would seek grief there, they would / not be prepared for emptiness such as hers” (26). While she implies that it is likely that we would read Julia as hard, this is something that we would read through the particularity of our desire. Conscious of this, we might choose to read otherwise, to read mobility instead of the fixity of the

newspaper photograph Brand describes. As Brand suggests, “a woman I’ve seen her / Julia perhaps”—is not so easily read (42). Her need is not apparent through our need. Brand writes that, “I can’t quite make her out,” (42). Julia is described in “XXIII” as a surface for inscription, “she is a mixture of twigs and ink she’s like paper” (42). But she is a page that is too far away from us for a fixed interpretation, and, for Brand, this fixity should not be something we seek. Similarly, the police officer leaving the courthouse after being acquitted of killing Alan is described not as he is, but as he would be—

he would strike  
a match on the bottom of his shoes,  
light a cigar in victory of being acquitted  
of such a killing, and why not (48)

However, conscious modification of our practices of reading seems to be posited as something that could be this “why not.” Alan is shot, after all, because of interpretation, smashed against the static reading practice of the man who shoots him. Reading differently, as a consensual, collaborative process, might make it possible for *this* reading, this “would” to change. Barthes suggests that in a text of bliss “[e]verything comes about; indeed in every sense everything *comes—at first glance*” (*Pleasure* 53). The problematic of Brand’s text has to with first glance—the first glance of the police officer at Alan, our first glance at the faces where we read our desire, but this is not a first glance that involves coming, it is a first glance that involved stopping. A first glance that could begin to involve the motion it lacks. The text of bliss rises out of history, but it does so “like a scandal (an irregularity), that is always the trace of a cut, of an assertion . . . and . . . the subject of history . . . this subject is never anything but a ‘living contradiction’: a split subject, who simultaneously enjoys, through the text, the consistency of his selfhood and its collapse, its fall” (Barthes, *Pleasure* 21). Instead of consistency, of the self through which we read an other, we are given the opportunity in the gaps and cuts of Brand’s texts to split, to overflow back and forth between words, meanings, interpretations.

### **Becoming Change, Unbecoming Irony**

The openings in Brand’s text, the seams which she refuses to solder and which she challenges us equally to refuse to solder, are potential sites for the meeting and cleavage of the traditional and subversive edges of language, interpretation, thought. It is at this meeting point that we find the possibility for a complicity that involves exchange, *dépense*—a complicity that

involves the contractual seduction of Deleuze's masochist, rather than the impossibility for consent of his sadist or of Clarke's relentlessness. Barthes warns us that "the subversive edge may seem privileged because it is the edge of violence; but it is not violence which affects pleasure, nor is it destruction which interests it; what pleasure wants is the site of loss, the seam, the cut, the deflation, the *dissolve* which seizes the subject in the midst of bliss" (*Pleasure* 7). Interpretive acts in *Thirsty* are violent—both acts of traditional interpretation, which replicate the cycle of killing, and acts of interpretation that may reject this, but reject this through freezing, through immobility. The potential for restitution in Brand's text lies in interpretive interplay—the acknowledgement that our movement around corners and across thresholds is not innocent, but movement all the same, a reciprocal movement through which we achieve a different violence, the splitting of the subject enacted by the cut, the dissolve. Barthes claims that he is "interested in language because it wounds or seduces me" (*Pleasure* 38). We can show a productive interest in Brand's language through accepting its seductive wounds, accepting her invitation to play back and forth across the gaps in her text in mutually consensual interpenetration. If we engage in this mutual wound, this mutual pleasure—this joint refusal of static violence—"the opposing forces are no longer repressed but in a state of becoming: nothing is really antagonistic, everything is plural" (Barthes, *Pleasure* 31).

The *dépense* across thresholds that splits the subject and produces mutually contaminated interpretation involves an act of becoming that echoes Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of becoming in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Becoming, here, is not a process with destination, a final state, nor is it one with a fixed origin. Rather, it is a state of continual change and exchange, a deterritorialization—in effect, it is corners and thresholds, the place where "a new road is cut, a sound escapes, a touch / lasts" (Brand 37). In "Picking the Deadlock of Legitimacy," Ellen Quigley both relates and opposes Brand's writing to Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome theory. While she suggests that Brand incorporates the idea of nodal points in coalition into her work, Quigley also asserts that Brand's "attack on the intending subject, the object, and authority suggests theories of legitimacy restrain revolutionary thought and subjectivity, but Deleuze and Guattari's motifs of self-flagellating masochism . . . and of a desire to move beyond all 'molar' political alignments reflect a privileged, socially legitimate subject" (49-50). While Deleuze and Guattari's theories are undeniably written from a position of privilege, this acknowledgement of the potential to move on the

part of such a position is necessary to the kind of reparative communal interpretive acts proposed by Brand. While it is certainly valuable to recognize the cultural specificity of the perspectives of Brand's characters, this cultural specificity is not, as Quigley suggests, defined by a "specificity that resists global assimilation by the abstract rhizome" and, therefore, "Brand's deconstruction of identity is not politically deadening" (56). Rather, Brand's deconstruction of identity and interpretation, and the poetics of her text, are not politically deadening and, indeed, propose a radically reparative space, *because* they emphasize the spaces between words, where both the traditional and subversive edges participate in a deadening of language, but where there is the possibility for each to do otherwise. The possibility for a contractual, reparative complicity in Brand's texts follows a model of mixed pleasure and violence, of masochism that, rather than inevitably stemming from the self-flagellating throes of privilege, provides the space for agency in its undoing.

It is not enough to delineate a subversive edge, no matter how culturally specific, without acknowledging that the traditional edge, always present, also borders the cut, the edges of language, and also has the potential to move, in communication and collaboration with the subversive edge. Deleuze and Guattari's fifth theorem of becoming is that:

[D]eterritorialization is always double, because it implies the coexistence of a major variable and a minor variable in simultaneous becoming (the two terms of a becoming do not exchange places, there is no identification between them, they are instead drawn into an asymmetrical block in which both change to the same extent, and which constitutes their zone of proximity. (306)

For Deleuze, the masochist must convince, must incite his or her tormentor into the contractual relationship that enables both desired violence and acknowledged consent. In Brand's writing, our kinship with and complicity in producing text enables this simultaneous, continuous changing implicated by Barthes' cruising, Deleuze and Guattari's deterritorialization, and Deleuze's masochism. If Julia does not have to be read as hard, then perhaps the "would" in the police officer's description can change too. This block can change because of its proximity, and because of its textuality, "becoming / transparent as veins and letters and children / fugitive / as crossroads and windowpanes and bread"—a becoming which Julia, at least, in "XXIV" explicitly longs for (Brand 45).

Clarke's text, however, does not share this site of potential mutuality. Mutuality in Clarke's text is almost always violent and so is the text. Yet this

is all the more painful, because Clarke clearly presents us with a continual longing that it might be otherwise, expressing hope for language as shelter and beauty. In “Negation,” he associates his autopsy of the poetic heart with going “out shining instead of tarnished”—an association that seems to pose the possibility for regurgitating English as something renewed instead of simply masticated and musty. However, the rest of *Execution Poems* consistently reincorporates moments of textual beauty into violence. In “Childhood II,” Rufus represents books as potential shelter, claiming that he wanted:

jackets sewn from the torn-off, leather covers of books. [He] wanted to don jackets emblazoned with Eugene Onegin, *Claudine at School*, *Sonnets From the Portuguese*, *The Three Musketeers*—all the works of Pushkin, Colette, E. B. Browning, and Alexandre Dumas—all those secretly Negro authors. (17)

The “secretly Negro author” represents a potential avenue for reclaiming English and literary text as “mine”—as something that Rufus can use and reappropriate in a way that is shining rather than tarnished, in the shape of a patchwork jacket, an interplay of seams. And yet, the very next line begins with the word “instead.” And the instead of this poem is violence, from which Rufus’ jacket of literature offers no protection. One of the violent vignettes he describes is “a poet axed in the back of neck,” as poetry does nothing to protect the poet (17). The only textual protection here is the newsprint that is used to blind the windows and start the stove, as “yellow terror eat[s] / yesterday’s bad news” (17). Text may offer some protection, but only protection from the cold, and through destruction and the closing off of rifts. School, though an improvement, is “violent improvement,” as the classics offer only vengeance and “language cometh volatile” (Clarke 25). Beauty does not still aggression, but channels it. And, indeed, Rufus concludes, “my pages blaze, my lines pall, crying fratricidal damnation” (25). Literature is simply violence reinscribed, caught between ineffective religion and violent sexuality. In “Haligonian Market Cry,” literature is an irrepressibly violent harvest, “planted by Big-Mouth Chaucer and picked by Evil Shakespeare” (18). Literature offers no protection, it plants, feeds, and harvests aggression out of beauty.

This cruelty, the impossibility of textual solace as “blood must expunge . . . blood,” is the irony of Clarke’s text. He poses beauty as checking aggression, but the only poem Rue produces is death, his only text his testimony. His relationship with language is only recognized as significant as it leads to the brothers’ final sentence of silence. In “Coldness and Cruelty,” Deleuze positions irony as characteristic of sadism, and the irony of Clarke’s text

seems particularly sadistic, as language and text offer the hope for a grace that never appears, leading instead to a violence for which we are all somehow responsible, but also somehow unconsenting. While the “masochist is insolent in his obsequiousness, rebellious in his submission,” Sade’s characters speak the “counter-language of tyranny” even as they enact violence that must not involve consent (Deleuze 89, 87). Brand’s text is insolent—it submits to our interpretation in a way that draws attention to the specificity of each textual choice, to our complicity in producing meaning. It asserts the productive potential and desirability of informed consent. Clarke’s text, in its relentless exposure of relentless violence, echoes Deleuze’s language of sadism, and his irony drives home the connection drawn by Northrop Frye, in “On the Nature of Satire,” between irony and nihilism—irony is a potent weapon, destroying everything in its path. Brand’s text, with its seductive wounds, its insolence, uses insolence as a conduit towards productive bliss—if we agree to cooperate in enacting it. She raises the possibility of the complex variety of affects that Sedgwick calls for, not to deny violence, but to complicate it—to draw the violence of interpretation into a reparative contract. In Clarke’s text, we are all complicit, but we are trapped in the irony of a complicity that we somehow can never control, choose, or deny. According to Deleuze, both de Sade and Sacher-Masoch ask “what if the higher principle no longer exists, and if the Good can no longer provide a basis for the law or a justification of its power?” (86). De Sade’s answer is that law is the ultimate irony—

It is irrelevant whether we see the law as the expression of the strongest or as the product of self-protective union of the weak . . . the union of the weak merely favors the emergence of the tyrant; his existence depends on it. In every case the law is a mystification; it is not a delegated but a usurped power that depends on the infamous complicity of slaves and masters. (Deleuze 86)

For Brand, textual complicity can also result in the wound that seduces, in mutual becoming. For Clarke, law is tyranny, but overthrowing the law is also violence that can only ever reproduce itself. Text is beauty, but a beauty that is inevitably drawn back into undesired and undesirable violence. We are all complicit, but this complicity, instead of offering the potential for exchange, is simply inevitable.

The inevitable violence of Clarke’s text comes from a notion of community inextricably bound to begetting. From surname to fetus, filiation reproduces violence in a manner that is compulsive—it excludes other possibility. The reproductive nature of violence and murder, in history and in

text, contributes to a paranoid methodology that, in exposing the rampant oppression that is always already present, always there to be rediscovered, excludes the possibility of hope. Clarke's text draws in and involves his readers, but we are merely children and parents in the familial continuity of continuously self-reproducing violence. Clarke's text rejects the nostalgia of origin in some ways, but maintains a notion of continuity that, while intensely political, also serves the politically deadening function of denying any potential for agency or change. The text already knows itself, and where it is from, and it already knows us, and where we are from, and so it knows what must come of any meeting. For Clarke, there is no such thing as the pleasurable, cruisy chance encounter. Violence is everywhere, so if we do not know its precise origin, it is only because it is omnipresent—it cannot be reduced to only one moment, one family line. Brand's writing, as both Quigley and Goldman point out, rejects origin more consistently. *Thirsty*, however, in positing the potential for resistance against compulsory filiation, also posits the potential for hope. While validating Brand's emphasis on deterritorialization (which she does not relate to Deleuze and Guattari), Goldman also questions "the politics of drifting, particularly, the valorization of drifting as a strategy to counter what Brand views as the unsavoury politics of belonging" (24). Brand's emphasis on aesthetics and pleasure seems to Goldman politically suspect, as "advocating the pursuit of pleasure and drifting as political strategies strikes me as somewhat limited, representing a compromised reaction to both slavery and sexism" (24). However, just as Deleuze and Guattari's perspective, rather than being irredeemably privileged, functions as the potential for movement within a traditional edge that can work with the subversive edge to acknowledge and shake our communal complicity in fixing meaning, the potential that Brand advocates for pleasure and aesthetically catalyzed political change is neither utopian nor negligent. As Sedgwick argues, "[h]ope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates" (146). It is through her avoidance of filiative notions of family and community that Brand succeeds in positing this hope, however traumatic it may be. While Goldman suggests that, especially given the explicit policies of slavery and sexism to break down family and communitarian ties among slaves, Brand's representation of an alternative is too stereotypically promiscuous, it is through a promiscuous style of interpretive relationships that we find another possibility for building ties and communities (24-5). As Barthes

claims, “I must seek out this reader (must ‘cruise’ him) *without knowing where he is* . . . the bets are not placed, there can still be a game” (*Pleasure* 4, Barthes’ italics). While Clarke knows exactly where we all are, as readers, as writers, as people, this location, this inherited identity, is that of criminals and murderers. Brand’s emphasis on the spaces between words, the mediation between people, and the interpretive choices we are all complicit in, makes visible a space where the bets need not already be placed. Drift is not acommunitarian; rather, through cruising each other, through not knowing where we each are, she proposes a model of community wherein our complicity involves agency, and thus the agency and the hope, through our meetings around corners, to construct a different kind of space.

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