

Poetry and the Ethics of Global Citizenship

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Abstract: In her article "Poetry and the Ethics of Global Citizenship" Monique-Adelle Callahan argues that the recent work of poets Jorie Graham and Yusef Komunyakaa suggests the emergence of an archetypal poet who transgresses boundaries of place and time through measured wandering amongst cultures and histories. Graham and Komunyakaa offer a poetic discourse on the relationship between poetry and citizenship in an increasingly global world. Through a close reading of excerpts from Graham's 2012 *Place* and Komunyakaa's 2011 *The Chameleon Couch*, Callahan uses the paradigm of the poet-as-prophet to articulate the position of the poet vis-à-vis the geopolitical spaces she occupies. Callahan argues Graham's and Komunyakaa's poetry evinces a certain nostalgia for place while at the same time delineating the existential space of placelessness. In this sense, their writing compels us to recognize an emerging shift in identity politics as it relates to both national and individual bodies.

Monique-Adelle CALLAHAN

Poetry and the Ethics of Global Citizenship

"The universe is expanding," writes Pulitzer Prize winning poet Tracy K. Smith in her recent book *Life on Mars* (13). If the twenty-first century launches us beyond the conceptual boundaries of national geographies and into a global cosmos, then Smith gestures towards an even more transformative sensibility: a diversiform world at once turned into one. And yet this century has witnessed and continues to witness some of the most rampant signs of dissention and discord: brutal civil wars, social uprisings, political protests, sectarian conflicts, economic recession, and natural disaster. Equally panoramic is the array of lenses we might use to examine these developments.

To explore the relationship between poetry and our evolving conceptions of citizenship in this world at once increasingly variegated and "turned into one," I analyze Jorie Graham's 2012 *Place* and Yusef Komunyakaa's 2011 *The Chameleon Couch*. Not only because both of these Pulitzer Prize winning poets are living and writing today, but also because this relationship is a central tenet of their projects. Their projects illustrate contemporary transformations in our understanding of the relationship between literature, language, and citizenship as both a local and global phenomenon within the context of a growing transnational ethos. Their poetics propose what Jahan Ramazani calls a "transnational imaginative citizenship," an act of reading themselves and their world as "imaginative citizens not of one or another hermetically sealed national or civilizational bloc, but of intercultural worlds that ceaselessly overlap, intersect, and converge" (354-55). Their poems then can be understood as performances of transnationalism. By transnationalism, I mean "the phenomenon of reaching across or extending beyond predefined national boundaries" that also "offers an alternative to a nation-based understanding of literature and history and an alternative way of theorizing texts" (Callahan 6). Within its space — a cosmos of semantic and semiotic play — history and the present co-exist simultaneously mirroring our experience of "reality" as a palimpsest, layers of histories that form and inform the present. The poem is a multi-valenced, polyphonic, and multicultural space in which poet and text meander through a transnational space transgressing the fire-wired boundaries (legal, political, cultural, linguistic, temporal) that would otherwise manacle poet and text — the poetic performance — to a particular location. The poet is at once a poet of place and placelessness, whose poetry is characterized by movement that transgresses boundaries of geography, time, and space. The poet is prophetic: he engages in witness (insightful seeing), protest (critique aimed at re-vision), and contest (the challenging of temporal, national, and political boundaries).

James Kugel reminds us of "a tradition of associating poetry and prophecy" with roots in "ancient Greece and biblical Israel" noting that at times people separated these offices and at times they asserted the "prophet-like nature of the poet" (1). Samuel A. Meier adds that prophets were "not static icons but humans whose personalities and concerns adapted to the changing centuries" (12) and were able to see, through an "insightful gaze" both the vision and the figurative significance of the vision, thus giving birth to the prophetic oracle (39-42). Abraham J. Heschel outlines three elements in the figure of the prophet who is "a witness, and his words a testimony" (27). First, the prophet is a witness to god's power, judgment, justice, and mercy; second, the prophet speaks out in protest against immorality: "Above all, the prophets remind us of the moral state of a people: Few are guilty, but all are responsible. If we admit that the individual is in some measure conditioned or affected by the spirit of society, an individual's crime discloses society's corruption" (19); and third, the prophet challenges his people to recognize the contesting forces of history: "The prophet's use of emotional and imaginative language ... concrete in diction, rhythmical in movement, artistic in form, marks his style as poetic. Yet it is not the style of poetry that takes its origin, to use Wordsworth's phrase, 'from emotion recollected in tranquility.' Far from reflecting a state of inner harmony or poise, its style is charged with agitation, anguish, and a spirit of non-acceptance. The prophet's concern is not with nature but with history, and history is devoid of poise" (7; see also Carruth; Miron; Shoham).

As a participant in global citizenship, the poet accepts the call to speak, to see, and to engage a triumvirate approach as witness, protester, and contestator. These three elements constitute a kind of ideal citizen of this new global space as envisioned by the poet and her literary project. The prophet figure delineates an ideal global citizenship exercised in Graham's sprawling lines and Komunyakaa's epic wanderings. The poet expresses a prophetic lament resonant of Jeremiah, or Ezekiel's observations of the Israelites in exile in Babylon. In the book of Ezekiel, the presence of God meets the prophet in exile after the destruction: "And behold, the glory of the God of Israel came from the way of the east: and his voice was like a noise of many waters: and the earth shined with his glory. And it was according to the vision that I saw when I came to destroy the city: and the visions were like the vision that I saw by the river Chebar; and I fell upon my face. And the glory of the Lord came into the house by the way of the gate whose prospect is toward the east" (43:1-4). The specific nature of "the glory" varies as Graham and Komunyakaa engage with the present-absence of God and the cities — that is the places to which they travel in their poems — in disparate though conversant ways. Sight, along with its processes, and the aftermath of this sight preoccupies their poetic texts.

A concern with the globalization of US-American literature has preoccupied literary scholarship for the past two decades in particular. Vilashini Coopan's definition of globalization will help us here. For Coopan, globalization is "a process of cross-cultural interaction, exchange, and transformation" (15). Paul Giles aptly asserts that US-American literature "should be seen as no longer bound to the inner workings of any particular country or imagined organic community but instead as interwoven systematically with traversals between national territory and intercontinental space" (63). As Edward W. Said reminds us in *Culture and Imperialism*, the cultural identity of nations in this era of increasing globalization should be conceived in terms of space rather than time. Giles aims to trace the origins and evolutions of this globalization within the context of US-American literature, mapping an enduring instability of the relationship between "American literature and geography" (1). We have moved into a "transnational era" over the course of the last four decades, he observes. And these decades have been "characterized by a decline in a literature infused with an exceptional Americanism and an increasingly globalism characterized by 'deterritorialization'" (12-13).

In *Global Remapping*, Giles maintains that to "speak of American literary culture under the rubric of deterritorialization is thus not simply to encumber it within monolithic orders of globalization or imperialism but, rather, to think of it as a socially constructed, historically variable and experientially edgy phenomenon, whose valence lies in the tantalizing dialectic between an illusion of presence and the continual prospect of displacement" (25). Unburdening US-American literature of bounded territory reveals the "dialectic" of place and placelessness and, as Giles suggests, promotes a "transnational reading of American literature" (262). In this sense, Giles echoes Coopan, who argues that "globalization" of literary studies in recent decades "entails the learning (and teaching) of a kind of relational thinking in which we see the nation through the local yet as part of the global" (26). Coopan reminds us that nations are "fantasmatic objects knotted together by ambivalent forces of desire, identification, memory, and forgetting, even as they simultaneously move within, across, and beyond a series of spatial and temporal borders (us/them, territory/flow, present/past, life/death);" ultimately, the "space of nations is never simply their own" (xvii). Recognizing nations as at once integral, interlocking and persistent in their deconstruction of place, how do we consider movement between and among global territories (both physically and virtually)? How do we account for what we see and how do we hold ourselves accountable for it?

In *Place* Graham approaches these very questions through Graham's "I" — whom we come to know as an archetypal self, an amalgam of Graham herself and a collective consciousness (sometimes of US-Americans, sometimes, epically, as humanity at large). My first example is the poem "Dialogue (of the Imagination's Fear)," in which Graham articulates an unmitigated critique of US-American freedom rhetoric: "All around in / houses near us, the / layoffs, / the windows shine back / sky, it is a / wonder we / can use the word *free* and have it mean anything at all" (29; emphasis in the original). Graham observes the realities of joblessness and entrapment mounting in truncated lines, her critical distance is slight, she slips in and around dissatisfied with seeing only

and prompted to interrogate what she sees. How can language dictate a discourse of freedom when all "around" and "in" reflects virtual prisons of socioeconomic decline? Eventually, even the poem disappears (perhaps a dismissal of "pure" aestheticism or of the impulse to replace practical action with prosody), along with the desire for its imaginative space, marking the ultimate disillusionment: "here, take away the poem, take away this desire that / has you entering this waste dark space, there are not even pockets of time here, / there are no mysteries, there is no laughter and nothing ever dies, the foreclosure / you are standing beside look to it, there is a / woman crying on the second floor as she does not understand what it will be like to / not have a home now, and how to explain to the children at 3:35 when the bus drops / them off —" (30). Graham describes a place where the material of poems does not exist: "there are not even pockets of time here / there are no mysteries / there is no laughter and nothing ever dies" (30). Again removing the distance between the aesthetic space of the poem's critique of the event and the event itself, Graham commands us to look, to see the woman who has just lost her home. When the poem disappears, what remains is foreclosure and its grim consequences. Graham strips the poem of its blinders, compelling it to the new sight practiced by the poet and performed by the poem. And yet Graham's is not a disavowal of poeticism. With meticulous precision, Graham maintains the integrity of each line, while at the same time enjambment creates a steady stream of consciousness, a consciousness perpetually building upon itself, growing in and out of itself, and ever yet transforming itself. Graham moves between an imperial expansion of the line that stretches across the page and then returns to a smaller space, a place in the middle. We come to understand this consciousness as an extension of the "American" voice which Graham describes in "Employment" as having its "wiring in its swan's neck / where it is / always turning / round to see behind itself as it has no past to speak of except some nocturnal / journals written in words where the fight has just taken place or is about to / take place / for place" (32). Transcribed in journals, US-American history is circumscribed by narratives of war. As our wars have been in other places, on other lands, our history takes place both here and elsewhere. The U.S. is at once with and without history (both in the sense of outside of and of lacking) and characterized as much by its movement from place to place as its taking of place after place. Graham's critique problematizes the processes by which the U.S. has established a sense of place in a changing world. That is to say, Graham posits a US-American consciousness that is at once insecure in its itinerant lack of certainty of place and imperialistic in its violent possession of places.

Graham locates her archetypal self within this dialectic between place and placelessness in "Untitled":

and I
am at the point in the road where I, who will have lived, no matter how many thousands
of years in the future come, if they come,
even if there are no more humans then or they have become unrecognizable, I,
even when no rain will have come down
in the memory of generations
so they think the story of such an element is one of myths, the empty
myths, I still will have
lived this day and all the preceding ones of my
person, mine, as I rise now
to the moment when right words
are needed — Dear moon. (14)

Combining historic, mythic, and apocalyptic elements, Graham's "I" lives simultaneously within and outside of the boundaries of time, living "this day" and, at the same time, "all the preceding ones of [her] person" (14). If Wallace Stevens identified the poem as the cry of the occasion, the occasion for Graham's speaker becomes the impetus for the cry of the poet: she rises when "right words are needed." The poem becomes a place — both a metaphysical space and a place in time — where the present exists and the speaker exists. Poetic utterance relieves, at least momentarily, the anxiety caused by persistent placelessness and imminent change. Living "this day and all the preceding ones" preserves her identity and the "I" resurfaces over and over within the chaotic landscape of the poem (ordered by the speaker's existential panic).

Desperate to maintain itself, the "I" struggles to hold onto existence and integrity in most certain uncertainty. History and language rise to the task of remembrance in "the moment" to tell the story of past centuries of human experience:

... and the door slams, and the only story I know, my head, my century, the one where
187 million perished in wars, massacre, persecution, famine — all policy-induced — is the
 one out of which
 I must find the reason
for the loved still-young creature being carried now onto the family lawn as they try
 everything, and all murmurs shroud hum cry instruct, and all the
 six arms gleam, firm, limp, all over it, caresses, tentacular
surround of the never-again, rush of blood and words, although look, you out there
 peering in, listening, to see who we were: here: this was history:
 their turn
 is all they actually have
flowing in them. (15)

We land in time and in place within the sphere of the poet's experience of time (my head, my century). Here Graham offers an unabashed critique of US-American foreign policy and bemoans the desperate attempt to save a dying "still-young creature." The speaker's world is a global world and the poem bears witness to various forms of human suffering. The "I" claims ownership for the "story" of this world; it is her century, her allotted space in time in which she has to find a reason to nurture and love on a personal scale. Whether we are onlookers to the spectacle of global turmoil or readers of its translation (that is, the poem itself — we lose the privilege of critical distance; we are outed: "you out there / peering in, listening to see who we were: here: this was history." Our voyeurism is exposed as well as our personal stake in the identity of the world around us as we look to see "who we were." Seeing is at once seeing out and seeing in. It is self-examination as well as recognition of "history." In the poem that opens the collection, Graham concludes: "and when I shut my eyes now I am not like a blind person / walking towards the lowering sun, / the water loud at my right, / but like a seeing person / with her eyes shut / putting her feet down / one at a time / on the earth" (5). Samuel Meier highlights the blind prophet Ahijah as exemplary of "this special gift of sight" that "does not even require normal vision" (43), but that involves a conscious process of transcendent insight. As a seer, the poet exercises a type of sight that transcends the physical. Graham's "I" experiences the earth intentionally and deliberately as a ground she treads not without caution and discrimination. Like the prophet, she approaches the "divine council" or the "throne room" — that is, she steps into the symbolic realm of language — and then returns to the earth with a message (Meier 22-23). Her duty to the earthly realm — that of geopolitical and social realities — relies on her ability to transcend the tragedy and produce art and meaning. She sees beyond the macabre lowering sun — signaling a certain approaching darkness or inscrutability — coupled with the loud waters — signaling the stormy turbulence of the contemporary political, social, and ecological climate of the world. She navigates this world with measured steps.

In Graham's "Of Inner Experience" her "I" is enlightened and, perhaps even more importantly, awake in her sleeping: "Eyes shut I sense I am awakening & then I am / awake but / deciding / to keep eyes shut, look at the inside, stay inside, in the long and dark of it" (39). Graham estranges us from natural sight, suggesting another kind of enlightened sight accessed through a willful act of closing the physical eyes and awaking to an other opposing realm of darkness. This "inside" seeing initiates a mystical transcendence not into a celestial realm disconnected from the earthly, but into the inner recesses of the mind:

I am also lying on the bed eyes closed
 and keeping them so, god owes us
 everything I
think from out here, there is not god I think lying in the non-dark of the mind, eyes
 closed, hearing the crows rustling in
 the nearest
 trees, the hayfork in the next field — I want to pray says the person behind the eyes — you
 cannot do so I say with these fingers — I want to break the dark with the idea of God says
 the

non-sleeping person on her back in the beginning of the 21st century, trying to hold on to duration which is slipping, slipping, as she speaks as I write, active translator, look. (40)

Extending the juxtaposition of states of sleep and wakefulness, Graham acknowledges a desire to "break the dark with the idea of God" in the face of a perceived absence of god expressed through the speaker's vacillation between "God" and "god"). She wrestles with the idea of god in whose absence the poetic intellect offers the only illumination. Writing — that which is said with "these fingers" — offers an answer to the unfulfilled desire to engage god in the act of prayer and prophetic communication with god reconfigures itself through the poetic utterance. Separate from the body, this illuminated "I" resists the persistent slipping away of time, speaks and dictates to the poet who translates the revelation. Nostalgia for religion echoes the nostalgia for place. The poem emerges at the nexus of these human longings resolved only in the act translation moving from one lexical space to another. This translation echoes the transmigrations of the poet through boundless time and space in efforts to reconcile place and placelessness.

In *Chameleon Couch*, Komunyakaa's poems echo Graham's transmigrations and extend her critique on the act of translation to attend to the question of transgression. In "Poppies," Komunyakaa is at once local — occupying a bounded identity on which he builds signifiers (first "a black man," then a poet, then a bohemian) — and transnational, a traveler actively moving through time and space within the poetic line: "I am a black man, a poet, a bohemian, / & there isn't a road my mind doesn't travel. / I also have my cheap, one-way ticket / to Auschwitz & know of no street or footpath / death hasn't taken. The poppies rush ahead. / up to a cardinal singing on barbed wire" (43). A juxtaposition of freedom and constraint preoccupies Komunyakaa: constraints imposed by human beings warn of the deleterious effects of transgression. Boundaries imposed by force contain and restrain freedom from memory and delineate the boundaries of the poetic imagination. The poet's mind can travel but the stanza closes with boundaries: the cardinal can do what the speaker cannot: fly. In "A Visit to the Inner Sanctum" Komunyakaa introduces the archetypal poet: "A poet stands on the steps of the great cathedral / wondering if he has been a coward in hard times" (49). Komunyakaa's archetypal poet questions the role he has played in response to "hard times." His position is extra-temporal and, in this sense, transcendent. His sight, that of prophetic insight, endowed with an ability to see history "Couldn't he see the tear gas drifting over Ohio / as flower children danced to Jefferson Airplane? / Will he ever write a sonnet dedicated to the memory / of four girls dynamited in a Birmingham church?" (49). But what should the poet do with what he has seen? Will poetry memorialize what he has seen, the gassed students at Kent University, the four young victims of the Birmingham church bombing? What place do they have in poetic form? Their expedience imposes that the poet "can't stop counting dead heroes who lived in his head / sultry refrains that kept him alive in the country of clouds" (49). Life and death war in the line: dead heroes live in refrain, constant repetition of a sameness mirroring infinity at once in the haze of war clouds and the celestial clouds of this sacred heaven-hell where mortality and immortality bind together through memory that is mediated and transmitted poetically.

We encounter the poet outside of the "Institute of National Memory," a metonymical representation of a collective cultural memory: "Outside the Institute of National Memory / he toasts the gods hiding between stanzas. / The girl he left behind for enemy soldiers / to rough up & frighten, she never stopped / waiting for him, even after she lost herself / in booze. No he faces a rusty iron gate" (50). Inspired to worship at this sacred memorial, Komunyakaa shifts into a single personal memory: the girl he left behind. Her girlhood innocence, trampled by "enemy soldiers" bleeds into the next line — her waiting for a failed salvation drives her, as it drives the line, to lose herself. Ultimately, Komunyakaa interrupts the memory: the image of the girl, woven through the stanza, comes to a traumatic halt echoed in the syntactical rupture. He refuses to face her and diverts his gaze to the boundaries of memory. The gate's erosion indicates its vulnerability to the passage of time, memory's boundaries are mutable and vulnerable to life's destructive elements, ironically the very elements which sustain it. Komunyakaa's poet cannot also get lost in intoxication, but must face the restraints of poetry with the boldness to speak an uncomfortable, self-incriminating truth, an act of contestation with himself and a suspended lack of resolution resolves the poem.

In "Cape Coast Castle" Komunyakka moves from personal (a moment after intimacy with a woman) to transnational (from an airport in Amsterdam to the slave castles in Cape Coast, Ghana). When we cross the Atlantic and time in this poem, we arrive at moment to witness one woman selected from a group of slaves to be "the governor's" pick:

... I could see the ships at dusk
rising out of the lull of "Amazing Grace," cresting
the waves. The governor stood on his balcony,
holding a sword, pointing to a woman
in the courtyard, saying, That one.
Bring me that tall, ample wench.
Enslaved hands dragged her to the center,
then they threw buckets of water on her,
but she tried to fight. They pinned her to the ground.
She was crying. The prodded her up the stairs. One step,
& then another. Oh, yeah, she still had some fight in her,
but the governor's power was absolute. He said,
There's a tyranny of language in my fluted bones.
There's poetry on every page of the Good Book.
There's God's work to be done in a forsaken land.
There's a whole tribe in this one, but I'll break them
before they're in the womb, before their conceived. (24-25)

Even the sea has its music. Lyric emanates from the natural landscape ("rising out of the lull of "Amazing Grace") and the physical body ("There's a tyranny of language in my fluted bones"). Can language assist the speaker in the way that the enslaved hands bring him the female body to summarily possess; does it assist the project of dominating the "forsaken land" which is at once the landscape of those sites of the imperialistic gaze and the female body itself? If language can be tyrannical, if the poetry of the "Good Book" can justify imperialistic slavery and embolden the systematic rape of enslaved women, can the poet unfetter and reclaim it? Perhaps the final lines of "Orpheus at the Second Gate of Hades" offer an answer: "If I never possessed these reed flutes / & drums, if my shadow stops kissing me / because of what I have witnessed, / shall holler to you though my bones, / I promise you" (46). If he can find a way to unfetter himself from the shadowy truth of what he sees, he will write and reclaim his body in a resurrection, coming back to life, to speak, an act like that of the prophet Ezekiel commanded by the Lord to the dead bones: "Again he said unto me, Prophecy to these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus saith the Lord God unto these bones; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live" (37: 4,5).

In "Green," Komunyakaa brings us to Enghelab Square, a major center in Tehran and a central locus for popular uprisings. Structured by the juxtaposition of what he has and has not known, Komunyakaa exercises the practice of cultural exchange, demonstrating his attempt to comprehend an other culture through the lens of his own:

I've known billy club, tear gas, & cattle prod,
but not Black Sheep killing White Sheep.
Or vice versa. I've known water hoses
& the subterranean cry of a Black Maria
rounding a city corner on two angry wheels,
but couldn't smell cedar taking root in the air.

I've known of secret graves guarded
by the night owl in oak & poplar.
I've known police dogs on choke chains.
I've known how "We Shall Overcome"
feels on a half-broken tongue,
but not how deeply sunsets wounded the Peacock Throne. (76)

Komunyakaa knows the African American struggle for civil rights and its anthem "We Shall Overcome," but he does not know the impact of the toppled "Peacock" throne, a metaphor for the Iranian monarchy (see Forbis 81). He is an ethical outsider aware of his position and lack of

knowledge, conscious of his own cultural baggage, intrigued by potential similarities, but not blinded to difference by an impulse to absorb this "other" experience in a narcissistic gaze:

Because of what I never dreamt
I know Hafez's litany balanced on Tamerlane's saber,
a gholam's song limping up the Elburz Mountains —
no, let's come back first to *now*,
to a surge of voices shouting,
Death to the government of potato!

Back to the iron horses of the Basijis
galloping through days whipped bloody
& beaten back into the brain's cave
louder than a swarm of percussion
clobbered in Enghelab Square,
cries bullied into alleyways & cutoffs. (76-77)

The lyrical poetry of Hafez combined with the ruthless violence of Tamerlane articulates the cultural and imperialistic conquest of an Iranian national identity, coupled in the poem with a glorification of Iran's geographical landscape. In medieval Persian, *hafez* finds its roots in the word meaning "to preserve" or "to keep" (Davis xxxvii). If Hafez's mystical, introspective, even proverbial lyric is the beauty of Iran's cultural legacy, then Tamerlane as epic Persian conqueror and king is beautiful beast and the two corroborate in Komunyakaa's poetic imagination Iran's contemporary angst. And yet this nostalgic adoration of Iran's cultural legacy and distinctive topography is interrupted. We see again the "no" — an exclamatory shift from an a-temporal dreamscape to the "now" — the contesting voices of political and social discontent, the militant force of Basiji soldiers, and the repression of oppositional outcry. The poet undresses himself of objectivity; he has witnessed and then becomes inspired by the display of revolutionary protest:

Though each struck bell goes on
mumbling in the executioner's sleep,
there are always two hands holding
on to earth, & I believe their faith
in tomorrow's million green flags waving
could hold back a mile of tanks & turn

the Revolutionary Guard into stone,
that wherever a clue dares to step
a seed is pressed into damp soil.
A shoot, a tendril, the tip of a wing.
One breath at a time, it holds till it is
uprooted, or torn from its own grip. (77)

He believes in the cause of the protesters — no doubt the protesters facing the government's military forces in Tehran in 2011. Green flags emblemize the protesters cause and articulate Komunyakaa's newfound belief — green the color of the post-1980-revolution Iranian flag. Komunyakaa moves from observance, to speculation, to ideological participation: he is not a distant voyeur, but a believer.

Komunyakaa's peripatetic meanderings through time and space continue throughout *Chameleon Couch*. In "The Beautiful Quickness of a Street Boy" he observes a boy in the streets of Burdwan, India. Komunyakaa is duped by the quick-witted prowess of the boy who asks him for a rose and then sells it to another man to turn a profit: "Our car fills with awe & laughter, / & someone says, There's a woman / somewhere. That street boy, / as if he'd sprung out of me, / out of another time, / is still pleading with everything / he knows" (97). In "Gone," the poet is in China, or perhaps in a China that is many places at once: "Somebody is screaming. I spring to my feet, / half stumbling out of the brain's cloudy weather. / Where am I, what year of the Rat, Horse, Dragon, / or Snake is it? I'm out the door. In the hallway" (100). Komunyakaa is both somewhere and nowhere, both "out the door" and "in" at the same time:

Damn. I'm pulling on my See No Evil T-shirt.
A woman's no-no voice. Bach usually drifts

out into this hall. This is Beethoven. I mean,
I hear doors slam & the struggle of an elevator.
The biblical howl of a gale. I hear a man's voice.
He's crying in a language between two or three
languages. The Chinese couple down the hall
on the left. I said hello, & they looked at the floor.
When I said goodbye, they gazed through me. (100)

He questions his place, his cultural and temporal situatedness. The hallway, a passageway between two or more spaces, is constructed in the poem as a liminal space where language and culture "drift" and uncertainty characterizes cultural referents, identities are nondescript (a woman, a man), and language is absent of meaning or distinctiveness. There is no recognition between "I" and other, but an averted gaze (they look at the floor) or one without an object (they gaze through me): "I listen. I listen with my head & my heart. The body. / The cells. I can hear a sobbing inside the walls. / I don't want to listen anymore. I fall across the bed / with my clothes & shoes on. I can't" (100). Listening becomes a bodily event that overwhelms him. It is a holistic experience requiring the mind and the heart and an extending of the self to the point of exhaustion and to the edge of desire. It is a consuming experience of witness leading Komunyakaa to contest the boundaries of time and space: the poetic text forms a topography of travel into an other space, it offers a kind of alterity that it at once is a quest for understanding the self and of the other free from the "real" boundaries of time, space, culture, and language. As we look for a language that allows us to communicate in such a way that it eschews the incendiary effects of cultural ignorance and (mis)translation of symbols and images and linguistic signs, there is even more of a need for poetic interrogations. We are at once de-familiarized and reacquainted with language and we walk the line through the machinations of the poetic imaginary.

In conclusion, Graham's and Komunyakaa's poems archive the collective angst of a national and global community. Their poetry not only mediates our travel through and in time, but also allows us to occupy place consciously with a critical conscious and to experience the humane proclivity for creative re-imagination of historical events and narratives. They transgress the boundaries of time, geography, place, and culture to penetrate to the "universally human" in realms of the archetypal and the political. Graham and Komunyakaa intertwine personal experience and global citizenship responding to the call to see and to speak. Their work suggests that the poet as global citizen and the poem as performance of a global ethics, in addition to disclosing truth, pursue a personal and collaborative truth that can effectively rebuild from the ruins.

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