5 At the Literary Crossroads of Blackness and Queerness in Contemporary America:

Race, Trauma and State Violence in the Poetry of Danez Smith and Saeed Jones

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Abstract

The United States has long discriminated against individuals belonging to both black and queer communities, and this has intensified significantly in recent years, with a clear rise in overtly homophobic and transphobic policies being churned out by successive conservative governments. This turn of events, in turn, has had an obvious impact on the lives and experiences of an emerging generation of black and queer poets in the country. This paper will examine these themes as they have been represented in two poetry collections written by contemporary black queer poets. Danez Smith's *Don't Call Us Dead* (2017) includes poems influenced by Smith's experiences growing up as black non-binary individual in a black, working-class neighbourhood and questions ideas of race, gender, incarceration and police brutality. Similarly, Saeed Jones' *Alive at the End of the World* (2022) draws upon the poet's memories of queer boyhood, featuring poems on masculinity, race, community, sexuality and state violence. This paper seeks to examine how these collections reflect the poets' efforts to represent the complexities of the Black

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queer experience in recent times; *and* draw upon both, the individual and the collective natures of the trauma, grief, and resilience involved while living in modern day America. By situating Smith and Jones within a lineage of Black queer literary figures before them, this paper tries to underscore the importance of literary representation in understanding and addressing the multifaceted nature of racialized queerness within contemporary America.

Introduction

The bitter reality of living under conservative governments is by no means a new experience for black queer communities. Like Essex Hemphill, Assoto Saint, Dawn Lundy Martin, Audre Lorde and James Baldwin before them, Danez Smith and Saeed Jones are two prominent contemporary Black queer poets whose poetry explores themes of race, sexuality and state violence in America. Danez Smith's *Don't Call Us Dead* (2017) includes poems influenced by Smith's experiences growing up as black non-binary individual in a black, working-class neighbourhood and questions ideas of race, gender, incarceration and police brutality. Saeed Jones' *Alive at the End of the World* (2022) similarly draws upon the poet's memories of queer boyhood, featuring poems on masculinity, race, community, sexuality and state violence. Much like their contemporaries Jericho Brown and Christopher Soto, Saeed Jones and Danez Smith both write about the racialised intergenerational trauma within their birth families as well as the collective pain of their queer "chosen families", and the legacies passed on to them by both— of pain, sorrow and grief, but also joy, resilience, and hope. This paper intends to analyse these attempts at personal and collective literary representation of racialised queerness within contemporary America as it faces a rising tide of far-right ideology, while particularly focusing on the role of communal grief and trauma as it shapes their distinctive poetic identities.

While accounts of George Floyd's brutal death at the hands of a police officer in 2020 sparked public debate on the racial ties of law enforcement and the nation-state's lack of accountability regarding the same, the same year also saw the deaths of a staggering 37 black transgender women at the hands of the police (ACLU 2020). However, their murders did not garner any of the media attention that Floyd's murder did. This simple anecdote serves to emphasise the intense marginalisation that black queer and LGBTQ bodies experience in particular— they are doubly susceptible to the violence of the white supremacist, cis-heteropatriarchial nation-state, which sees them as disposable.

The opening lines of the first of the four title poems of Saeed Jones's *Alive at the End of the World* (2022) are as follows: "The end of the world was mistaken/for just another midday massacre/in America". With this cutting line, Jones smoothly cleaves the ennui of the white American state to the near-apocalyptic conditions of human misery and raging tide of violence rising across the nation. As a black, queer man, Jones' experiences inform and set the tone for the entire collection, bringing together themes of grief, queer desire, race and state violence. In a similar vein, Danez Smith opens their poetry collection, *Don't Call Us Dead* (2017) with the following lines that speak for their fellow black, queer folk:

color of a July well spent. but here, not earth
not heaven, we can't recall our white shirts

turned ruby gowns. here, there's no language
for officer or law, no color to call white.

if snow fell, it'd fall black. please, don't call
us dead, call us alive someplace better. (Smith)

Here, Smith's poem imagines a literal after-world set apart from fears of a violent death due to racism and queerphobia— a routine realisation that is embedded in the daily lives of most black queer individuals in America. Smith, like Jones, engages with themes of queerness, brutality and race, while simultaneously trying to probe the nature of this racist, heteropatriarchal violence. It is also important to note how in the work of both these poets, there is a struggle to move past personal trauma— trauma that is directly or indirectly shaped by the ever-looming violence enacted by the state either in the present or over generations. Through their work, they try to represent its many manifestations, peeling apart the layered ramifications this pain has on the lives of black queer individuals as well as the impact it has on their collective consciousness.

In a recent paper, Joanna Mąkowska (2023) talks about the parallels in the literary work of black queer figures like James Baldwin, who wrote poetry during the conservative Reagan era and the contemporary black queer poet, Jericho Brown, who writes in present day America. She traces a lineage that links Brown and Baldwin, locating in their work Baldwin's definition of love: "something that emerges . . . as a radically political act that allows for an honest confrontation with the vulnerable self and others" (Mąkowska 71). Love might not be "a popular movement" as Baldwin puts it, but as Mąkowska notes, " it enables a relentless fight for racial justice and political change" (71). This love is often represented as a deeply corporeal, yet intensely radical and political force, as depicted in poems by earlier black queer poets. "American Wedding" by Essex Hemphill is an instance of this radical form: an intensely corporeal yet political poem that highlights queer love as a form of resistance in and of itself. This love is also often transmuted into a righteous rage against the brutality and oppression faced by the community, as seen in the work of poets like Audre Lorde (her poem poem "Power", written after the murder of 10 year old Clifford Glover at the hands of a police officer, is one famous example). Naturally, this approach also appears in the work of contemporary poets, like in this poem by Smith called "tonight, in Oakland":

who lets me practice hunger with him
i won't give him the name of your newest ghost

i will give him my body & what he does with it
is none of my business, but i will say *look*

i made it a whole day, still, no rain
still, i am without exit wound. (Smith)

These lines exemplify the easy surrender in the earlier description of love mentioned by Baldwin. "How to love the country that refuses to love you back? How to embrace one's vulnerability in order to love and be loved while being constantly exposed to oppression and violence? And, importantly, how do these two modes of love, and challenges imbricated in loving, intersect and interact?" — these are the questions that Makowska believes Baldwin's poetry deals with (73); and these concerns are also echoed in the poems of contemporary black queer poets. In "every day is a funeral & a miracle", Smith writes:

i'm not going to manufacture
any more sadness. it happened.
it's happening.

America might kill me before i get the chance.
my blood is in cahoots with the law.
but today i'm alive, which is to say
i survived yesterday, spent it. (Smith)

The metaphor of America as an autoimmune disease (implied to be HIV) that slowly kills the poet's body from within (as indicated by the phrases "my blood is in cahoots with the law" and "rip my way out"), shows how for Smith, loving their country like their own body has only pushed them further into harm– but as one cannot live without one's own blood (i.e, one's own sense of belonging and identity), one has to suffer with it everyday. It is to be noted that not only has Smith made their own HIV positive status public, they have also spoken about how a life of joy and happiness is something that they continue to cultivate post diagnosis as an act of rebellion against the heteronormative, racist ideology that wishes to erase them; the vehement reclamation of their body and agency is evident in their poem, "litany with blood all over" (Juncosa 2022).

A similar internal conflict is present in these lines from Saeed Jones' "After the School Board Meeting":

'America' is American
for 'wreck & repeat.' This song isn't comfort;
it's just to help me sleep. 'At least, this misery
is mine' I sing in my loaned & lonely dark,
& in the poplar tree outside my window,
a mockingbird sings my song back to me. (Jones)

Though the speaker is aware that the song of "America" is not something that has ever favoured his people, he keeps singing it to himself, because he knows that is all he has of his history. This song is all he has, a dark past of belonging that is not truly his, but is in fact "loaned" to him through his enslaved ancestors. The use of the mockingbird is interesting; it seems to evoke the symbolism of the bird in Harper Lee's How to Kill a Mockingbird. Lee's novel has previously been critiqued for centering her white protagonists who clearly exhibit traits of the "white saviour complex" (Jay 89, Watson 420). Jones seems to use the motif to subtly comment upon the isolation of the black man with only his own voice (and the

distant echo of so-called liberal white people and their fragility, as symbolised by the mockingbird) to keep him company.

In her essay, “Parade of Champions: The Failure of Black Queer Grief”, Michèle Pearson Clarke (2017) writes about how black queers exist “in a space of irresolution: too queer for blackness and too black for queerness” and in turn, how their lives are “most often ignored within the visual and discursive spheres of both blackness and queerness” (Clarke 94). In the same essay, Clarke talks about how dominant modes of representation of black queer folk in academia and culture tend to portray them as “victims, subject to only violence, erasure, and rejection at every turn”(95). But by engaging in an “alternative discourse”, she argues, one can “acknowledge the full humanity of black queer people by exploring a different dimension of black pain, and the possibilities created for us by grief and mourning” (95). Clarke tries to reclaim the black familial site as one that is unencumbered by stereotypical notions of exaggerated homophobia, one that insists on “our right as black queers to claim a place in the black family. It demands that we be seen as black and queer and loved” (96). These lines from Smith’s poem “summer, somewhere” are indicative of an attempt similar to Clarke’s:

> my head in your lap, scalp covered in grease
>
> & your hands, your hands, those hands
> my binary gods. Those milk hands, bread hands
>
> hands in the air in church hands, cut-up fish hands
> for my own good hands, back talk backhands, hurt more
> than me hands, ain’t asking no mo’ hands. (Smith)

The phrase “my binary gods” hints at hierarchical ideals of heteronormativity as well as the intergenerational trauma that is typically passed down in Black cishet families; this is also suggested by the symbolism of Smith’s mother’s “hands”, which are in conflict with Smith’s gender ideals and their non-conforming sexuality. And yet, the tenderness of Smith’s relationship with his mother is palpable (especially in phrases like “head in your lap”, which emphasise the physical affection that exists between them). This conflict of ideas can also be observed in a number of other acts of care she shows towards Smith, such as grooming their hair and cooking food for them; this in turn complicates ideas of filial piety that are typically associated with white heteropatriarchal family structures. The phonetic pattern of soft sounds being followed by sharper sounds serve as a poignant auditory contrast as well. This can be observed in the way the softer sounds of the words “head”, “lap” are followed by stressed sounds like in the words “scalp” and “milk”; similarly the softer, relatively unstressed sounds in “bread” are followed by the strong stressed sounds heard in a phrase like “cut up fish”. The presence of sharp alliterating syllables at the end of the line also create an auditory juxtaposition which alludes to the emotional contrast.

E Patrick Johnson, the black queer studies critic, notes how his black grandmother used the word “quare” (in AAVE) instead of “queer”; and while it had the same denotations as the word “queer”, the word “quare” itself is far more nuanced in AAVE, wherein it also connotes an excess of something:

> (Quare) translate(s) into an excess of discursive and epistemological meanings grounded in African American cultural rituals and lived experience. Her knowing or not knowing vis-à-vis "quare" is predicated on her own multiple and complex social, historical, and cultural positionality. (Johnson, 2003)

To Johnson, this positionality is what helped him develop his own ideas regarding queer studies and black studies; irrespective of the community's own beliefs regarding sexuality— it is due to the presence of strong affective bonds within it that helped foster his ideation process. Johnson, like Clarke, believes that this community and love are prerequisites for theorising a "racialized queerness". A similar excerpt of how community informs ideas of black childhood can also be found in the following lines from Jones' prose poem, "Saeed, or the Other One: II". The speaker here is confronted by a version of himself who is removed from the grief and violence that typically accompanies his life as a black queer person. It emphasises the innocence that his younger self would have had were it not for racial violence, a cruel knowledge that he gains as as he grows older:

> At first, if you had asked me, I would've said he looked like a white policeman's description of me…Another blink and the me on the couch sharpened into a resemblance that could fool the neighbor who lived across the hallway, or the barista I saw most mornings…several aunties at my family reunion would've called him by my childhood nickname and happily fixed him a plate. We went on like that in a calm silence; I looked and he became. Before long, the differences between us were so subtle, I began to doubt their existence almost as soon as I noticed them. (Jones)

Here, the "other" adult self of the poet seems to have suddenly regressed to a younger version of himself, unmarred by racist or queerphobic violence, thriving only on communal harmony— an (im)possible version of himself that can only be evoked through imagination. The regression of the timeline can be observed by flipping the order of events: the women who cooked him food as a young boy, followed by the friendly barista and the neighbour of his youth, followed by the distressing realisation that he will be unfairly targeted by policemen as he grows older. The last two lines in particular, reflect on what is taken to be a supposedly "natural" or normative progression of the development of a black queer child— he is not allowed to stay a child very long, so much so that the line between the innocence of his childhood and the darker realities of his adulthood seem to have blurred together in retrospect. This is especially suggested by the phrase "calm silence", as the silence of the people around him as he arrives at these conclusions takes on a much more oppressive and violent undertone as he grows older.

In another essay, "Manifest Faggotry: Queering Masculinity in African American Culture" (2003), E Patrick Johnson uses Freud's theories of mourning and melancholia to deconstruct stereotypical ideals of heteronormative black masculinity through specific case studies. Johnson draws upon Annie Cheng's idea of "racial melancholia", i.e, "the irresolvable grief that racialized peoples experience in response to exclusion and discrimination" to explain the link between mourning, melancholia and masculinity itself. This melancholia is reflected in Jones' second title poem in the collection, also titled "Alive

at the End of the World". The poem shows the literal "End of the World" as a personified father figure showing stereotypical features of black masculinity—still deeply imbricated in racial melancholia— as he shouts at his children for complaining "about the night air watching us sleep, or whenever we'd wince at his reach" (Jones). He is physically abusive and constantly bragging about the past in an attempt to cover his grief. He passes on this grief to his children who want him dead; who know "damn well/ that the End of the World's ghost/ was mean as spit and already on its way" (Jones). The name "The End of the World" gains a special significance when read as an allegory for the current generation of black people who want to be done with their ancestors' near-apocalyptic situation as soon as possible.

Smith's poem, "elegy with pixels & cum", speaks of how black and queer lives have always led a precarious existence. The speaker addresses a dead queer black man at the latter's funeral in the form of an elegy that reveals the harsh truth of their lives, spent tucked away in secrets and shame:

> i bet they had a pastor who didn't know you do your eulogy, kid.
> they turn our funerals into lessons, kid.
> they say blood & everyone flinches, kid.
> they say blood & watch us turn to dust, kid.
> they want us quiet, redeemed, or dead already, kid.
> they want us hard, tunnel-eyed, & bucking, kid. (Smith)

This highlights another key aspect that is distinct in many ways to black queer lives, the centrality of grief and loss. Quoting Rinaldo Walcott, who says of black lives that "death is not ahead of blackness as a future shared with other humans; death is (our) life, lived in the present," Clarke herself remarks how death "haunts queerness" (124), through ongoing homophobic violence inflicted on them by individuals and the state; and through the constant fear of contracting illnesses like HIV/AIDS and the cultural stigma attached to the same. She also refers to Heather Love's work connecting homosexual identity and loss, and further extends it to racial identity (Clarke 120). This idea serves to emphasise the poignant tone of the phrase, "say blood & watch us turn to dust" from Smith's poem. Similarly, the line "they want us quiet, redeemed, or dead already", indicates the kinds of choices (or the lack thereof) that are available to black queer people: social exclusion, death and/or "redemption", all of which echo Love's notion of the historical "impossibility" of same-sex desire in mainstream society (Love 4).

Some works of these poets also foreground how racism and homophobia have seeped into digital spaces in the twenty-first century; a subject hitherto unfamiliar to black queer poets prior to the current generation. In the poem, "a note on the phone app that tells me how far i am from other men's mouths", Smith notes the biases that the queer communities in America continue to have against black queer people on digital dating apps, as seen in these lines: "men of every tribe mark their doors in blood/No Fats, No Fems, No Blacks, Sorry, Just A Preference :)" (Smith). However, 2020 in particular saw the impact of digital social spaces on racial issues, after 17 year old Darnella Frazier captured the murder of George Floyd on her smartphone and made it public on the internet, presenting the nation-

state's power and its daily violence in all its grotesque brutality to the world. Jones, in particular, writes about the incident in his poem, "The Trial". The following lines from the poem show how deeply the poet himself identifies with Floyd and his fate:

> This video has got me against the wall
> or by the throat or on my back
> or—oh, who cares? Even
> my exhaustion is tired. (Jones)

The sudden shift in tone in the phrase "who cares", is in itself a resigned response to the hundreds of black deaths due to police brutality; with victims ranging from young children like Emmett Till and Trayvon Martin, to adult men and women like Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor. While the digital medium helped raise awareness in the case of Floyd's death, the visuals themselves caused black people deep distress, including the poet himself, as seen in the poem. Smith also comments on how black victims of police brutality are often reduced to trending hashtags on the internet, swallowed by discourse and utterly stripped of their personhood. This can be seen in their poem, "summer somewhere":

> they've made you a boy
> i don't know
> replaced my friend
> with a hashtag.
> …………………
> shield is shaped like
> a badge. i leave revenge
> hopelessly to God. (Smith)

The symbolism of the policeman's badge as a shield lets the reader know that the latter uses his power to escape the justice system. This is also something that Smith himself has long understood, and bitterly acknowledges by leaving "revenge hopelessly to God".

Thus, both Saeed Jones and Danez Smith portray and reflect the many socio-cultural and political tensions both within and outside the black and queer communities in the United States. Through their work, they attempt to trace their history back to a generation of black queer poets before them and articulate the trauma, desire and loss that accompany the daily experiences of black queer individuals in twenty-first century America.

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