

THE SRPR REVIEW ESSAY:  
REDEFINING OUR FUTURES:  
RECENT ABOLITIONIST POETIC PRACTICE

ALLISON SERRAES

*A Bound Woman Is a Dangerous Thing: The Incarceration of African  
American Women from Harriet Tubman to Sandra Bland*

DaMaris B. Hill  
Bloomsbury, 2019  
192 pages; hardcover, \$22.50

*I Remember Death by Its Proximity to What I Love*

Mahogany L. Brown  
Haymarket Books, 2021  
100 pages; paperback, \$16.00

*speculation, n.*

Shayla Lawz  
Autumn House, 2021  
112 pages; paperback, \$16.95

**Abolition, n.**

*Prison lacks the imagination. It is the constant undoing of our  
humanity. Atrophic muscle.*

*Where freedom is a hopeful star (38)*

—Mahogany L. Browne

We are in year three of a global pandemic, and much of my measurement of time these days is in relation to spring of 2020, looking to what life was like just before that moment in which the world shifted in such a drastic and categorical way.<sup>1</sup> In thinking about 2020, it is

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the research featured in this essay was gathered with the support of a Mellon/American Council of Learned Societies Dissertation Completion Fellowship of 2019.

difficult to separate the early pandemic from the horrifying and yet all-too-familiar murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, among many others, by police and white vigilantes. In fact, one key lesson from the past few years is that a disproportionately high COVID-19 death rate and anti-Black violence are not wholly separable phenomena when considered within a US historical context. To quote Mahogany L. Browne's *I Remember Death by Its Proximity to What I Love*, at least on the face of it, "There ain't no poem in that" (66). Still, with rising death tolls due to COVID-19 inside and outside of prisons and state-sanctioned and extra-state killings of Black individuals in these past three years in particular, we have also witnessed the term "prison abolition" and motto "defund the police" gain wider circulation on television and social media platforms to the point where many recognize these phrases even if they have not yet grappled with the breadth and depth of their meaning. The books of poems I am reviewing here offer new and radical ways to approach these questions of incarceration and police violence through what I call abolitionist poetic practices.

*What is abolition? If we get rid of prisons, then what do we do with the murderers? The rapists? The "real" criminals?* As a scholar of American literature and critical prison studies, I have addressed such questions often, questions that come from many varieties of critics, skeptics, or even folks who are genuinely curious about what a world might look like without these institutions. Many abolitionist activists and scholars approach these questions in (generally) two ways. The first is to interrogate why these questions seem the most pressing to us. One reason is that we tend to believe the notion that prisons and policing make us safer and more "secure," when, as activist and organizer Mariame Kaba has pointed out, there isn't much evidence to prove that that is the case.<sup>2</sup> Another reason, conveyed in the work of scholars such as Angela Y. Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, is that as a society we have come to rely on prisons as a kind of catchall solution for a large swath of social problems, including addiction, economic inequality,

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<sup>2</sup> Mariame Kaba, "So You're Thinking About Becoming an Abolitionist," in *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2021), 2-5.

gender violence, and murder.<sup>3</sup> In this way, when asked, *What will we do without prisons?*, our brains try to conceive of a different one-size-fits-all solution rather than attending to each issue that prisons and policing purport to “fix.” In other words, much of the knee-jerk resistance to abolition is a problem of a prevailing but faulty paradigm.

The second approach to these questions is what I’ll term definitional—that we get caught up in the etymology or denotation associated with the term “abolition,” which means to abolish, that is, eliminate, annul, or make void. The focus is the subtractive qualities of the term, but as most abolitionists and critical prison studies scholars point out, abolition has a necessary, generative foundation, one in which communities can imagine and build solutions that meet their specific needs. Critical prison studies scholar Dylan Rodríguez identifies abolition as “creative, imaginative, and speculative collective labor” that addresses the “historical roots” of the ways prisons have operated as institutions of violence to maintain the status quo of racial, economic, and gendered stratifications in society.<sup>4</sup> In other words, Rodríguez and others emphasize the necessity of the imagination in abolition as the means through which we can break down our current paradigms in order to create anew an intervention that is both political *and* poetic.

The three poets whose works I am reviewing here engage in this kind of imaginative abolitionist work. They find and create the poems in and from this. DaMaris B. Hill’s, Mahogany L. Browne’s, and Shayla Lawz’s works offer us new forms and frameworks for considering the prison-industrial complex and the roles that anti-Black violence play in the shaping of our lives. Their works collectively encourage an interrogation of what we mean by incarceration and state violence, what are their historical roots, and what kinds of social stratifications

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<sup>3</sup> See Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003) and Rachel Kushner “Is Prison Necessary? Ruth Wilson Gilmore Might Change Your Mind,” in the *New York Times Magazine* (Apr. 2019), accessed Feb. 9, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/17/magazine/prison-abolition-ruth-wilson-gilmore.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Dylan Rodríguez, “Developments in the Law: Prison Abolition: Abolition as Praxis of Human Being: A Foreword,” in *Harvard Law Review* 132 (Apr. 2019): 1575–1612.

these institutions and practices serve. These invitations to question are also paired with examples of resistance and collective action, offering a means to radically re-imagine the function of incarceration and the lexicon that makes these modes of captivity legible to society.

## Bound

DaMaris B. Hill's *A Bound Woman Is a Dangerous Thing: The Incarceration of African American Women from Harriet Tubman to Sandra Bland* displays a mastery of form. Nominated for an NAACP Image Award, Hill's book interweaves history, literature, and memoir; it curates a poetic tradition of Black women experiencing and resisting captivity from slavery to the present, from intimate partner violence to the prison-industrial complex. The collection is divided into seven sections, each a rumination on the word "bound" in relation to Black women's histories of confinement and resistance. In her second section, "bound.fettered.," Hill writes poems in conversation with critical prison studies scholar Kali N. Gross's *Colored Amazons: Crime, Violence, and Black Women in the City of Brotherly Love, 1880–1910*, a critical history of Black women's confrontations with confinement in Philadelphia at the turn of the century.<sup>5</sup> Hill takes parts of the descriptions of Black women featured in Gross's book who were charged with crimes or suffered at the hands of the criminal justice system, and she writes highly stylized formal poems—such as sonnets, villanelles, sestinas—each of which centers on a particular Black woman by making her its subject or persona.

The section "bound.fettered." performs what Hill calls an "ekphrasis" of Gross's text (xiv). The key to Hill's poems in this section is the centralizing of Black women, especially Black women who were deemed by the state to be criminal, deviant, feeble-minded, and therefore needing institutionalization. For example, in "The Love Song of Alice Clifton"—a title likely playing on the title to T. S. Eliot's poem—Hill describes the experience of Alice Clifton. The page preceding the poem introduces Clifton's name in bold, and provides an epigraph from Gross's text: "Given the circumstances, Clifton's case not only

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<sup>5</sup> Kali N. Gross, *Colored Amazons: Crime, Violence, and Black Women in the City of Brotherly Love, 1880–1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

offers insight into the impact of slavery on black womanhood but also showcases the impossible position of women like her. Clifton sought to escape slavery by slashing her infant's throat ...” (25, Hill's ellipses). According to Gross's text, a doctor testified that Clifton said that the white man who fathered the child, John Shaffer,<sup>6</sup> “had persuaded her to kill the child ... he planned to ‘wed a fine woman,’ and he feared the impact of the scandal. Shaffer had promised he would purchase her freedom if she killed the baby.”<sup>7</sup> Unlike the archival records that show Clifton was unable to testify at her own hearing,<sup>8</sup> Hill's poem is written from Clifton's point of view, reflecting on Schaffer's prodding of her to commit infanticide to obtain freedom and her resulting punishment.

Of great significance is the fact that this “Love Song” is written as a Shakespearean sonnet. In fact, the three quatrains of the sonnet stay true to Shakespearean form in that they perform the back-and-forth of a traditional love sonnet in which the speaker is seduced by a lover. Hill's focus on Schaffer's “sweet prod” and likening him to “a lowly cherub, coy” invokes the language and tropes of the love sonnet; however, Schaffer is not enticing Clifton to love, as we know she has already had relations with him and is pregnant. Rather, Hill employs this traditional form in a way that draws attention to the particular, context-specific seductions that would have persuaded Clifton to kill her infant: the “sweet prods” traditional to the love sonnet are updated to the nineteenth-century context of US slavery, as Schaffer is urging Clifton toward the seduction of freedom. The sonnet's final heroic couplet furthers this emphasis on limitation as it is expressed through the form: “slashes for dead honey. i'm bound. in blame / Schaffer is no savior. our sin, i'm chained” (27). “The Love Song of Alice Clifton” participates in a doubled discourse on form in that the poetic qualities of the Shakespearean sonnet—strict line count, rhyme, meter, and subject matter—limits the space and modes through which Clifton can tell her story, but it also is the confinement

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6 Kali Gross's text refers to John Shaffer, whereas Hill's poetic rendering of Clifton's case spells the name “Schaffer.” I use the spellings that each author uses when referring to the person/character.

7 Gross, 17.

8 *Ibid.*

through which she, via Hill, also is permitted to speak, to offer a lament that points to the legal, social, and political limitations placed on Black women during slavery that later perpetuate through the US legal system well after emancipation.

While “bound.fettered.” explicitly connects its poems with critical prison studies scholarship, the book as a whole makes an intervention in poetic responses to incarceration by ruminating on the multiple meanings of boundedness more broadly. “Bound” means “to be confined,” but it also means “to spring forth,” “to be bound to one another in kinship relations,” and “to bind, as in the material process of book making.” Specifically, the simultaneity of bound, as in *fettered*, and bound, as in *spring forth*, captures the essence of the Black women featured in Hill’s collection, which makes them resistant even in, or else precisely because of, their confinement.

With a long title that might sound more like the name for a work of literary criticism than a book of poems, Hill’s work radically pushes the boundaries of what poetry can do. As I’ll also touch on in regard to Mahogany L. Browne’s work, a characteristic of contemporary abolitionist poetics is a blending of research, organizing, and formal craft in ways that invite us to reframe our proximity to and our interrogation of contemporary systems of anti-Black violence, including but not limited to incarceration. Hill’s text frames a long history of Black women’s incarceration broadly defined—as implied by the subtitle’s span from Harriet Tubman to Sandra Bland—from chattel slavery through contemporary imprisonment and state violence. Moreover, Hill includes poems about and in the voices of women—including Lucille Clifton, Eartha Kitt, Ida B. Wells, and Zora Neale Hurston—who are not always literally incarcerated but have been bound by the social and ideological limitations of their time. Hill’s attention to the multiplying modes of reading how Black women have been *bound* and how they have resisted offers a more comprehensive view of the ways in which Black captivity has been understood, organized, and particularly gendered. By broadening this history, we as readers can enter the question of prison and abolition anew. It is through these ideological and imaginative interventions that Hill’s text performs a deep analysis of violence against Black women, and also archives their resistance.

What also fascinates me about this work as a piece of abolition poetics is what I see as a poetic participation in #SayHerName. In the

preface, Hill writes that each woman she features in her poems is an act of paying homage:

In these poems, the legacy of these women's lives chases me like a strong wind. This book is a love letter to women who have been denied their humanity. Most of these women have been forgotten, shunned, and/or erased. Every time I call a name in this book, presume that the person who bears the name is loved. If you are brave, imagine the name of that woman congealing on my tongue, give the names breath and the memory. (xviii)

Hill calls readers to imagine each name being said aloud, but also importantly notes that the utterance is attached to breath and memory.

The Say Her Name project is aligned with but also a response to the efforts of the Black Lives Matter movement. The Black Lives Matter movement emerged and gained momentum after Trayvon Martin's death in 2012, and continued as more and more Black people were brutalized or killed at the hands of police or civilians who had deputized themselves as agents of state enforcement (such as George Zimmerman). The Say Her Name movement materialized in 2015—and then gained momentum in the wake of Sandra Bland's death that same year—as a response to a situation in which even though police violence was affecting all members of Black communities, the media predominantly covered episodes of police violence against Black men and boys specifically. The African American Policy Forum (AAPF), co-founded by Kimberlé Crenshaw, released a report, *Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women*, which details the AAPF's dedication to “she[d] light on Black women's experiences of police violence in an effort to support a gender-inclusive approach to racial justice that centers all Black lives equally.”<sup>9</sup> The “goal” of the report “is simply to illustrate the reality that Black women are killed and violated by police with alarming regularity. Equally important, our hope is to call attention to the ways in which this reality is erased from our demonstrations, our discourse, and our demands to broaden our

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9 Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw and Andrea J. Ritchie with Rachel Anspach, Rachel Gilmer, and Luke Harris, *Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women* (African American Policy Forum, 2015), accessed Feb. 9, 2022, [https://www.aapf.org/\\_files/ugd/62e126\\_9223ee35c2694ac3bd3f2171504ca3f7.pdf](https://www.aapf.org/_files/ugd/62e126_9223ee35c2694ac3bd3f2171504ca3f7.pdf).

vision of social justice.”<sup>10</sup> In this way, as the AAPF’s report suggests, the gender-inclusive approach to racial justice is a movement that is invested in reframing the narrative discourse. This narrative reframing can have a real-life impact because “[t]he erasure of Black women is not purely a matter of missing facts. Even where women and girls are present in the data, narratives framing police profiling and lethal force as exclusively male experiences lead researchers, the media, and advocates to exclude them.”<sup>11</sup>

Hill’s collection as a whole also combats this trend. Her poem on Sandra Bland, “#SandySpeaks Is a Choral Refrain,” further does this re-narrativizing work by challenging the ways we frame our understandings of police-civilian confrontations. Hill weaves the refrain, “It could have been me,” throughout her retelling of the encounter between Sandra Bland and the arresting officer, Texas State Trooper Brian Encinia. The poet’s voice also imagines Encinia’s perspective: “In this vision, he is a rodeo-style hero, Sandy is a rogue rascal” (99). In a move that echoes poet Gwendolyn Brooks’s use of the ballad to re-imagine the roles of Emmett Till’s murder in “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon,”<sup>12</sup> Hill entices us to think about the narrative frameworks that create and allow for routine police violence. This poem is one of many powerful examples in the book to show how white supremacist ideologies promote violence as a means of maintaining state power.

In contrast to such boundedness, Hill offers portraits of Black women who have sprung forth, and continue to spring forth, to make freedom possible for themselves and others. Her poems that pay homage to freedom fighters highlight Hill’s quest to find a form that expresses their power and honor their legacy. Her homage to Harriet Tubman, for example, appears in a three-column contrapuntal—a form in which the poem is crafted to be read in multiple ways—which echoes Tubman’s elusive quality that helped her guide several enslaved people along the Underground Railroad as well as her capacious legacy,

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Gwendolyn Brooks, “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon,” in *The Bean Eaters* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960) 19–25.



as she was a leader, soldier, spy, nurse, fundraiser, and caretaker. As Hill has mentioned at readings, this form works for a woman whose legacy is so monumental that we can never quite fully pin her down.<sup>13</sup>

Hill's poems on Ida B. Wells likewise carefully attend to form and freedom. Written in the language of equation, these poems not only highlight the legacy of Wells's investigative journalism on lynchings in the US but they also honor the means by which she revolutionized investigative journalism through her presentation and analysis of statistical data. The poems are titled variations of " $\lambda v = C \approx \heartsuit v \gg$ ," which Hill translates as "The speed of light is almost equivalent to love come in a hurry" (69). For Hill, the poem's form in these later sections operate to honor the legacies of these freedom fighters in contrast to her use of form in "bound.fettered." meant to signify confinement.

In the final section of the book, Hill writes herself into this legacy of Black women freedom fighters who spring forth against restraint. In this section, the "I" becomes DaMaris Hill, and these poems create continuity between the work of the women she centers and honors in the book and her own legacy as a poet, educator, and mother. *A Bound Woman is a Dangerous Thing* re-narrativizes Hill's and our understanding of Black women's struggles and their radical liberationist legacies by offering an alternative composite history of Black women's confinement and resistance. In her preface, Hill states that "these poems are love letters. The opening of the book explores how I am bound in the sense of being beholden to others. In the African American tradition, we honor our ancestors" (xiii). Hill links her writing with a specific praxis centered on the work of the archivist. The abolitionist poet points to the systemic technologies at work that maintain white supremacy, whether institutional—through policing and prisons—or ideological—through white supremacist cultural conceptions of criminality circulated through media, the archive, and literature. But she also curates a record that shows the tradition of radical praxis—Black women's fugitivity—to be used as a resource for resistance in the present and future.

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13 "A Bound Woman Is a Dangerous Thing." C-SPAN 2: Book TV, (Feb. 1, 2019), accessed Feb. 9, 2022, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?457457-1/a-bound-woman-dangerous-thing>.

## Proximity

Whereas Hill's text curates and frames a long history of Black women's captivity and resistance, Mahogany L. Browne's more recent book-length poem, *I Remember Death by Its Proximity to What I Love (I Remember Death)*, situates readers squarely in the present, in the familiar and even the familial. *I Remember Death* ruminates on how contemporary systems of mass imprisonment not only affect those incarcerated, but also how families and communities are continually affected by the cycle of harm that incarceration perpetuates. Browne's poetry—largely centered on the fact that Browne's father has been incarcerated for most of her life—offers readers a meditation on *proximity* that can denote the relational and the locational nearness people “on the outside” have to the prison-industrial complex. This focus on the spatial and relational echoes a famous quote from critical prison studies scholar Angela Y. Davis: “On the whole, people tend to take prisons for granted. It is difficult to imagine life without them. At the same time, there is reluctance to face the realities hidden within them, a fear of thinking about what happens inside them. Thus, the prison is present in our lives, and, at the same time, it is absent from our lives.”<sup>14</sup> Browne's poetry closely considers the simultaneous presence and absence of the prison in our contemporary lives.

At first glance, we can see Browne's interest in the spatial and relational aspects of the prison through page layout and her attention to white space. The book is presented in two parts (Parts I and II) with an added final poem, “Corrective State.” Every pair of facing pages in the book has a black border with the repeated acronym of a correctional institution in the state of California (total of thirty-five institutions). She pairs these paginal enclosures with a “Key to Acronyms,” at the end of the book that provides the full names of each prison. While much of the book-length poem focuses on the speaker's relationship with her father, the power of these boundaries on each page compounds to create a sense of the weight of all of the individuals who have loved ones inside of these institutions. These are the people whose names are not stated directly, but whose existence resonates through the bordered page.

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<sup>14</sup> Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, 15.

To think about the simultaneous presence and absence of the prison from our lives is to confront the thrust of the book's title, which comes from the book's main refrain: "I remember death by its proximity to what I love the most. / And the most never looks like freedom, not really." This refrain fragments, regroups, echoes, and congeals throughout Part I of the text, appearing on a single page as "I remember," "I remember death," or other variations. The speaker, in her quest to work through her father's absence as it also connects to broader systems of anti-Black violence, must work to confront what it means to be free when so proximate to unfreedom. The poem interrogates what "freedom" actually means in a nation that relied on slavery and state-sanctioned apartheid, and that continues to rely on disproportionately racialized incarceration, to "secure" those freedoms for only a portion of the population. The refrain echoes, "I remember death by its proximity to what I love because incarceration promises everyone it touches *you will not be the same*" (38).

As an activist and organizer whose body of work features YA novels and guides for youth organizers, Browne's poetic style also serves as a guide that informs readers about and critiques the prison-industrial complex as it effects incarcerated individuals and their families. From the first lines of the book, Browne calls us to think through prison's effects on families:

if my mother were ever convicted for her addiction   like my father   I wonder  
who I would be robbing now

The data from the Fragile Families Study says  
*My kind of survival displays more behavioral problems  
& early juvenile delinquency*

I say:   *You right* (2)

Browne critiques a system that separates families and then criminalizes children who are traumatized by this separation. Her framing of the way her behavior is read as delinquent and simultaneously a "kind of survival," points to how studies acknowledge the harmful effects of incarceration, yet provide no productive response to these effects. As previously mentioned, the prison becomes a catchall "solution" for complex and varying social problems, and studies mainly only acknowledge but cannot produce an alternative approach than

criminalizing the survival response. It is through Browne's blending of the statistical and the personal that this book urges a composite yet intimate reading of systemic violence—a sort of bifocal approach to the issue.

Much of this balance of the statistical and personal appears in Browne's footnotes. The footnotes throughout the book exist as part of the poem, and when she delivers these poems at readings, Browne reads the footnotes at the point in the poem where the superscript appears in the text. In one of these poetic footnotes, she reemphasizes the spatial and relational:

<sup>8</sup> There are thirty-five prisons in California. I miss my father. Since 2017, California's prison population has hovered at about 115,000 inmates. I miss my father. Currently there are 2.2 million people in prison or jail nationwide. I miss my father. California's recidivism rate is ranked among the highest in the country. I miss. (53)

As many abolitionists have pointed out,<sup>15</sup> statistics about prisons can be dehumanizing and disfiguring because people can often lose sight of the fact that the numbers highlighted represent individual people. How can we *really* fathom the weight of a statistic like 2.2 million people? How do we conceptualize, hold space for, and acknowledge that each is somebody to someone? The power of Browne's poetics as a longtime organizer is to invite us to enter the intimate space, *to get proximate to*, by interrupting the statistic with the relation.

This folding of research into her poetics also informs her use of the page. In one example, the page is blank save for a superscript 7 that refers to a footnote: "A private prison can offer their services to the government and charge \$150 per day per prisoner" (44). This use of white space invites a meditation on the weight of the single sentence of information. Further, one could read the expanse of the mostly blank page juxtaposed to the content as a means to measure space: the distance from the superscript to its referred-to information symbolizes our own vague, distant awareness that private corporations profit off

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<sup>15</sup> One of many examples of this kind of reading of statistics can be found in Mariame Kaba and Tamara K. Nopper "Itemizing Atrocity," in *Jacobin* (Aug. 15, 2014), accessed Feb. 5, 2022, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/08/itemizing-atrocity/>.

of and incentivize incarceration; and perhaps even further, the distance on the page represents what we believe to be our own distance from the prison-industrial complex. As many abolitionists and reformers have argued, one of the key features of making change within these systems begins with getting close to the issue. The work of founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative Bryan Stevenson against capital punishment is marked by his now-famous and repeated calls to “get proximate” to suffering and those experiencing injustice.<sup>16</sup> In *I Remember Death*, proximity is a measure of urgency. It is a measure of the speaker’s relationship to her father, which simultaneously serves as the central meditation of the poem and the synecdoche for the broader reality of millions of others.

This singular yet collective call spans from the collection’s early lines to the final notes of “Corrective State,” the last piece in the book. Sometimes Browne’s use of the collective is in reference to collective means of resistance, as illustrated when a visiting artist at a prison “is asked to stop bringing poems that encourage *Collective behavior*” (3). By the final poem, it seems that this collective behavior is the means through which survival, healing, and resistance are made possible as a coalition between incarcerated and nonincarcerated individuals operating in solidarity. “Collective behavior” as it is termed in Part I is deemed a threat by prison officials who know that isolation is part of the day-to-day violences aimed to subdue incarcerated individuals. The poem, “Corrective State,” doubles down on the radical power of collective behavior as a means to *get proximate* to the realities of incarceration. The poem also reminds readers that prison affects everyone:

An unshakeable whisper tremors our collectivity

*I want to go home*

*I want to hold my daughter*

*I want to see my mother one last time* (65)

If proximity is a means to think about one’s relation to another person, to a place, and to a situation, this final poem solidifies how people

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<sup>16</sup> Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2014), 21.

on the so-called “outside” carry the tremors of voices from within. Browne quotes prison abolitionist and activist Mariame Kaba in an epigraph in Part II: “We don’t get how we are all tied to the prison-industrial complex. Nobody’s out” (43), and this quote is fully realized in the final poem. In the way that Browne’s book invites proximity through a daughter-father relationship fractured through incarceration, this book also serves as a haunting and necessary reminder that even when we aren’t thinking about it, the prison is always already proximate to us: *Nobody’s out*.

In this way, *I Remember Death* reminds us that abolition is not just about prisons, it’s about the carceral logics that exist outside of them, too: the social and political structures that allow for so much premature death on the streets, at traffic stops, in homes, and even in healthcare systems. In “Corrective State,” Browne links the space between her father, who is still incarcerated, and her by turning her attention to the contemporary crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic that has wreaked havoc on some of the most vulnerable populations—including incarcerated people. Browne frequently uses double slashes in this poem, and their presence marks a pause (or breath) and so brings into sharp relief the need for air—even literally, in experiencing the respiratory effects of the illness: “The sickness lie // a boundaryless wretch” (64). Browne continues to link this experience to the prison by noting this experience with COVID-19 “was the most American thing I’ve ever felt // secure in my home and still dying from the heat / of capitalism” (64, slashes indicate line and stanza breaks here). In this sense, “Nobody’s out” in the way that Kaba expresses—the boundaries between the prison and so-called free world dissolve when considering healthcare disparities, medical racism, and disproportionate access to goods and services in times of crisis. *I Remember Death by Its Proximity to What I Love* is deeply experimental in its analysis of incarceration, but it also is profoundly lyrical, and vastly moving in its insistence on reaching toward a collective future.

### **Speculation, n.**

Shayla Lawz’s debut collection *speculation, n.* is a sensory experience. Part poetry, part visual art, part sound, and all radical performance, this work ruminates on the multiple and multiplying entry

points to anti-Black state violence and radical futurity. Lawz's hybrid approach offers a new understanding of how tragedy is televised, repeated, promoted, and, perhaps more importantly, how this saturation of image and sound affects the psyche of the living, an approach that defines Lawz's growing body of work as a writer and interdisciplinary artist interested in multimedia texts. Entering the text is like entering a performance art space, as Lawz begins with "Instructions for Viewing," "You will encounter a variety of ways to experience this book; some sections will require your reading, others will require your listening, and all will require your attention" (1). The first page contains a QR code and URL that leads the reader to a playlist that is part of the experience, including songs by Kendrick Lamar, Boris Gardiner, Noname, and others. Unlike Hill's and Browne's texts, *speculation, n.* does not make incarceration its focal point, but Lawz's text offers us yet another nuanced rumination on what holds captive, what captivates, and how a broader consideration of violence might contribute to the abolitionist project of re-narrativizing through the radical imagination.

The book is organized in four parts via definitions of speculation: "the faculty or power of seeing; vision"; "conjecture; without evidence"; "a spectacle"; and "observation of the heavens; stars." The first three parts of the book reveal how hyper-proximity to death—whether through personal connection or media saturation of anti-Black violence—turns into an inundation of grief. However, while the broad arc of the book moves from the news that reports violence to, in Lawz's words, an end "with the futurity of the body,"<sup>17</sup> the full text vibrates with the speaker's relationship to life—sometimes a question, sometimes a doubt, sometimes a cosmic and fervent assertion. *speculation, n.*'s mode of zooming in to the granular and particular pain via the scene, image, sound bite and zooming out to the cosmic and the speculative on the surface seems to occur in separate sections of the book as part of a progression, but it actually is this constant back and forth motion—the italicized *I am not dead yet* and *I am alive* that permeate each section throughout—that gives the book momentum.

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<sup>17</sup> "Ten Questions for Shayla Lawz." Poets and Writers (Oct. 26, 2021), accessed Feb. 5, 2022, [https://www.pw.org/content/ten\\_questions\\_for\\_shayla\\_lawz](https://www.pw.org/content/ten_questions_for_shayla_lawz).

The first two parts of this work explore how we see, how we hear, and how we process the news of premature Black death—death by interpersonal and state violence. The blending of text, sound, and image creates shifting perspectives of receiving “The News,” that “will tell you what to believe” (12). As part of this text’s main focus on how one receives, interacts with, and absorbs reported tragedy, there are four poems titled “NEWS TODAY” throughout the first two parts and a final fifth poem of the same title appearing in the final section. These headlines frame and reframe our interactions with death as it is reported throughout the text in these news poems and others: a boy outside her window, Sandra Bland, her aunt, a character in a soap opera, Eric Garner, and unnamed Black men killed by police. These poems alternate with images of objects by which we receive, record, and spread information: cell phones, television, and radio. Yet, at the same time Lawz presents us with the text, the sound bite, or the image, Lawz simultaneously asks us to examine it: “That image printed on the front page, that black scream they gave them. These are not ours to keep, but *they were ours*” (12). Lawz’s poem suggests how the dead belong to the community but the media distorts and devalues their lives through image and text, through speculation.

One of the most moving sections of this text is a performance piece in the third part called “Proximity.” Preceded by a black page with white script in all caps that reads, “NOTES ON PERFORMANCE,” while also directing the reader to “PLAY SOUND 8” (53), a song “XXX” by Kendrick Lamar featuring U2, “Proximity” is a set of notes to a performance poem dedicated to Sandra Bland. The primary note reads: “*This poem is dedicated to Sandra Bland, who after a traffic stop in 2015, was found [REDACTED] in her jail cell, three days later*” (54, Lawz’s italics and blackout). Using the subsequent notes—such as “face projection” (54) and “READ HEADLINES” (54), which coincide with the headlines and images on the page—as a guide, a reader can imagine a performance in which the poet uses visuals, typography, and voice to work through the 2019 reported information that Sandra Bland recorded the traffic stop that led up to her death. The repetition of the fact of this report is followed by Lawz’s interrogation of perspective, point of view, and proximity in both the filmic and relational senses:

**REPORT:** Yesterday, May 7, 2019, a video of the traffic stop surfaced from Sandra’s point of view



When I think of **point of view**, I think proximity. I think of how close one thing is to the next. (54)

Part of the performance has the poet face the projection and show the video “at length, perhaps thirty-nine seconds,” at which point the poet invites viewers and herself to speculate based on what is seen, “Now, we could imagine...” (56). A reader can conceive the silence and the weight of the performance space here in which the poet conjectures exactly where the spectacle of violence occurs. She lists information, suggests *when* and *how* it might have occurred, but then concludes,

i don't need to know  
what killed Sandra  
to know  
*what killed her* (57)

This impulse to know *exactly* when and how dominates our news cycles. In researching for this review article, I scrolled through several news reports similar to the one Lawz refers to in the performance poem. One segment went as far as to film some of Sandra Bland’s family members’ reactions to watching the footage for the first time.<sup>18</sup> Lawz’s attention to the spectacle of violence echo African American studies scholar Saidiya Hartman’s foundational work on anti-Black violence in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*, in which she refers to a brutal scene from *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* where young Frederick Douglass witnesses a slave master brutally beat an enslaved woman, Aunt Hester. Hartman does not reproduce the scene, but states that her interests are rather in

the ways we are called upon to participate in such scenes. Are we witnesses who confirm the truth of what happened in the face of the world-destroying capacities of pain, the distortions of torture, the sheer unrepresentability of terror, and the repression of the dominant accounts? Or are we voyeurs...? (3)

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<sup>18</sup> Brian Collister, WFAA Investigative Staff, “Sandra Bland Recorded Her Own Arrest. Watch Her Cellphone Video from the 2015 Traffic Stop.” (May 7, 2019), accessed Feb. 9, 2022, <https://www.wfaa.com/article/news/sandra-bland-recorded-her-own-arrest-new-cellphone-video-reveals/287-44ff2f5b-f481-48c3-a5ca-fad15296d979>.

Lawz's multimedia performance in its insistence on watching the video and *speculating* where the violence begins, ends, and occurs is simultaneously an experiment in how we encounter a scene of subjection. Lawz prods the news reports of death—particularly Black women's deaths—in a similar fashion: are these searches for exactly when, how, and why a search for truth and justice? Or are we voyeurs? The way the poet shakes off the catalogue of details from the traffic stop to state she doesn't need to know what killed Sandra Bland to know what killed her suggests the latter. Lawz's shift in this section to her experiences with racism at an institution of higher learning in which she similarly catalogues the "facts" or "details" of the events serve as an additional reminder that official details, records, and even video of anti-Black violence rarely operate in the service of justice.

However, *speculation, n.* is not only concerned with how one views and experiences pain. The book's fourth section, in which Lawz implements the cosmic definition of speculation, "observation of the heavens, stars," engages in the generative, abolitionist work of Black radical futurity. With a cosmic shift in tone, imagery, and sound—the first song of the section is Jamaican singer/songwriter Boris Gardiner's "Every N\*\*\*\*\* Is a Star"—much of this section engages with Afrofuturistic and speculative traditions. From the first poem, "What Could We See from the Moon?" Lawz reminds readers that even through the TV advertisements, news reports of death, and proximity to death, there is life in the future if it can be imagined:

But I know we are all right HERE, too. I  
understand living and dying as fact, but the  
body that refuses death is a star. How could I  
believe in anything else but my immortality? (70)

This cosmic reframing of life should not be read as unrealistic and utopian, but rather as part of a Black radical tradition of writers, musicians, and artists. In fact, Lawz names some of these artists, such as James Baldwin, while clearly echoing others, such as Sun Ra, in the text's futuristic images and qualities. The reach into the speculative in many ways mirrors the abolitionist practice of imagining futurity through collectivity. This text operates in conversation with abolitionist praxis in that it calls upon the radical imagination to conceive of what is possible as a means for shaping life beyond the structures of

the present world. Lawz's work is a significant new addition to this vital tradition.

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The three books of poetry reviewed above chart and add to a history of Black liberationist poetics. They echo freedom fighter Assata Shakur's assertion that "love is contraband in hell, cause love is an acid / that eats away bars."<sup>19</sup> The only way out is through proximity, through solidarity, and through action. These works not only create new forms and frameworks for understanding anti-Black violence and its representations in our current moment, but they also offer us a new language for conceptualizing a future of collective action. Hill models a springing forth; Browne invites us to "send a kite to Folsom" (68); Lawz points to a future composed of "keeping everything alive" (77). What might our futures look like if we made such kinds of the imaginative a praxis? What forms and what languages can make this possible? And what can they make possible? What bars can they eat away? These poets offer a crucial history, and they draw us a map.

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<sup>19</sup> Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 1987), 130.