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“And I am not very pleased / I am not pleased”: Peacefighting in Contemporary US Feminist Poetry

di

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Abstract: The paper uncovers and explores a century long peacefighting tradition in contemporary US poetry, focusing particularly on feminist and pacifist thought and on the poetic representation of antiwar protests across time. As Giorgio Mariani states in Waging War on War (2015), women’s writing and feminist studies have made a “tremendous difference … in not only the ways we see war but also how we define war in the first place” (ix). Accordingly, the paper closely reads the literary works of Denise Levertov, Joy Harjo, June Jordan, and Lucille Clifton, showing that poetry in their hands becomes a battleground where imperial and emancipatory forces face one another and a playgound for the articulation of alternative, more liberating imaginaries, hosting peacefighters, anarchists, runaways, beloved ones, and singing natives.

This essay explores the interrelation between women, conflict, and peacebuilding, by retracing a century long peacefighting tradition in contemporary US literature. It focuses on the antiwar praxis carried out by a small group of contemporary US women poets, who have not only engaged in the task of “awaken[ing] sleepers” (Greene, Denise Levertov, p. 2) to the damages produced by wars but have also resisted “the intoxication of nationalism” (Butler, The Force of Nonviolence, p. 182) and contributed to spread a revulsion against toxic masculinity particularly, and state violence more generally. As Giorgio Mariani claims in Waging War on War (2015), women’s writing and feminist studies have made a “tremendous difference … in not only the ways we see war but also how we define war in the first place” (p. ix). In their poems, Denise Levertov, Joy Harjo, June Jordan, and Lucille Clifton expose the devastating effects of wars on human beings as well as on the earth; they further promote principles, such as radical equality and reciprocity, solidarity, and liberation, that are opposed to the ideals that rule wars.

Far from being isolated figures within the US literary panorama, the poets addressed in this essay act as nodal points of an extended national and transnational

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network of peace fighters and justice seekers, which counts among its ranks renowned figures such as Rosa Luxemburg, Martin Luther King, Teresita Pasini, Rachel Corrie, and the Mahatma Gandhi. These prominent actors have shown fearlessness towards brute force and utilized agency in situations in which they were presumed to have none. Indeed, as Judith Butler states: "Nonviolence is perhaps best described as a practice of resistance that becomes possible, if not mandatory, precisely at the moment when doing violence seems more justified and obvious. In this way, it can be understood as a practice that not only stops a violent act, or a violent process, but requires a form of sustained action, sometimes aggressively pursued" (p. 27).

The selected poets, as I will demonstrate, pursue nonviolence in a sustained and committed way. They do not simply refrain from violent action but actively fight US militarism and a fanatic nationalism; they further offer concrete recipes to actually "make peace" (Levertov), train for "conflict resolution" (Harjo), and learn to "sing against the dying" (Jordan). In doing so, they curb narratives that present wars as inevitable and morally acceptable, forcing individuals to react to stop wars and pushing states to take responsibility for their illegitimate violent actions.

By and large, the feminist poets at the center of this study reveal the link existing between a patriarchal society firmly anchored in a toxic masculinity and a grotesque war propaganda circulating the thrill of war and exalting heroic soldiers and holy martyrs. In Levertov's "An Interim," for instance, an arrogant boy deceives a little girl showing no remorse, while a US military leader devastates a city, justifying his action with a reason of force majeure. In this case, militarism is tightly connected with gender violence and nature devastation; the poem shows in poetic terms what Rob Nixon has argued in *Slow Violence*, namely that besides devastating material infrastructures and human life on the spot, "war generates a destructive, historically specific chemical, radiological, epidemiological, and environmental legacy" (209) long after the war has been declared officially over.

In Jordan's "The Bombing of Baghdad," the shelling of Iraqi civilians during the first Iraq war of 1991 is connected poetically to the massacre of the Sioux at the dawn of US colonialism. By openly "betraying" her nation and by siding with the Iraqi civilians and the native Sioux, the Black speaker rejects the hierarchy us vs. them, whites vs. colored, colonizers vs. colonized, cultivating instead principles of equality, liberation, and justice that have a global reach. On the whole, the poets included in this essay perform the role of witness of war atrocities, incite public outcry regarding losses that would otherwise pass unnoticed, and act as vigilant custodians of both human life and the natural environment against the overt and more covered threats caused by wars.

Peace as Force

A native of England and the daughter of a Russian Jew converted to Christianity, Levertov arrived in the US in 1948. One of the most acclaimed contemporary US poets, Levertov possesses – in the words of Amy Gerstler – "a clear uncluttered voice – a voice committed to acute observation and engagement with the earthly, in all its attendant beauty, mystery, and pain" ("The Awe of Seeing: Evening Train by

Denise Levertov", p. n.d.). As a talented and committed poetry-maker, Levertov selects for her poems topics that reflect the experiences of her life. Consequently, right after the end of WWII, where she had served as a civilian nurse in the London area, Levertov publishes a series of poems that show her deep commitment as a militant pacifist. In the 1960s, she had founded, together with a group of other avant-garde artists, the Writers and Artist Protest against the War in Vietnam, while also participating in anti-war demonstrations, editing an anthology for the War Resisters League, and being arrested for anti-war protests repeatedly in 1964. Besides her commitment to end the Vietnam War, Levertov publicly expressed her opposition to nuclear weaponry and opposed US economic and military aid to support state repression in El Salvador as well as US involvement in the Gulf War.

One of her most popular anti-war poems is "Making Peace", published in 1987 in the collection *Breathing Water*. As usual, Levertov structures her poem organically, showing readers how on a linguistic level it is possible to build peace. Accordingly, the poet chooses an open and flexible form; she uses verses that are fluid, harmonious, and well-balanced; she includes long pauses and carefully selects crystalline and luminous words. These formal practices reflect Levertov's attempt to concretely dismantle hierarchies, promote reciprocity, and implement equality, liberation, and justice, which are antithetical to the rules that govern wars. The following lines are a clear case in point:

> But peace, like a poem,
> is not there ahead of itself,
> can't be imagined before it is made,
> can't be known except
> in the words of its making,
> grammar of justice,
> syntax of mutual aid. (p. 40)

Here, peace is not represented as a ready-made object at the reader's disposal and within his/her reach but as a practice that requires hard work and a sustained commitment. Mutual recognition and respect, radical equality and accountability are crucial components of peace-making processes; this is why in her poem, Levertov follows strict rules that establish a "grammar of justice, / syntax of mutual aid" (p. 40). Levertov's lines resonate with the poem "Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings" by Native American poet Joy Harjo, for whom mutual recognition and respect are among the ground rules that may enable opposing parties to reach a conflict resolution. In Harjo's own words: "Respect whose lands these are on which we stand. / Ask the deer, turtle, and the crane. / Make sure the spirits of these lands are respected and treated with goodwill" (p. 77). Peace-building, as Harjo suggests, does not simply require that one be constructive and refrains from destruction; a commitment to radical equality, articulated through an equal relationship between human beings and wild animals, is also essential.

For both poets, peace can only be attained if the dominant party deliberately renounces to its hegemony and gives up the use of brute force. In the compelling words of Harjo:

> We say, put down your papers, your tools of coercion, your false promises, your posture of superiority and sit with us before the fire. We will share food, songs, and stories. We will gather beneath starlight and dance, and rise together at sunrise. (p. 77, underlined in the original)

As a descendant of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, whose members were forcibly removed from their original lands by the US army and deported west of the Mississippi, Harjo knows very well that peace requires a recalibration of power on the part of the dominant party and the sustained commitment not to hurt others, particularly those who find themselves in a situation of vulnerability. Through her eloquent words she delivers a strong and clear message in favor of giving up one's supremacy and dominance, which calls to mind Gandhi's practice of *ahimsa* or nonviolence, based on the deliberate renunciation on the part of Gandhi himself of his male prerogatives and power. To quote Leela Gandhi:

> Gandhi, who considered gender-violence at the source of all violence, was a great believer in falling-short as a technique of ahimsa.
>
> To this end he urged all men (advisedly) to fall short of prevailing norms of masculinity—in fact, to consciously emasculate themselves.
>
> … Now, withholding consent is a corollary to falling short. (p. 53, italics in the original)

Inspired by Gandhi's practice of *ahimsa* as well as by the motto of the American War Resisters League – "Power comes in giving up power" (qtd. in Gandhi p. 52) – I ask in return: What would happen if all men were to fall short of norms of toxic masculinity; if citizens would disidentify from bloody leaders; if soldiers were to withhold consent to killing others and devastating the earth; and if states would refuse to resort to brute force to resolve their conflicts? Would humanity and the earth thrive and prosper and would the balance that currently weights in favor of war be finally altered? This is how Levertov poetically imagines this unprecedented moment in human history, when peace outweighs war:

> A cadence of peace might balance its weight
> on that different fulcrum; peace, a presence,
> an energy field more intense than war,
> might pulse then,
> stanza by stanza into the world,
> each act of living
> one of its words, each word
> a vibration of light—facets
> of the forming crystal. (p. 40)

Levertov's representation of peace as a massive presence, capable of altering the balance and changing the fulcrum on which the world rests, provides nonviolent thought and praxis with hope and a firm belief in its potentialities. It further gives peace an authoritativeness often lacking in debates about wars and conflict resolutions, where nonviolence is often seen as passive and ineffective or condemned as an assault on democracy, humanity, and the state's presumably legitimate right to self-defense. Indeed, as Butler notes: "Critique, dissent, and civil dis-

obedience are construed as attacks on the nation, the state, humanity itself. This accusation emerges from within the framework of presumptive war, where no position can be imagined outside that frame" (*The Force of Nonviolence*, pp. 144-145).

In "Making Peace," Levertov imaginatively and linguistically neutralizes war, to the point that this latter vaporizes in the air, while peace grows and fills the space with its intense light and powerful force. In this poem, peace is not just an appendix of war but prevails and stands compellingly on its own, thus confirming Mariani's belief that "some texts do allow peace to speak in a voice that does not merely echo that of war" (p. 25).

Peace as Majestic Grandeur

Far from being as destructive as the power released by the nuclear bomb, the strong force liberated by Levertov's peace makes readers become fascinated with it. The idea that peace spreads harmony and well-being, while war produces harm and devastation is expressed in the poem "An Interim," which was published in 1968, a year that saw anti-war protestors massing outside the White House, civil right groups holding teach-ins and marching, young men publicly burning their draft cards and refusing to leave for Vietnam (Levy, "Behind the Anti-war Protests that Swept America in 1968," p. n.d.). In this enraged and exasperated atmosphere, Levertov composes a poem that placates and calms, one that offers little intervals of peace, which break the otherwise bleak and desperate time of war. The poem is organically structured according to seven independent yet interconnected vignettes, in which the speaker sketches a prismatic representation of life in wartime with its hopelessness, moral and linguistic degradation, arbitrary trials and imprisonments.

The opening lines express the exhaustion, desperation, and loss of horizons produced by war, which "drags on, always worse", while "despair / seethes hot and black" (p. 69). Vignette 2, focusing on two children playing airily in a laundromat, only apparently offers some kind of relief from the distressing atmosphere produced by the war:

2

Children in the laundromat

waiting while their mothers fold sheets.

A five-year-old boy addresses
a four-year-old girl. 'When I say,
Do you want some gum? say yes.'
'Yes...' 'Wait!—Now:
Do you want some gum?'
'Yes!' 'Well yes means no,
so you can't have any.'
He chews. He pops a big, delicate bubble at her. (pp. 69-70)

The boy in this scene misleads and cheats the girl, turning language into a weapon. His arrogant attitude reveals his sense of omnipotence and his feeling of entitlement and power over the girl. In "An Interim," Levertov provokes in the reader a sudden, shocking realization: male violence is engrained since childhood; it uses language to manipulate and hurt; male children act tough, suppress emotions, and willfully hurt others to respond to society's expectation of toxic masculinity. Accordingly, the boy's dishonest, violent, and pitiless behavior towards the little girl turns him quickly into an agent of violence. As the next stanza reveals, the step from deceptive boy to sanguinary military leader waging a bloody war on harmless civilians is short:

And,
'"It became necessary
to destroy the town to save it,"
a United States major said today.
He was talking about the decision
by allied commanders to bomb and shell the town
regardless of civilian casualties,
to rout the Vietcong.'

O language, mother of thought,
are you rejecting us as we reject you?

Language, coral island
accrued from human comprehensions,
human dreams,
you are eroded as war erodes us. (p. 70)

Here, the bombing of Vietnamese civilians is presented as inevitable and morally acceptable by the military leader, who advances a reason of force majeure to justify the massacre. Like a coral reef island impacted by pollution, language is eroded by the filthy war talk, which mystifies the truth. To the degradation of language, the destruction of human life, and the environmental threats caused by the war, Levertov responds by preempting triumphal narratives and by exposing the myths and phantasmagorias that make wars appear legitimate at the eyes of inattentive citizens.

The tight relationship between anti-militarism and environmental activism is further reinforced in vignette 3, where the peace and well-being that the ocean propagates on "outstretched bodies" laying on "hospitable, accommodating" sand (p. 71) is contrasted with the suffering and disregard for human life produced by war. In particular, the unjust and disproportionate punishment inflicted on the war-resister de Courcy Squire – eight months in solitary confinement and a 650-dollar fine for "*sitting down in front of a police wagon / momentarily preventing her friends from being / hauled to prison*" (p. 71, italics in the original) – confirms the brutality of war, which destroys, as Butler claims, "the very restrictions imposed on destructive license" (*The Force of Nonviolence*, p. 154). To the claustrophobic and solitary cell of de Courcy Squire, Levertov opposes the majestic beauty of the pulsating ocean. In "An Interim," peace is once again magnified, its power and force

amplified through the metaphor the ocean, which keeps dwelling and whose pulse can never be put to rest. In Levertov's solemn words:

> Peace could be
> that grandeur, that dwelling
> in majestic presence, attuned
> to the great pulse. (p. 72)

Like the vigorous ocean that never rests, so the peace fighters mentioned in the last vignette – Norman Morrison, Alice Hertz, A. J. Muste, Dennis Riordon, Bob Gilliam – are indefatigable and moved by an unstoppable force. They have even resorted to extreme measures, such as acts of self-immolation in order to "wake up the by-standers" (p. 74) who, in the words of Levertov, "don't dare imagine death" (p. 76). The necessity to mobilize a self-absorbed and unresponsive audience, who sees war as natural and self-explicatory, is also wat we find in "The Bombing of Baghdad" by Black US poet June Jordan.

Peace as Mourning and Singing

In *Poets Beyond the Barricade* (2011), Dale Martin Smith reflects on the changes that have occurred in US anti-war poetry from the 1960s to the 1990s and writes: "Inquiries and engagements in public poetry have grown in recent years out of opposition to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. While forms of social protest continued in poetry during the decades following the public outcry to war in Vietnam, the Iraq War has challenged poets to develop strategies of social engagement in ideological situations that differ considerably from the 1960s-era environments of cultural change" (p. 109). As Smith explains here, the 1990s saw the emergence of innovative poetic strategies developed particularly by US ethnic writers to wage war on war and to give dramatic visibility to the human and environmental emergencies caused by wars. One of the most powerful condemnations of the First Iraq war (1990-1991) is to be found in Jordan's "The Bombing of Baghdad," a poem that was composed in the wake of a heavy US shelling. This is how the poem opens:

> we bombed the darkness we bombed
> the sunlight we bombed them and we
> bombed them and we cluster bombed the citizens
> of Iraq and we sulfur bombed the citizens of Iraq
> and we napalm bombed the citizens of Iraq. (p. n.d.)

With sophisticated literary techniques, such as the use of repetitions, enjambments, and word variations, Jordan stresses the uninterrupted and constantly escalating attacks targeting the civil population of Baghdad. She further draws the reader's attention towards the human and natural devastations produced by incendiary weapons such as napalm, which have been included in the UN Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW), as well as by other chemical weapons, whose use and possession are prohibited under international law.

The speaker in this poem takes an infuriated stance against the bombing that is carried out also in her name, by publicly proclaiming her self-distancing from the violence perpetrated on innocent victims, already made vulnerable and exposed to deaths by the sanctions regime imposed in 1990.[1] In ways similar to Gandhi, Jordan strategically "falls short" of her dominant position as a US citizen and willfully embraces her marginal position as a Black subject and a war dissenter. The poet does not simply express a powerful protest against the US-led war but also acknowledges the Iraqi losses as a public act of mourning. Indeed, as Butler notes:

> This is one reason why mourning can be protest, and the two must go together when losses are not yet publicly acknowledged and mourned. The mournful protest – and here we can think of Women in Black or the Abuelas of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, or the families and friends of the Ayotzinapa forty-three – makes the claim that this lost life ought not to have been lost, that it is grievable and should have been regarded as such long before any injury was done. (Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, p. 74)

In an unequal conflict that sees the US as a military superpower confronting a vulnerable, developing nation, even what Butler calls the "distribution of grievability" appears to be assymetrical. To re-establish the balance, Jordan acknowledges the Iraqi deaths as lost lives that deserve to be mourned. Since it acts simultaneously as private mourning and public outcry, Jordan's act of commemoration and condemnation calls to mind the emblematic Black Power salute, performed by Black athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico, during the medal ceremony for the 200-meter race. Through their demonstrative gesture – a black-gloved fist raised in the air – the two runners intended to publicly fight race oppression and express Black pride in a silent yet very impactful way. As Kevin Quashie notes: "In truth, the beauty of the protest is enhanced by noting the intimacy, in reading Smith and Carlos not only as soldiers in a larger war against oppression but also as two people in a moment of deep spirituality, in prayer, as vulnerable as they are aggressive, as pensive as they are solidly righteous" (p. 8).

A similarly fierce and inward-driven gesture is also to be found in Jordan's poem. From the height of the podium of American belle letters, Jordan proudly raises her Black fist to oppose US militarism and neo-imperial war campaigns, while also expressing Black pride, affective closeness, and solidarity towards the victims of the US shelling. Jordan's fight against the US invasion, occupation of Iraq, and extermination of its native population gains further strength and potency, as she associates the survivors of the Baghdad raids with Native fighters Crazy Horse and the Lakota Sioux. These latter had strenuously fought against General Custer and his army, who had embraced, in Jordan's own condemnatory words, "the guts and gore of manifest white destiny," pushing westwards to "annihilate the savages" (p. n.d.). By uncovering the US myth of Manifest Destiny, namely the idea that the continued territorial expansion of the US westwards and beyond the last frontier was inevitable and allotted by God's Providence, Jordan helps readers see how wars rely

[1] On the humanitarian catastrophe provoked by the sanctions regime imposed on Iraq from 1990 to 2003, see, among others, Joy Gordon, *The Enduring Lesson of the Iraq Sanctions* (2020), Abbas Alnasrawi, "Iraq" (2001), Geneva International Center for Justice, "Razing the Truth About Sanctions Against Iraq" (2017).

on an us vs. them rhetoric and on racial and religious phantasmagorias, which cover up what is in fact a racial genocide. This rhetoric, staging a clash between a supposedly enlightened and civilized West against a barbaric and uncivilized East, is not relegated to wars of the past but has been mobilized also in recent times. With respect to the Iraq war, Harjo explains:

> At the heart of the myth of the American Dream story is cowboys-and-Indians. It's dark against light, good against evil with the white guys or European/Christian ideas being the good and evil being the so-called primitive or earth ways and those who practice those ways, or have darker skin. And anyone who isn't Euro-Christian is an Indian. The military not-so-code word for the battlefield in Iraq or during the Gulf War is/was Indian Country. The Iraqis are the Indians, the U.S. military the cowboys. (Harjo, "Becoming the Thing Itself," pp. 25-26)

Harjo's shocking disclosure that the US army still uses old colonial myths and racist phantasmagorias to legitimate its wars of expansion and occupation is deeply troubling. Nevertheless, it makes Jordan's juxtaposition of Iraqi bombed civilians and Native massacred bodies more realistic and sounder.

In "The Bombing of Baghdad," Jordan reclaims her Blackness strategically as a way to counter ultranationalist and racist doctrines, building an alliance with two groups of dispossessed, racialized, and psychologically traumatized people—the Sioux and the Iraqis—made vulnerable by white supremacism and settler colonial practices. Similarly, in "Moving Towards Home," Jordan had publicly expressed her outcry against the 1982 massacre of Palestinian civilians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Beirut at the hands of the white Christian Phalangists backed by the Israeli forces. She had further asserted her gradual unfolding from being a Black woman to becoming a Palestinian in the making as a reaction to the intended extermination of (Black) Palestinians by white supremacist and settler colonial forces. More specifically, Jordan had not only strategically joined ranks with both the victims and survivors of that genocidal act but had also publicly acknowledged and mourned the loss of "loved ones," therefore suddenly including Palestinian lives within her network of closely-knit affective relations of planetary size. The following lines, expressing Jordan's love towards Palestinians as well as her vigorous commitment for the recognition of their state as "a litmus test for morality" (Jordan, "June Jordan Names Palestine and Queer Liberation"), are a clar case in point:

> I was born a Black woman
> and now
> I am become a Palestinian
> against the relentless laughter of evil
> there is less and less living room
> and where are my loved ones?
>
> It is time to make our way home. (Jordan, "Moving Towards Home," p. n.d.)

In "Moving Towards Home," Jordan metaphorically hits the road and marches together with her comrades – the displaced Palestinians – moving towards home. In this poem, she extends the frame of war and re-inscribes the deliberate killing of Palestinians by the white Christian Phalangists with the support of the Israeli Army

within a structure of Black oppression and racial extermination, which has a global and local dimension.

In both poems, Blackness is reconceptualized not as an exclusive, segregating identity category but as a shared experience of painful racial oppression and violence[2]. One should note that oppression for Jordan, is not a faded, universal category but a very specific embodied experience, to which each single person is exposed in unique ways and which requires an attention to the specificities of each single case to be rightly grasped in all its complexity. Indeed, as Jordan herself explains in an interview: "If I, a black woman poet and writer, a professor of English at State University, if I am oppressed then we need another word to describe a woman in a refugee camp in Palestine or the mother of six in a rural village in Nicaragua or any counterpart inside South Africa" (Jordan qtd. in Parmar 63).

Jordan's intersectional feminist activism, which embraces the planet yet takes into account the specificities of location and class, expresses a blunt condemnation of US colonialism and neo-imperial wars, while also celebrating Black pride, Palestinian resilience, and acts of indigenous resurgence. If Levertov magnifies peace, Jordan extends that frame of war to include the planet as a whole, countering the misleading depiction of Iraqis, Natives, and Palestinians as lives that do not count and, consequently, as deaths not worth mourning. In doing so, she promotes a drastic change of affects from disregard to care. Jordan's "song of the living" awakens the reader to the horrors of past and present wars, turning him/her from a passive spectator into an active listener and perhaps even into a committed peace-fighter. Like the photographs and poems produced by the Guantanamo prisoners, Jordan's poem inaugurates a "breaking out" from the usual frame through which wars are usually being narrated. To quote Butler:

> The movement of the image or the text outside of confinement is a kind of "breaking out," so that even though neither the image nor the poetry can free anyone from prison, or stop a bomb or, indeed, reverse the course of war, they nevertheless do provide the conditions of breaking out of the quotidian acceptance of war and for a more generalized horror and outrage that will support and impel calls for justice and an end to violence. (Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 11)

In "The Bombing of Baghdad," Jordan makes the horror of the war dramatically visible, stirring the reader's conscience and mobilizing him/her in unprecedented ways. The poet does not limit herself to arouse in the reader an aversion towards the war but celebrates the survival and stubborn aliveness of both Iraqis and Natives alike. In doing so, she delivers one of the main lessons learnt as an African-American and a descendant of Black slaves, which has been articulated in memorable ways by another iconic African American poet of her age: Lucille Clifton. In the famous poem "won't you celebrate with me," the speaker – as a proud and resilient descendant of enslaved people – invites the reader to join her chant of survival and celebrate her incredible capacity to elude what she herself calls the "everyday something that has tried to kill me" (p. 427). Jordan's poem too, I suggest, is "attuned to different cries and moans" yet also represents a potent "song of the liv-

[2] On the long tradition of Afro-Palestinian solidarity, see Michele Hartman, *Breaking Broken English: Black Arab Solidarity and the Politics of Language* (Syracuse UP, 2014) and Alex Lubin's *Geographies of Liberation: The Making of an Afro-Arab Political Imaginary* (North Carolina UP, 2014).

ing / who must sing against the dying." Writing on Clifton's jubilant poem, with roots firmly anchored in a traumatic history of violent removal, enslavement, and segregation, in *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being* (2021), Quashie writes that Clifton's poem offers readers the opportunity to encounter "black being as it is, in its beingness, in its terribleness and wonder and particularity" (5). This is precisely what Jordan's poem also attempts to do, namely to make readers encounter the trauma but also the wonder and beauty of survival.

Peace as "Nonmilitary Militancy"

All the feminist poets included in this essay write honest, sincere, and perceptive poems that expose the dreadful mechanisms of toxic masculinity, colonial domination, and white supremacism that make wars thrive and proliferate. They further lay bare the squalid war rhetoric and nationalist propaganda employed by militarist states to cover atrocities and provide war with a respectable façade of moral acceptability and political inevitability. In distinctive yet communal ways, the selected feminist poets prove, to quote Mariani, that "[p]eace is not synonymous with inaction. On the contrary, peace can be achieved only through a nonmilitary militancy" (p. 42). Peace, in other words, does not happen in a vacuum but is a process that requires, as Butler reminds us, "a form of sustained action, sometimes aggressively pursued" (*The Force of Nonviolence*, p. 27). This emerges clearly in Levertov's poeme "Making Peace," where the poet engages wholeheartedly in an effort to concretely make peace, by exposing and dismantling the distortions and phantasmagorias circulated by the war talk. Indeed, as Mariani claims: "Pacifists have often denounced the hypocritical language deployed to justify war in the name of peace. For example, when in March 2003 George W. Bush announced that airstrikes against Iraq had begun, he claimed that America was 'a peace-loving nation'" (49).

Levertov, however, does not stop at the level of critique. She concretely engages in a creative act of peace-making by crafting a slowly cadenced and finely balanced composition, showing readers that in order to make peace one needs to engage in a patient and delicate task of linguistic accord and quietness of spirit. For Harjo too, justice, reciprocity, mutual recognition and respect represent the starting point for anyone seriously committed in a process of conflict resolution. Finally, Jordan replaces the furious sounds of the bombs falling on the city of Baghdad with a collective chant of strong resilience and proud survival.

In a concerted voice, the aforementioned poets oppose war and respond with force to the general tendency to discredit pacifism and nonviolence as passive, antinationalistic, and ineffective. They further contest the idea that armament and war are the only available solutions to conflicts. Highlighting the importance of feminism for disarmament, Ray Acheson explains:

> You can also see the ways in which those who equate weapons with power and security push back on alternative points. There is a process of belittling, a sense that anyone calling for disarmament or calling out the dangers of weapons, or the excessive accumulation of weapons, is naïve. We are told: "This is the way the world is. We need these weapons because we have to protect, we have to deter." (n.d)

By connecting armed conflicts with patriarchy, male violence with racial and colonial extermination, environmental erosion with the corruption of language and moral degradation that are concomitant characteristics of war, the chosen poets reveal the culturally ingrained mechanisms of white supremacism, gender violence, and racial domination, which make war so popular and widespread while also marginalizing women in peace-building processes.

Indeed, as the first of ten resolutions on women, peace and security (WPS) adopted by the US Security Council in 2000 makes patently clear, despite the "disproportionate and unique impact of armed conflict on women and girls, […] women remain underrepresented and make up only approximately one third of participants in multilateral disarmament meetings and even fewer are heads of delegations" (Security Council, "Resolution 1325", p. n.d.). To the underrepresentation of women in conflict negotiations, Levertov, Harjo, and Jordan respond by highlighting the leading role that women can play not only in peace building processes but also as witnesses of war atrocities, participants in the resistance, and as committed peace fighter. Theirs is a final call to save both the human species and the planet from the next apocalyptic war, which as Clifton suggests in these lines, will be a global conflict of ecological folly that leaves no winners behind. To quote Clifton's premonitory verses:

> the air
> you have polluted
> you will breathe
>
> the waters
> you have poisoned
> you will drink
>
> when you come again a
> and you will come again
>
> the air
> you have polluted
> you will breathe
>
> the waters
> you have poisoned
> you will drink (Clifton qtd. Morrison xxxiv)

Ecological awareness and resistance to war are tightly interwoven in Clifton's poem. As the poet suggests here, the costs of wars are not just material and human but also environmental. Indeed, as Nixon notes: "In our age of depleted-uranium shells and cluster bombs, 'smart' wars become wars of ecological folly as we turn soil, air, and water into slow weapons of mass destruction, wielded unremittingly against ourselves" (p. 231). This delayed violence is of the worst kind since, as Nixon claims, it is "typically not viewed as violence at all" (2).

It is precisely to this particular form of "slow violence" that the poets addressed in this essay turn their own and the reader's attention. By exposing the injurious invisibility of male violence in a laundromat as well as the health threats that per-

sist even when wars have officially ended, Levertov, Harjo, Jordan, and Clifton help readers recognize covert and more overt forms of violence, acknowledge and mourn casualties that would otherwise pass as lives that do not count, ultimately strengthening their revulsion towards and agency against the war.

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