



Trauma Engraved in Stone Material Community and the Singularity of a Traumatic Affect in Yusef Komunyakaa’s “Facing It”

Abstract: The purpose of this article is to trace the behaviour of a traumatic affect based on the reading of Yusef Komunyakaa’s “Facing It,” a poetic ekphrasis of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Tracing the manners in which war trauma is worked through and acted out by the speaker, this paper discusses how trauma eludes both compensating processes. At the same time, the nonhuman or inhuman features of trauma are analysed alongside the nonhuman agency of the memorial. The intersection of both nonhuman modes of being makes it possible to align the trauma discourses with materialist criticism. In addition, the traumatic experience is discussed through its tactile connotations following Komunyakaa’s poem and Maya Lin’s commentaries to her monument. Touch turns out to be a potent category capable of capturing the dynamics of a traumatic affect and a promising trope on which new ethical modes of being together in trauma might be founded. Hence, the aim of this article is fourfold; it attempts to: (1) analyse how Komunyakaa’s poem, informed by the selected developments in materialist criticism and trauma studies, might illustrate and expand the affect of trauma; (2) deepen our understanding of the intersections of the material and the traumatic; (3) investigate how the speculative reorganisation of human and nonhuman boundaries, inspired by “Facing It,” might help in assessing trauma, which necessarily resides at the edges of subjectivity; and (4) propose how the figure of trauma based on vulnerable and transformative limits might revise our understanding of community and formulate an ethical obligation for the traumatic times we live in.

Keywords: trauma, the Vietnam War, Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Yusef Komunyakaa, posthumanism, new materialism

*Each one
is the inverse
shape of what’s
missing.*

– Rae Armantrout¹

1. Rae Armantrout, “Dark Matter,” in *Versed* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2009), 69.

Petrification or Petrifiction?

Even though recurring traumatic affects might result in sudden petrification, the very correspondence between the petrified and the traumatic is rather obscure, making the notion of “trauma engraved in stone” highly problematic. First, having been engraved, trauma becomes recorded within a fixed material space. Yet, in a way, if trauma occupies any space, it has conventionally been reduced to a paradoxical figure tentatively located between existence and inexistence. In Dominick LaCapra’s classical typology, historical trauma, which originates in devastating events that disturb the integrity of a subject, is founded on formative *loss*. Structural trauma, understood as a the transhistorical supplement to historical trauma, is conditioned by *absence* beyond any definite loss.² The former binds the traumatic charge with the return of the past and the repetition of its destructive event; hence, it opens a space of mourning capable of re-inscribing trauma within clearcut divisions into the past and the present. The latter, devoid of any link to the past, resists undergoing the aforementioned healing process; rather, it denotes the investment of libidinal energy in performative merging, or confusing, of the past and the present, thereby fuelling the melancholy of a subject (as the traumatic charge cannot be integrated in any linear timeline and, thus, contained). In either case, not to mention the transgenerational networks of shared affects and memories,³ trauma necessarily becomes recorded as an empty sign of difference: something else, somewhere else. It persistently eludes representation, including any attempt to capture it in writing.⁴ Second, stones tend to be perceived as passive witnesses of history, and not necessarily actants transmitting it further. The lithic conjures up the geological images of durability, hardly corresponding to the features of trauma described above. Yet, through the

2. Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 76–82.

3. Groundbreaking analyses of trauma as a transmissible phenomenon were conducted by Marianne Hirsch. See: Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012). The trajectories of trauma within shared networks of a transgenerational phenomenon become also a crucial figure for Bracha L. Ettinger’s theory and art. See: Bracha L. Ettinger, “Transcryptum: Memory Tracing In/For/With the Other,” in Bracha L. Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, ed. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 163–170.

4. See: Adrian Parr, *Deleuze and Memorial Culture. Desire, Singular Memory and the Politics of Trauma* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 1–14. Parr notes, “[T]he epic quality of trauma forces culture to stutter and historical consciousness to stumble and it is here where memory tumbles around mixing up the specificity of the present with the complexity of the past. In effect, traumatic memory can make cultural production stagger, reducing society to tears. Ultimately, in all their force these tears are beyond representation” (Parr, *Deleuze and Memorial Culture*, 3–4).

shared – yet dissimilarly realised – materiality, the contradictions between the lithic and the traumatic indirectly raise a question of utmost importance for the contemporary analyses of trauma: namely, to what extent cultural and material artefacts, which bear the traces of trauma re-inscribed in them by the work of mourning, might expand our understanding of *the affect of trauma*, that is, the singularity of absence or loss. This problem is caused by the transient nature of trauma, which always reaches the subject indirectly, transformed semiotically into safe and controllable compensation in order to prevent the subject from disintegrating.

Stemming from these preliminary intuitions, this article proposes a reading of Yusef Komunyakaa's "Facing It," a poem on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C., whose conceit is founded on the interrelation of the lithic (or the material) and the traumatic. However, I aim at presenting neither a coherent study of the poetic imagery of the Vietnam War nor a comprehensive investigation of Komunyakaa's strategies of representing trauma and working through. Since it is the *singularity* of a traumatic affect that this article endeavours to explore, it purposefully focuses on a *single* poem, regardless of the conceptual difficulties arising out of this interpretative assumption. Despite seemingly coherent patterns of guilt, loss, and mourning, Komunyakaa's poem allows us to evaluate the wound it is based on thanks to the fact that both the granite monument and trauma reveal their "nonhuman" or "inhuman" potential. The general aim of this paper is fourfold; it attempts to: (1) analyse how Komunyakaa's poem, informed by the selected developments in new materialist criticism and trauma studies, might illustrate and expand the affect of trauma; (2) deepen our understanding of the intersections of the material and the traumatic; (3) investigate how the speculative reorganisation of human and nonhuman boundaries, inspired by "Facing It," might help us assess trauma, which necessarily resides at the edges of subjectivity and, therefore, linguistic cognition; and (4) propose how the figure of trauma based on vulnerable and transformative limits might revise our understanding of community and formulate an ethical obligation for the traumatic times we live in.

What the opening contradiction falsely assumes is that unlike trauma (empty yet highly active), the lithic relies on unchangeability and stasis. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen claims in his introduction to *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman*, "hur[ing] a rock" has a capacity to "shatter an ontology."⁵ Be it a mere pebble, metamorphic element of rock formations, resource used to construct old cathedrals and immortalise the toils of their builders, part of weapons and tools, or human and nonhuman fossil, stone – in its numerous manifestations – survives human

5. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 2.

finitude and, quite literally, resurfaces in new times and contexts.⁶ Stone is a vessel where the past, present, and future are blended together.⁷ Seemingly meaningless and highly durable, the lithic becomes the medium of uncanniness and otherness thanks to the intense material processes and metamorphoses it undergoes.⁸ An embodied encounter with any stone, significantly, opens us to a multitude of human and nonhuman stories materialised in its rocky constitution, which compresses the various timelines it has intercepted. These stories – fragmentary and untraceable – found a speculative possibility that fosters our relationship with the material and the nonhuman, and reorientates our temporal position by opening us to the radical encapsulation of the past which is still in the process of being (re-)materialised. In a way, petrification – in its figurative (psychological) and literal (geological) senses – becomes a site of *petrifications*, where the narratives of other, alien, or uncanny modes of existence come to being. Griselda Pollock redefines “trauma as no-time,” as it “challenges all temporal thinking since it is both a continuous unknown present and a haunting absence [...]”⁹ In the light of the posthumanist reading of the stone, informed by Cohen’s theory, we might reconsider the lithic as another medium of “no-time.” As demonstrated above, similarly to trauma (and, especially, the structural dimension of trauma), it confounds seemingly stable definitions of absence and presence, and makes simple temporal divisions obsolete.

Imperfect Sacrifice

“Facing It” focuses on the act of observing one’s mirrored image in the polished granite of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C., superimposed on the names of people lost in Vietnam which are carved on the surface of the monument. The Vietnam Wall – designed by Maya Lin, back then an undergraduate student, and dedicated in 1982 – is a monument consisting of two black granite walls forming a triangular shape. The names of over 58,000 casualties are carved on them in the order of the dates of death. One of the vertices of the triangle points at the Lincoln Memorial, the other – at the Washington Monument, both of which, importantly, are reflected on its polished surface as well. Just as the location of the wall, the monuments reflected in the wall canonise the

6. Cohen, *Stone*, 79–85.

7. Cohen, *Stone*, 79.

8. Cohen, *Stone*, 80.

9. Griselda Pollock, “Trauma, Time and Painting: Bracha Ettinger and the Matrixial Aesthetic,” in *Bracha L. Ettinger. Eurydyka – Pieta / Eurydice – Pieta*, ed. Anna Chromik (Katowice: Muzeum Śląskie, 2018), 67.

significance of the Vietnam War in American history; at the same time, these two reflections are integrated into the death toll marked by the individual names and the contrasting image of a serene landscape of Constitution Park, as if on a lithic palimpsest. These circumstances make the monument a peculiar object.¹⁰ Lin elucidates:

Walking through this park-like area, the memorial appears as a rift in the earth – a long, polished black stone wall, emerging from and receding into the earth. Approaching the memorial, the ground slopes gently downward, and the low walls emerging on either side, growing out of the earth, extend and converge at a point below and ahead. Walking into the grassy site contained by the walls of this memorial we can barely make out the carved names upon the memorial's walls. These names, seemingly infinite in number, convey the sense of overwhelming numbers, while unifying those individuals into a whole. For this memorial is meant not as a monument to the individual, but rather as a memorial to the men and women who died during this war, as a whole.¹¹

Not being a space of a unified historical experience or caesura, the monument does not reduce lives and stories carved on its surface to a single identity. Indeed, to an extent, Lin refers to the construction of the whole, the communion of the dead, associating the Wall with a collective of the fallen associated with a single devastating event. We might speculate that if that was the case, Lin's project would identify traces of a shared trauma – namely, the death of the loved ones – and, by pertaining to a universal experience, attempt to make mourning possible. However, such a path might result in depersonalisation of the dead. That is when Lin's project offers us an alternative path. It is the recognition of the number of names and their overwhelming quantity that allows us to unify them as the whole only tentatively. Despite its elegant, minimalist, and harmonious design, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is rather supposed to embody dispersion and multitude: of stories, individuals, and names. Jenny Edkins, comparing looking at Wall's surface to the mirror stage as theorised by Jacques Lacan, notes that “the imaginary wholeness that we see in the mirror is interrupted by the real of the names.”¹² For Lacan, the mirror stage is the moment of both recognition and misrecognition: the identification of the subject is simultaneous to the

10. For detailed analyses of memorial and trauma politics involving the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and critical introduction to its political, gender, and racial contexts, see: Parr, *Deleuze and Memorial Culture*, 54–75; Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 73–91.

11. Maya Lin, *Boundaries* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 4:05, quoted in: Parr, *Deleuze and Memorial Culture*, 56.

12. Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 88.

acknowledgment of “myself” as the “other” reflected in the mirror.¹³ Therefore, the identity of the subject becomes inherently split, seemingly focused on singular “I,” and, then again, deprived of fixed boundaries capable of containing “not-I” – and the disruptive activity of the real – outside.¹⁴ As Edkins shows, the Vietnam Wall enacts a comparable cut; even though the names are gathered on a single surface of the memorial within a shared memory space, each of them resonates on its own and demands its own historical recognition.

Facing such an excess, the speaker of Komunyakaa’s poems recognises his or her own position at the intersection of individual and collective traumas. At the same time, “Facing It” becomes an exercise in renegotiating the boundaries of an embodied experience, augmented by the reflected reality, addressing the corporeal dimension of trauma. Visually rich, thanks to Komunyakaa’s photographic and painterly aspirations,¹⁵ the poem begins as follows:

My black face fades,
hiding inside the black granite.
I said I wouldn’t
dammit: No tears.
I’m stone. I’m flesh.
My clouded reflection eyes me
like a bird of prey, the profile of night
slanted against morning. I turn
this way—the stone lets me go.
I turn that way—I’m inside
the Vietnam Veterans Memorial
again, depending on the light
to make a difference.¹⁶

Exposed to the recognition of the multitude, the speaker encounters alienation and vulnerability, when any corporeal limits (defining and protecting him or her) can no longer be recognised. These, in turn, suppress tangibility of the divisions

13. Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russel Grigg (London, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 75–76.

14. Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function,” 76–77.

15. William Baer and Yusef Komunyakaa, “Still Negotiating with the Images: An Interview with Yusef Komunyakaa,” *The Kenyon Review* 20, no. 3/4, (1998): 7.

16. Yusef Komunyakaa, “Facing It,” in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Seventh Edition, Vol. E, *Literature since 1945*, ed. Jerome Klinkowitz and Patricia B. Wallace (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 3076–3077.

into the interior and the exterior. As a survivor, he or she belongs neither entirely inside the monument nor outside of it. Rather, he or she is constantly affected by the interplay of lights and appearances that makes the movement between the silent inside and the painful outside possible: a body is turned into a stone, and the stone – back into the flesh. “Facing It,” however, only partially focuses on the psychological separation from history and war traumas, indicated by the distinction into what one feels and what one is supposed to feel.¹⁷ The appearances emerging on the surface of the memorial point out the agency of the monument and the affective potentiality reverberating in it. What is at stake is not so much commemoration understood as the mythologised memory or a symbol of identity politics; it is rather replaced with an uncanny and empty commemoration that conveys a traumatic lack of safety, as the stable boundaries demarcating me and the other, or the present and the past, are abolished.

The traumatic affect transmitted by the memorial does not entirely negate the effect of historical trauma, whose traces are scattered throughout Komunyakaa’s poem. Lights and mirages appearing on the surface of the monument activate the memories of blood and fire, most presumably deeply hidden. The recognition of a known name evokes a vision of a person killed by a mine (“I touch the name Andrew Johnson; / I see the booby trap’s white flash”¹⁸), whereas the reflection of a passing plane conjures up the threat of an air strike (“Brushstrokes flash, a red bird’s wings cutting across my stare. / The sky. A plane in the sky”¹⁹). The sense of loss caused by these images does not guarantee any definite working through. We read:

I go down the 58,022 names,
half-expecting to find
my own in letters like smoke.²⁰

A fantasy of finding the speaker’s own name written in smoke functions as a chiasm juxtaposing the relationship between the fallen (or lost) and their physical manifestation on the surface of the memorial with the absence of the survivors, not acknowledged anywhere. A record in smoke as a metaphor contests the limits of loss. Symbolically evoking the imagery of the Holocaust and historically

17. A psychological reading of “Facing It” is advocated by Ed Pavlić. See: Ed Pavlić, “Open the Unusual Door: Visions from the Dark Window in Yusef Komunyakaa’s Early Poems,” *Callaloo* 28, no. 3 (2005): 794–795.

18. Komunyakaa, “Facing It,” 3077.

19. Komunyakaa, “Facing It,” 3077.

20. Komunyakaa, “Facing It,” 3077.

recreating the atrocities caused by napalm fire, the half-expected (yet unfound) smoke joins the funeral and war imageries within an elaborate figure of triple uncertainty. The smoulder, itself indicating a dissolving substance, is separated from any fire that might have caused it, as it originates in the living subject's transhistorical fantasy. At the same time, the speaker seeks smoke against his or her better judgement, relying on the comfort of controllable self-deception which doses self-destructive fantasies rooted in either regret of having survived or doubt in being still alive.

The complexity of smoke might be read in at least three ways. First, resorting to smoke imagery might be motivated by the general renouncement of an arbitrary division into the fallen and the survivors, annulled by the destructive intensity of trauma. Second, it might encompass a sense of guilt caused by one's survival in the need of inscribing the speaker's name among the dead through the dissolving "ink" of smoke. Finally, it might attempt to use the contradiction of dissipating smoke and physical written record to mark an individual sense of loss, whose singularity suspends the divisions into us/them, living/dead, here/there, now/then, to name a few, which the Wall brings about.

In the light of these speculations, we might read the smoke as a sign of mourning – of loss – yet deprived of any lost object; is it then the melancholic mourning over absence, a threat LaCapra notes in his essay? The smoke seems to mark here the subtle logic of a trace, closer to *cinders* than actual *smoke*, that is, one of many Derridean spectral graphemes.²¹ The smoke read as cinders marks the reiterating surplus value that prohibits us from arresting loss, absence, or the past or memory, for that matter, as inactive void.²² Therefore, returning to the poem, the mentioned writing in smoke becomes an unfinished sacrifice pointing to remains without fire that might have caused it. Visible on the metamorphic surface of the memorial, smoke might demarcate minimal difference between the black skin of the subject and the black texture of the granite. Yet, we never observe the

21. Jacques Derrida, *Cinders*, trans. Ned Lukacher (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 55. Derrida elucidates on the same page: "What a difference between cinder and smoke: the latter apparently gest lost, and better still, without perceptible remainder, for it rises, it takes to the air, it is spirited away, sublimated. The cinder – falls, tires, lets go, more material since it fritters away its word; it is very divisible."

22. Derrida, *Cinders*, 43. This quality helps us associate the smoke in Komunyakaa's poem with cinders; Derrida argues: "The fire: what one cannot extinguish in this trace among others that is a cinder. Memory or oblivion, as you wish, but of the fire, trait that still relates to the burning. No doubt the fire has withdrawn, the conflagration has been subdued, but if cinder there is, it is because the fire remains in retreat. By its retreat it still feigns having abandoned the terrain. It still camouflages, it disguises itself, beneath the multiplicity, the dust, the makeup powder, the insistent pharmakon of a plural body that no longer belongs to itself – not to remain nearby itself, not to belong to itself, there is the essence of the cinder, its cinder itself" (Derrida, *Cinders*, 43).

fusion of the two, and the renegotiations of the figure of smoke indicate neither its origin nor moment of complete disappearance. The logic of lack is supplemented by the logic of dissipation, the ongoing degradation or dissolution which is never entirely complete, preventing the totalising figures of loss or absence from prevailing. In a paradoxical way, the subject yields to their own fantasy of a sacrificial renouncement of their own representation, while facing the names of the fallen, mediated by an elusive presence, neither inside nor outside. Traumatic loss becomes replaced with the traumatic impossibility of losing oneself, that is, the impossibility of negating one's survival and yet overcoming the destructive impact of trauma on one's subjectivity. The conviction of – or need for – being absent, instead of accommodating historical trauma, fuels the need to support a traumatic affect, to ceaselessly act it out, leading to transgression of boundaries and exposing vulnerability of the subject.

Permeating Presence

Resistant to linguistic representations, trauma marks the excess of materiality which can never be entirely accommodated or arrested. Yet – and this is emphasised by the flux of identities, appearances, and timelines Komunyakaa's poem evokes – it also transgresses the fixed boundaries of an individual, society, or history. Therefore, trauma indicates a material surplus of the world: surplus, comprised of the remains after some past catastrophe, which has a potentiality to materially and semiotically transform the world, yet is not necessarily incorporated in it. Such surplus is expanded by Lin, who intended the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as a demonstration of how traumatic events and affects participate in worlding processes. As she suggests, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is “[a] part of the earth, a work formed from the act of cutting open the earth and polishing the earth's surface, dematerializing the stone to pure surface, creating an interface between the world of the light and the quieter world beyond the names.”²³ Parr adds that the monument is a “*nonhuman wound*: a landscape that has been sliced open [...] to produce a ‘coloring void,’ a landscape section that emits ‘subtle imperceptible variations’ in hue, tone, reflection, and texture.”²⁴ In Komunyakaa's poem, vision ceases to be a primary sense, giving way to the primacy of touch. It is not to say that the Wall opens itself up only in the moment of being touched; also, it encompasses touch in a broader sense through the materialisation or re-materialisation of the past and the present, the living and the dead, the organic and the material,

23. Lin, *Boundaries*, 2:07, quoted in: Parr, *Deleuze and Memorial Culture*, 66.

24. Parr, *Deleuze and Memorial Culture*, 71, emphasis in the original.

within a shared surface of the monument where the superimposing images affect the stability of boundaries.²⁵ The collapse of representation becomes both a cost of and a criterion for the materialisation of trauma. The monument seems to be limitless, as it merges the inside and the outside, and yet it discloses itself as a limit or a barrier while being touched.

The dimensions of touch and its transformative potential cannot be reduced only to the speaker, or other spectators touching the granite plates. In a way, this sense is most insistently realised in the nonhuman “touch” of the monument.²⁶ The monument also marks the moment of touching and being touched by the landscape which it “slices open.” Just as in case of any physical cut, even though they belong to the same material space, one opens another and renders it alien. At the same time, intrusion or otherness is reciprocated by means of touch: a physical unmediated proximity. After all, touch manifests itself in the permeable and superimposed bodies, when – in Komunyakaa’s poem – the speaker’s appearance fuses with that of the white veteran reflected on the granite slate: “A white vet’s image floats / closer to me, then his pale eyes / look through mine. I’m a window.”²⁷ Do we speak of a limit demarcated by the physical features of the granite prism, or that established by the black skin of the speaker, whose hand, presumably, wanders on the surface of the monument? As in Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *The Visible and the Invisible*, the distinction into touching and being touched seems to be obsolete, exposing us to the pre-subjective texture of being that is orientated at itself.²⁸ “The flesh of the world,” as Merleau-Ponty calls it, precedes any corporeal encounter and redirects us to the potentiality that foregrounds any “spiritual,” “intellectual,” or physical cognition²⁹; the flesh is an “incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being.”³⁰ These reflections correspond to Karen Barad’s analysis of touch. Barad

25. Karen Barad, “Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/continuities, Spacetime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-come,” *Derrida Today* 3, no. 2 (2010): 254.

26. For a psychoanalytically grounded reading of trauma and touch, especially in the context of transgenerational trauma, see: Anna Kisiel, “Touching Trauma: On the Artistic Gesture of Bracha L. Ettinger,” *Narracje o Zagładzie* 4 (2018): 138–162.

27. Komunyakaa, “Facing It,” 3077.

28. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 140.

29. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 139.

30. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 139. In her text, Diana Coole acknowledges the importance of Merleau-Ponty (especially in connection with Deleuze’s reading of Leibniz) for new materialism. Coole argues that, thanks to the concept of the flesh, Merleau-Ponty “helps us to rethink agency [...] as those contingent capacities for reflexivity, creative disclosure, and transformation that emerge hazardously within the folds and reversals of material/meaningful flesh.” Diana Coole, “The Inertia of Matter, the Generativity of the Flesh,” in *New Materialisms*:

notes that in the light of quantum field theory touch becomes an inhuman locus of indeterminacy: “electrons, indeed all material ‘entities,’ are entangled relations of becoming, there is also the fact that materiality ‘itself’ is always already touched by and touching infinite configurings of possible other, other beings and times.”³¹ Touch is an act of self-touching, in which all actual and virtual particles, bodies, entities, spaces, and times meet.³² In other words, touch designates the primordial intimacy of the world, which stages the encounter of everything that is and reconnects it with its inherent otherness.

Commemorating the dead, the memorial is anything but dead. Despite the impenetrable void it establishes, its agency opens us to an uncanny experience of otherness, confronting present and past temporalities with the untraceable ones. Eventually, it contrasts the war trauma and veterans’ demise with its own persistent vitality. At the end of “Facing It,” we read: “In the black mirror / a woman’s trying to erase names: / No, she’s brushing a boy’s hair.”³³ The apparent gesture of wiping the names away is brought to life by the speaker’s misrecognition, which implies dissent or denial. Reflected on the surface of the monument, the motherly gesture becomes desperate in its inability to change the past or resurrect the dead; after all, the names stay on the granite. More importantly, if read outside of the speaker’s perspective, her actions are the results of care. Instead of restoring the order, they fix the boy’s hair. Yet, when these two horizons collide and the historical guilt is sieved through an everyday action, the final lines of Komunyakaa’s poem reveal the importance of touch as a practice of memory and a figure of intimacy. Touch participates in a creative encounter transforming the historical, the public, the personal, and the intimate. The woman’s act supplements care for her own child with compassion for any single fallen, an implied boy reflected on the memorial, who, therefore, becomes the figure of radical mourning. Taking place outside and inside the monument, touch marks the ultimate connection with the dead; it offers them compassion and closeness they were deprived of by the horrors of war.

Apart from hope that might stem from the woman’s gesture, historical trauma is hardly being worked-through in Komunyakaa’s poem; most of the time, “Facing It” supports the unresolvable acting out of the structural lack instead. Structural trauma is not reduced to the work of melancholy in this case. The proximity with raw material experience and acknowledgement of a nonhuman agent – that is, the

Ontology, Agency, Politics, ed. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2010), 113.

31. Karen Barad, “On Touching – The Inhuman That Therefore I Am,” *differences. A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 23, no. 3 (2012): 215.

32. Barad, “On Touching,” 215.

33. Komunyakaa, “Facing It,” 3077.

granite monument – facilitate detecting the inhuman kernel of structural trauma, which makes it possible for us to revisit our notions of human and non-human intimacies. It might be argued that trauma is the in-human *per se*: an excess of alien temporalities within the human being that challenges the unity of a human subject. It resists signification or representation, making us vulnerable to excessive materiality. This materiality by no means takes a form of a passive object; it troubles, challenges, and hurts the subject exposed to it instead. In “Facing It,” the inhumanity of the trauma meets the inhumanity of the stone. Let us repeat Lin’s and Parr’s observations: the black granite has its own history of violence and its own constellations of wounds. It had been cut, carved, shaped, and polished before it reached its final form. The cultural transformation turning the resource into the memorial wipes away the “natural” histories and timelines of the stone, turning it into a symbol of a devastating event in modern human history.³⁴

The recognition of the violent history of the memorial corresponds to storied matter, put forward by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann. Equally rooted in *story* and *storing*, matter becomes a matrix collecting human and nonhuman *stories* within a nonhuman material.³⁵ The granite incorporates both the material events which brought it to being a monument, that is, the contemporary histories of conflict, and the forgotten individual stories written “in smoke.” Yet, the monument is not just a war testimony. The mirages on its surface confront the stories of the spectators with the commemorated fate of the fallen. Instead of making it possible to work through war trauma, the memorial attempts to materialise trauma without a history: it retrieves a singular traumatic affect, singular memory as Parr has it,³⁶ by exposing us to the inhuman parallel between the object and trauma. The biographies of the fallen, historical discourses of the Vietnam War,

34. The analyses of stone, granite, and the Wall, and their agencies, recurring in my essay, raise the question of the degree to which they are ontological and aesthetic objects. I would argue that in such theoretical framework this question bears little relevance. In fact, artistic qualities of the Wall belong to greater networks of semiotic, symbolic, and material interrelations, just as the properties of the raw material which was processed and used to build it. Within an embodied encounter, the Wall seems to become a narrative site, with its unique thing-power (to use Jane Bennett’s concept) that invites both human and nonhuman modes of creativity through which meaning and matter are being deployed and redistributed. See: Serpil Oppermann, “From Ecological Postmodernism to Material Ecocriticism: Creative Materiality and Narrative Agency,” in *Material Ecocriticism*, ed. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014), 21–36. See also: Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2010).

35. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, “Material Ecocriticism: Materiality, Agency, and the Models of Narrativity,” *ecozon@3*, no. 1 (2012): 83, <http://ecozona.eu/article/viewFile/452/477> (26.03.2022).

36. Parr, *Deleuze and Memorial Culture*, 12.

histories of both involved and accidental spectators: all of these merge in the excessive experience when the fixed boundaries are temporarily suspended by the vibrancy of the memorial. The granite, just as the poem, solidifies itself as a site of petrification, informing new understandings and connotations of structural trauma, and, therefore, deepening our understanding of it in the uncertain times of the 20th and 21st centuries. Yet, since trauma – as it has been emphasised in this text several times – resists linguistic cognition, perhaps it is fiction that can become the only just textual approach to it.

The Traumatic Kernel of Community

In a conversation with William Baer, Komunyakaa argues that the Vietnam War creates a traumatic network of people who share its destructive affects.³⁷ Following Maurice Blanchot, Michael Dowdy calls this phenomenon a “community of burden.”³⁸ How can we conceptualise such a burden? What is the “common” that lies in the centre of this community? Is it collective trauma, vulnerability, guilt, loss? Let me now move on to preliminary and theoretical remarks regarding community and trauma that the new materialist reading of Komunyakaa’s poem might inspire; by no means do these, however, aspire to formulate a coherent system or complete interpretation.

As it has been argued, the encounter with the granite memorial opens the subject to an excessive materiality where timelines, stories, lives, or even entities coexist. The potentiality of storied matter to conflate and transform matter and meaning within alien spaces and durations indicates the existence of such a space even if provisionally shared. Still, the material and affective configurations of trauma tend to degrade bit by bit the semiotic and symbolic demarcations of such a site, even though all of them remain its constituents.

It might be argued that vulnerability and precarity, as theorised by Judith Butler in *Frames of War* and *Precarious Lives*, might serve as a ground for the “community of burden.” Indeed for Butler, vulnerability meets mourning in one’s recognition of life as *life that might be lost, might not be lived as life*, and, therefore, mourned; Butler argues: “The apprehension of grievability precedes and makes possible the apprehension of precarious life.”³⁹ Even though Butler’s proposal constitutes an ethical matrix that has a great political potential, it hardly fits the order of life that

37. Baer and Komunyakaa, “Still Negotiating with the Images,” 11.

38. Michael C. Dowdy, “Working in the Space of Disaster: Yusef Komunyakaa’s Dialogues with America,” *Callaloo* 28, no. 3 (2005): 819.

39. Judith Butler, “Introduction: Precarious Life, Grievable Life,” in *Frames of War. When Is Life Grievable?* (London, New York: Verso, 2009), 14–15. See also: Judith Butler, “Survivalibility,

is presented in the poem. In “Facing It,” the counterintuitive interaction with the monument, spectral encounters of the alive and the dead, intermeshing material and corporeal boundaries, vivid flashbacks and unfolding memories all redirect us to the excess of life or vibrant agencies. This excess of life, ceded onto the encounter with the monument, is connected with the recognition of vulnerability of the fallen through mourning; nonetheless, it comes at the cost of an attempt to divest the speaker of life, a paradoxical attempt figured by writing name in smoke, admitting the impossibility of escape the monument, and expecting composure while visiting the monument. In a way, some of these might be read as denial-driven reactions to the traumatic event which transform guilt into the suspension of the speaker’s own vulnerability, precarity, and, therefore, grievability. Hence, it might be added that it is difficult to determine to what extent trauma is commensurate with grievability as a matrix of vulnerability. Finally, the material dimensions of touch, as theorised in this text after Merleau-Ponty, Barad, and partly Derrida, introduce a different space of vulnerability; this other vulnerability, only partly corporeal and political, relies on non-living actants even though the ones mentioned in the poem and this analysis are hardly precarious. Expanded in such a way, to say the least, vulnerability – understood through the unfolding matter, differentiation, and rematerialising boundaries – becomes more immune to being arrested within a fixed figure of a subject and threatens Butler’s take by blurring the definition of life constituent of her theory.⁴⁰

A similar figure of community and the common, or being in common, which is necessarily aporetic (and, therefore, echoes loss), is put forward by Roberto Esposito.⁴¹ For Esposito, the only possible community is the one that exhausts itself to the most brute possible state. He anchors his reflection on community, or *communitas*, in ambivalent *munus*. As Jacques Derrida reminds us, gift – that is *munus* – remains gift insofar as it lies outside of the orders of giving, receiving,

Vulnerability, Affect,” in *Frames of War*, 33–62; Judith Butler, “Violence, Mourning, Politics,” in *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London, New York: Verso, 2004), 19–49.

40. Pieter Vermeulen, following Timothy Campbell, argues that vulnerability, as theorised by Judith Butler, would be at odds with Roberto Esposito’s account as a category too prone to be appropriated by the immunising processes (even though both agree to ascribe a formative place for vulnerability and locate it in the possibility of being killable). See: Pieter Vermeulen, “The Biopolitics of Trauma,” in *The Future of Trauma Theory*, ed. Gert Buelens, Samuel Durrant, and Robert Eaglestone (London: Routledge, 2014), 148–149, <http://www.pvermeulen.com/uploads/1/2/4/3/12438327/biopoliticstrauma.pdf> (26.03.2022).

41. In a different context, Pieter Vermeulen proposes that Esposito’s notions of *communitas* and *immunitas* might be used to describe the momentum of trauma studies. For him, trauma studies immunises the subject in order to control the degree of vulnerability and the relationship with the world. See: Vermeulen, “The Biopolitics of Trauma,” 152.

and sharing: that is, beyond exchange.⁴² Therefore, all of the attainable categories – including the subject⁴³ – would expose community to the danger of being mediated and, hence, of being annihilated. We read:

The community isn't anything else except the border and the point of transit between th[e] immense devastation of meaning and the necessity that every singularity, every event, every fragment of existence make sense in itself. Community refers to the singular and plural characteristic of an existence free from every meaning that is presumed, imposed, or postponed; of a world reduced to itself that is capable of simply being what it is: a planetary world without direction, without any cardinal points. In other words, a nothing-other-than-world.⁴⁴

The community beyond meaning or truth strips community to bare existence shared within the world. In order for it to be all-encompassing, it purposefully remains an empty figure which does not violate anything it includes. At the same time, it marks the world primarily a common concern. Structurally, community in Esposito's reading is not far from the counterparts of the traumatic affect founded on lack discussed in this article. At the same time, in Esposito's writing, the profound nothingness we share might be read within a deeply ethical perspective:

The *munus* that the *communitas* shares isn't a property or a possession [*appartenenza*]. It isn't having, but on the contrary, is a debt, a pledge, a gift that is to be given, and that therefore will establish a lack. The subjects of community are united by an "obligation," in the sense that we say "I owe *you* something," but not "you owe *me* something." This is what makes them not less than the masters of themselves, and that more precisely expropriates them of their initial property (in part or completely), of the most proper property, namely, their very subjectivity.⁴⁵

Accordingly, this aporetic interpretation is particularly promising. Esposito recognises that community is always in crisis, as it is bound to be stricken with the experiences it cannot endure. These are the well-known moments which

42. John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida. Religion without Religion* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), *passim*.

43. Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2010), 7–8.

44. Esposito, *Communitas*, 149.

45. Esposito, *Communitas*, 6–7, emphasis in the original. Curiously, the Italian noun *appartenenza*, rendered here as "possession," also designates "belonging" and "membership."

overthrow the established meanings and feed on the fragility of knowledge. However, the very same realm, that is, the realm in which only lack (loss?) and nothingness can be shared, establishes not only the possibility of pure ethical indebtedness – of the unconditional owing – but also an absolutely open world, which may be inhabited by “a meaning which still remains unthought.”⁴⁶ Eventually, community encompasses the very ability that “separates and joins” these two forces; it incarnates the unstable liminal position.

Since trauma is structurally empty, any attempt to grasp it is necessarily fictitious. Yet, the abundances of these inaccurate, speculative, virtual, or misrecognised stories might reconnect us to the empty kernel that fosters the cognitive pursuit. Within this empty kernel of trauma, in which any relationship is both embedded and disconnected, the only quality that might be discerned is the existence in lack. Stripped of any other features, this brute reality reaches a universal level, whose irrefutability is granted in a possibility to be affected by trauma. A traumatic affect – as the lack binding us together – creates a space of an empty community, comparable to that discussed by Esposito. In such a space, the only ethical imperative that arises might echo Esposito’s “I owe you”: an unresolved yet demanded act of compassion that each subject bound by trauma shares. In such a reading, trauma reaches beyond the intimate and expands its borders to reach intimacy in coexistence. At the same time, the ontology of trauma involves an ethical project as well. The inherent act of duty, or owing, to one another in the times intensely saturated with historical and structural traumas, might help us navigate in the torn reality bequeathed from the 20th-century violent history.

Conclusion

Komunyakaa’s “Facing It” recollects a visit to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. as a deeply uncanny experience, transgressing subjective and objective boundaries and interconnecting the personal with the historical. The surface of the granite monument serves as a stage where the alive and the dead meet, be it for the first time or again, exposing the spectators to deeply traumatic experiences. At the same time, the poem demonstrates the congruity of structural trauma and a nonhuman agent, merging their seeming passivity with unexpected vibrancy. New materialist theories re-educated through trauma studies reconstruct the memorial as the storied matter that unravels the symbolic and material, human and non-human trajectories in which a traumatic affect develops. In each case, a traumatic affect manifests its own singularity in the surplus or the excess

46. Esposito, *Communitas*, 149.

of the world that cannot be properly accommodated on the subjective level and, therefore, can never be entirely worked through.

The layers of coexistence in Komunyakaa's poem found a speculative space where known and alien timelines, stories, and entities meet. Material actants and their vibrant agencies conflate with thanatic dynamism of trauma, as both realms confront us with unsettling vulnerability, transgressive renegotiations of boundaries, and refined semiosis of life and death. At the same time, the material and the nonhuman serve as useful categories unfolding the dimensions of trauma without reducing it solely to subjective or narrative crises. Trauma is a space of differentiation and redifferentiation that unravels through touch, visible both in the speaker's brilliant (or brilliantly failed) observation of the woman's gesture, and in superimposing human and nonhuman realms on the surface of the monument. In this context, "Facing It" not only enlightens the conceptual and material links between the lithic and the traumatic, but also allows us to rediscover to what extent trauma might be imprinted on being-together. Following these intuitions, a model of community founded on the traumatic lack might be developed, whose ontological emptiness conditions the irrevocability of an ethical obligation we share to one another. "I owe you," realised in the poem through the woman's gesture, becomes, therefore, a means to deflect trauma and use it to reestablish the relationships originally shattered by the destructive and tragic historical events.

References

- Armantrout, Rae. "Dark Matter." In *Versed*, 69. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2009.
- Baer, William, and Yusef Komunyakaa. "Still Negotiating with the Images: An Interview with Yusef Komunyakaa." *The Kenyon Review* 20, no. 3/4, (1998): 5–20.
- Barad, Karen. "Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/continuities, Spacetime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-come." *Derrida Today* 3, no. 2 (2010): 240–268.
- Barad, Karen. "On Touching – The Inhuman That Therefore I Am." *differences. A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 23, no. 3 (2012): 206–223.
- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Butler, Judith. "Violence, Mourning, Politics." In *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, 19–49. London, New York: Verso, 2004.
- Butler, Judith. "Introduction: Precarious Life, Grievable Life." In *Frames of War. When Is Life Grievable?*, 1–32. London, New York: Verso, 2009.
- Butler, Judith. "Survivability, Vulnerability, Affect." In *Frames of War. When Is Life Grievable?*, 33–62. London, New York: Verso, 2009.

- Caputo, John D. *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida. Religion without Religion*. Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997.
- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.
- Coole, Diana. "The Inertia of Matter, the Generativity of the Flesh." In *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, Politics*, edited by Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, 92–115. Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Cinders*, translated by Ned Lukacher. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.
- Dowdy, Michael C. "Working in the Space of Disaster: Yusef Komunyakaa's Dialogues with America." *Callaloo* 28, no. 3 (2005): 812–823.
- Edkins, Jenny. *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Esposito, Roberto. *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*. Translated by Timothy Campbell. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2010.
- Ettinger, Bracha L. "Transcryptum: Memory Tracing In/For/With the Other." In Bracha L. Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, edited by Brian Massumi, 163–170. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.
- Hirsch, Marianne. *The Generation of Postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.
- Iovino, Serenella, and Serpil Oppermann. "Material Ecocriticism: Materiality, Agency, and the Models of Narrativity." *ecozon@* 3, no. 1 (2012): 75–91. <http://ecozona.eu/article/viewFile/452/477> (26.03.2022).
- Kisiel, Anna. "Touching Trauma: On the Artistic Gesture of Bracha L. Ettinger." *Narracje o Zagładzie* 4 (2018): 138–162.
- Komunyakaa, Yusef. "Facing It." In *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Seventh Edition, Vol. E, *Literature since 1945*, edited by Jerome Klinkowitz and Patricia B. Wallace, 3076–3077. New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007.
- Lacan, Jacques. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience." In *Écrits*. Translated by Bruce Fink in collaboration with Héloïse Fink, Russel Grigg, 75–81. London, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006.
- LaCapra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002.
- Lin, Maya. *Boundaries*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Visible and the Invisible*, edited by Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968.
- Oppermann, Serpil. "From Ecological Postmodernism to Material Ecocriticism: Creative Materiality and Narrative Agency." In *Material Ecocriticism*, edited by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, 21–36. Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014.
- Parr, Adrian. *Deleuze and Memorial Culture. Desire, Singular Memory and the Politics of Trauma*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009.

- Pavlić, Ed. "Open the Unusual Door: Visions from the Dark Window in Yusef Komunyakaa's Early Poems." *Callaloo* 28, no. 3 (2005): 780–796.
- Pollock, Griselda. "Trauma, Time and Painting: Bracha Ettinger and the Matrixial Aesthetic." In: *Bracha L. Ettinger. Eurydyka – Pieta / Eurydice – Pieta*, edited by Anna Chromik, 66–80. Katowice: Muzeum Śląskie, 2018.
- Vermeulen, Pieter. "The Biopolitics of Trauma." In *The Future of Trauma Theory*, edited by Gert Buelens, Samuel Durrant, and Robert Eaglestone, 141–155. London: Routledge, 2014. <http://www.pvermeulen.com/uploads/1/2/4/3/12438327/biopoliticstrauma.pdf> (26.03.2022).

