

Grievous Speech: Nathalie Stephens' *Touch to Affliction* and the City of Death

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Abstract

Like all resonantly elegiac texts, Nathalie Stephens's 2006 book *Touch to Affliction* does more than just locate or inscribe grief; it also challenges the historicized position of affect by dislocating the identity of the mourner, the City of Death through which the mourner roams, and the shifting identity of the mourner's "lost beloved." Stephens's mourner politicizes the act of walking through the city: first, as a "dissonant body" that refuses gender norms, and second, as a stubborn physical presence of public mourning: that which is wrought by the nation, and that to which the nation can never fully respond. Alluding to philosophy about mid-twentieth-century violence, the narrator asks two resonant questions: "Where is the poet who will return language to the body?" and, more problematically, "Where is the body that is prepared to receive language?"
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Résumé

Comme tous les textes résolument élégiaques, le livre *Touch to Affliction* de Nathalie Stephens, publié en 2006, fait plus que simplement localiser ou inscrire le chagrin; il remet également en question la position historicisée de l'affect en disloquant l'identité de la personne en deuil, la Ville de la mort dont elle parcourt les rues, et l'identité fluctuante du « bien-aimé perdu ». La personne en deuil de Stephens politise l'acte de marcher dans la ville : en premier lieu, en tant que « corps dissonant » qui refuse les normes de genre, et en second lieu, en

tant que présence physique obstinée du deuil public : celui qui est façonné par la nation et auquel la nation ne peut jamais répondre pleinement. Faisant allusion à la philosophie de la violence du milieu du 20^e siècle, la narratrice pose deux questions retentissantes : « Où est le poète qui rendra le langage au corps? » et, question plus problématique : « Où est le corps qui est prêt à recevoir le langage? »

There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.

Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1968)

Not confessional. Evidence, rather, of the unspeakable. That thing toward which we move and we are an affront to the language we use to name it.

Nathalie Stephens, *Touch to Affliction* (2006)

To call Nathalie Stephens's 2006 resonantly resistant book of poetry *Touch to Affliction* a text of mourning may be to state the obvious, but like all elegiac texts, Stephens's book does more than just locate or inscribe grief. It also challenges the historicized position of affect by dislocating the identity of the mourner, the City of Death through which the mourner roams, and the shifting identity of the mourner's "lost beloved." Stephens comes to these challenges with a history of working with a poetics of resisting finitude, naming, and the reiterative ending, and exploring the more difficult movements of the in-between, as Stephens describes in a 2009 interview with Kate Eichhorn (65-67). In *Touch to Affliction*, the dissonant body of the narrator is more than a body that is alienated or thrown into an existential crisis by the walk through the ruined city, although these situations may also be true. Perhaps more importantly, it is a body whose dissonance allows the speaker to comment on a subjectivity that has been broken by the language that is supposed to serve it: the language of belonging, and not incidentally, the language of elegy: "I went into a new city with old words. // ...I carried a small body in my teeth. // Claim nothing as your own. Not curvature. Nor comfort. // Nor sleep" (17). In assuming the mourning of others and offering advice for walking through the City of Death, the speaker counsels the refusal of consolation and all other forms of comfort, especially the consolation offered by historiographic materialism that favours tropes of the *pharmakon* or sacrificial bodies to justify theologically sanctioned violence or narratives of political or historical inevitability.

Stephens's interest in Walter Benjamin's (1968) concept of the *nunc stans*, the "abiding now" from his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," is at work throughout *Touch to Affliction*, as is Stephens's deep

suspicion of the "utopian present" as an impossibility that is "terrifying" for the kinds of violence it allows, and in some ways, assumes (Eichhorn 65). Benjamin (1968) warns against this kind of an agreement on a utopian present, and in doing so, casts time itself as a tool manipulated by historical and political construct, "the puppet called historical materialism" that "enlists the services of theology" (253). *Touch to Affliction* is a book-length elegy that explores the paradox of elegiac tradition: in a strange and yet strangely familiar blasted cityscape, a speaker becomes a kind of *flâneur de la pensée de la mort*—or perhaps more elusively, a *flâneur* of the not-quite-forgotten—and the narrative offers elegiac fragments that bear a literary resemblance to mid-century texts like Simone Weil's (1952) *Gravity and Grace*, or Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, with all three texts working in the arena of the intensely-wrought philosophic aphorism. More than one writer has taken on the task of dismantling the masculinist and class-bound tradition of the *flâneur*, and while Stephens alludes to Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" as a major influence in Kate Eichhorn's 2009 interview published in *Prismatic Publics*, Stephens's mourner is meant to politicize the act of walking through the city in at least two ways: first, as a "dissonant body" that refuses gender norms, and second, as a stubborn physical presence of public mourning which is wrought by the nation, and to which the nation can never fully respond. In some ways, it could be said that this was Benjamin's project as well, coming to fruition in the twenty-first century.

As the narrator-mourner moves through the City of Death, Stephens (2006) challenges historiographic materialism that reproduces "the insufficiency of grieving" (73). Alluding to philosophy about mid-twentieth-century violence, the narrator asks two resonant questions: "Where is the poet who will return language to the body?" and, more problematically, "Where is the body that is prepared to receive language?" (16). The city of *Touch to Affliction* is twofold; at once outside the body, a realistic enough historical city washed in a historical blur, this "Not Paris" (33), and a fabled city that springs from inside the speaker's "dissonant" body (28), as the title of one poem suggests: "My thigh grew a city" (17). The classical allusion to Dionysus, conceived in his human mother's womb but stitched into the thigh of Zeus and "grown" to godhood, suggests both

violence and resilience, and even gestures to a socially “dissonant body” that is both male and female. But in *Touch to Affliction*—whether or not the speaker positions themselves as transgender like Tiresias, the seer who was both a man and a woman—the dissonant body of the mourner is a body who, like Tiresias, dwells in the “abiding now,” a position that is especially piquant when we consider Stephens’s own practice of publishing as Nathalie Stephens and also as Nathanaël. The Tiresian potential of Stephens’s text finds corollaries in other recent artistic explorations of Tiresias that underscore the dissonant body’s location in a mourning practice, such as transgender artist Heather Cassils’s recent performance art piece named for the seer, in which Cassils works with the vision of “the body as a social sculpture” (Heyman 2015) and wears “a neoclassical Greek male torso carved out of ice” and melts it with body heat over a four-to-five hour period (Cassils 2015). In *Touch to Affliction* (2006), the cost of returning language to the body is high; the mourner is perpetually “drowning in a mouth that doesn’t close” (72), but at the same time, the narrator refuses the efficacy of memory, choosing instead to note the many ways in which language “sets [the] body against itself” (14).

Reframing the elegy to consider the transgendered and transnational terms of intimacy is no small task, poetically or politically, and necessarily involves a broad and deep investigation into how the language of grief intersects with or reframes concepts of the local and the global, especially the ways in which such categorizations have been mediated by history and violence. Parsing the geographies of inclusion and exclusion, Stephens notes that “the work of time and history” is that of “swallowing” different material histories to favour a single history: “the sort of violences that are subsumed both into history and into the silences of historical narrative” (Stephens, qtd. Eichhorn 2009, 65). Considering the city as the site of mourning in *Touch to Affliction*, Stephens asserts that “cities... become synonymous with the wars they receive” (qtd. Hix 2013). The speaker’s dissonant body is dissonant within the city and within the text. At once a citizen and an outsider, the speaker has a mourning practice that refuses the movements of historical inevitability and consolation. The lost beloved takes the form of a “small body” that the narrator attempts to protect, hide, and save throughout the text: what Kaja Silverman (1996) has called in *The Thresh-*

old of the Visible World a “disprized body” (26), a body whose social value as a citizen goes unrecognized by the state, and what Erin Moure (2012) would call “the unmemntioable” in her book of the same name: a body whose history exists within a shibboleth, at once urgent and unutterable.

The dissonant body in *Touch to Affliction* is not a disposable body, but it is a body that troubles the distance between presence and absence and exists in perpetual precariousness on the margins of an unsustainable world. Judith Butler’s (2009) questions in *Frames of War* about grievable life being defined—and sometimes denied—by a responsiveness that is mediated by affective conditions for social critique find purchase in *Touch to Affliction*, not the least because Stephens locates the mourner in “Not Paris.” What Stephens has written is not specifically a Holocaust text, though the echoes of that historical violence are unmistakable throughout *Touch to Affliction*, from their allusions to philosophers and literary figures who have written extensively about ethics and mid-twentieth-century violence (Simone Weil, Simone de Beauvoir, Yehuda Amichai, Emmanuel Lévinas) to invocation of the lost and their erasure from history. Stephens, like Erin Moure, is Canadian, and both poets have explored necropolitics via the mid-twentieth century European conflict for the philosophical and affective turn that history of violence continues to echo through succeeding generations of the people who were displaced by and sometimes murdered in the conflict. Moure (2012) works with the shibboleth as a tool of historical erasure in *The Unmemntioable*, while Stephens offers her peripatetic mourner—the *flâneur* in the City of Death—as a challenge not only to elegiac consolation but also the assumption that grief is always and only “personal.” Reading *Touch to Affliction* through Sara Ahmed’s (2004) “affective economy” means reconsidering the city as a structure of feeling and acknowledging that, while emotions may be personal, they are not private nor are they isolated from material histories. Ahmed’s observation that emotions “create the very affect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds” (117) is integral to considering how *Touch to Affliction* challenges historiographic materialism and proposes a necropolitics (to use Achille Mbembe’s [2003] term) that regards language as barbarism, with the only solution being the dislocation of grief from the “personal” while rooting it in the intimate. If Mbembe is correct

to note that the central tenets of necropolitics are the exercise of sovereignty as “control over mortality” and the definition of life as “the deployment and manifestation of power” (12), then reconsidering and articulating grief as something larger than the personal is a necessary resistance to such control.

Examining the politics of speaking with and not-naming the dead while excavating a history that seems to be both buried and omnipresent is a tricky balance to maintain, but *Touch to Affliction* is by no means alone in these aims, even within Canadian literature. A number of recent book-length elegies by Canadian writers engage with elegiac necropolitics that challenge the overlying and sometimes deeply manipulative narrative of received history. The elegy has long been a genre that thrives on the contradictory elements of its own conventions even as it displays an extreme willingness to adapt those conventions to shifts in power and problems of the expression of emotion. My own incursions into the study of elegy in Canada began with a consideration of gender with an emphasis on the possibilities of the paternal elegy to act as a feminist moment, debating the terms of socio-cultural power by deconstructing the concept of inheritance. My 2012 book, *The Daughter's Way*, considers among other things the ways in which the elegy is invariably a political genre, even when—or especially when—it concerns a “personal” site of affect that we may be tempted to think exists beyond the political. The potential for a reparative and politically resonant politics of mourning in Canadian women’s elegies has an elemental relationship with genre rebellion: the use of the genre’s surprising flexibility to reveal the possibilities of reading beyond convention. Thinking about global necropolitics as it is written in Canadian poetry means, among other things, engaging with critiques of state authority as a way to inquire into grief on a geopolitical scale while interrogating Canada’s historical positions, with special emphasis on the politics of citizenship. Stephens’s *Touch to Affliction* is an early foray into these questions, and in addition to Erin Moure’s *The Unmemntioable* (2012), Stephens’s work has been followed by other poetic texts that take up similar elegiac interrogations of history, memory, and citizenship: Dionne Brand’s *Ossuaries* (2010; see Quéma 2014; MacDonald 2013); Di Brandt’s *Walking to Mojácar* (2010); Renée Sarojini Saklikar’s *children of air india* (2013; see MacDonald 2015); and Rachel Zolf’s *Janey's Arca-*

dia (2014) to name only a few. As Stephens has said in an interview with rob mcLennan (2007), “The holding patterns (nation, text) reveal our own subscriptions to nationalistic (genealogical) litany; this is not a call for dissidence, but a manifestation perhaps of the insidious overlap of lives and the constructs that seek to contain them in distinction” (n.p.).

To work with elegiac writing, within and outside of poetry, is to note it everywhere in contemporary culture, and becoming acquainted with the demands of grief politics necessitates discovering that elegiac affect can encompass a range of emotion; grief can manifest in a text as sadness, anger, ambivalence, fear, unexplainable joy, wry humour, jealousy, chagrin, numbness, panic, and flat indifference. Elegiac affect in its articulated chaos can also present as—and sometimes can only be offered—as the inchoate moment: both fresh in perspective and frustrating in its paradoxical aims to gesture to an insoluble riddle. But all of these ways of “saying the unsayable” emphasize, W. David Shaw (1994) has noted, the quintessential elegiac paradox: the way grief manifests in the literary ritual of mourning that we call the elegy as a sense of urgent reluctance. As Stephens (2006) puts it, “It is not a matter of words for things. Rather it is a matter of the distance between the word and the thing” (31). In *Touch to Affliction*, the elegy becomes not only a literary ritual of mourning, but also a language, or a non-language: one that unites and divides groups of people not only because they share grief, but also because they refuse or reject its articulation as a mode of erasure.

Initially, what caught my attention in Stephens’s *Touch to Affliction* was the presence of Simone Weil in the text; rethinking the elegy as a political genre brought me to reading Weil’s (1952) philosophy—especially her decreative moment—as a search for a tangled riddle of self and not-self. While all roads do not lead to Weil, the frequency of her appearance in Canadian literature is pretty arresting, and the ways in which decreation and elegy meet are fascinating. *Touch to Affliction*—with its Weilian interest in affliction as devotion, its philosophy, and its address of twentieth-century violence through Walter Benjamin and Emmanuel Lévinas, among others—is less about Weil as a historical figure than it is a text influenced by Weil’s context and inquiries, although Weil does appear in Stephens’s *City of Death* as an enraptured (and raptured) teacher: “Weil’s language was

a language of not meaning./ She left room for the thing that was breaking. / She slept with her head against a pile of stone” (Stephens 2006, 37). It is hard not to hear an echo of Weil in the narrator’s statement that “Your language gives me order. It says nothing of *la douleur*” (38), a moral and linguistic conundrum that is the affective core of *Touch to Affliction* as the speaker works to find room for what is breaking.

In an interview with rob mclennan, Stephens (2007) notes that the text struggles not only with language as a system of order but also with time as a linear construct:

I could measure time in deaths, disease; or else in encounter, friendship; gardens, architecture. The number of falls—historical and communal. Geography is one way of measuring distance, the many encroachments, and yes, a form of inscription, a way of approaching textuality, of moving through text. But it is not ever limited to the place where I am. Rather, it is cumulative, and the madresses emerge with those accretions. (n.p.)

The city, then, with its cumulative encroachments and inscriptions, cannot be reduced to a geographical location, or even to a culture, but acts in Stephens’s work as a site doomed—and sometimes nearly erased—by history but still accessible via mourning. With its aphoristic address that is more than a little reminiscent of Simone Weil’s writing style, *Touch to Affliction*’s City of Death also appears in British philosopher Gillian Rose’s (1996) discussion of necropolitics and power, *Mourning Becomes the Law*. Rose, herself a passionate reader of Weil, criticized postmodernism for its “despairing rationalism without reason” (7) and goes on to point out that mourning’s power is absolutely not diffuse or melancholic. For Rose, the mourner’s task is not only to transgress the ways in which civic law restricts mourning practices, but also to perform mourning as a “just act” that will actually become the law that reifies mourners as civic subjects (103). Rose is no utopian herself; she is also reaching for a model of mourning that resists despair and refuses the kind of conservative consolation that suggests affect must be controlled and dissolved for the good of the status quo. Rose roots the performance of mourning in a challenge to the city’s laws of citizenship and belonging, arguing that mourning a body disprized to the point of death

by an unjust regime is the ultimate political act that can reform the city:

Mourning draws on transcendent but representable justice, which makes the suffering of immediate experience visible and speakable. When completed, mourning returns the soul to the city, renewed and invigorated for participation, ready to take on the difficulties and injustices of the existing city. The mourner returns to negotiate and challenge the changing inner and outer boundaries of the soul and of the city; she returns to their perennial anxiety. (36)

This “perennial anxiety” in *Touch to Affliction* seems located very much within Stephens’s mourner, but it is also to be found in the city as well, beset by the dead and by its lack of narrative to account for their macabre omnipresence, as in the poem “Not Paris”:

In Paris, the Seine overflows and corpses wash onto its shores. The tourists board the bateaux-mouches. The sky fills with buzzards. And the Levites gnash their teeth. Le corps is not the same as corpse. And this is not Paris. But it’s close enough. (Stephens 2006, 38)

Reading Stephens’s work through Rose’s (1996) view of mourning as a just act that will transform the city might seem antithetical given that Stephens does not claim the agora as a place of public speech as many philosophers do, but rather, through Benjamin, the public square as a site of blind consent and witness to execution:

The public square is foremost the place of the gallows, perhaps the prototypical spectatorship, with its murderously inscribed desires. Consensus really is the violent abdication of thought. The tacit relinquishment of historical agency to an inviolable executioner—history itself, perhaps. (Stephens, qtd. Hix n.p.)

But Stephens (2013) also claims in the poem “Al-ler-retour” that grief can be an enclosed space, a garrison that surrounds the mourner: “What medium passes through me? Grief like a garrison and I am everywhere I have ever been.” Rose, locating the space of mourning outside the walls of the city, shows no trust in the public square either, in full historical awareness that the agora did not favour the speech or the emotions of women,

foreigners, or those with different (perhaps “dissonant”) bodies. If we are looking for a way to read Stephens’s dissonant mourner as an accusative citizen, Rose’s (1996) caution against “despairing rationalism” buoys up Stephens’s mourner as a speaker who does not subscribe to a conservative ethics of consolation, but rather one of insistent implacability beyond the wildness of grief and well-placed in reason:

What is relevant is not memory but its absence. Is not habit but its betrayal. Is not innovation but // humility. Is not love but anguish. Is not literature but history. Is not language but sediment. Is not amnesty.

Is grievous.

Is grievous.

Is grievous. (Stephens 2006, 54)

And that which is grievous is placed prominently within the text that is this City of Death. In the multi-page poem “We are Accountable for What We Aren’t Told,” Stephens (2006) calls up the various histories of Paris to note the kinds of narratives that dwell in the blurred violence against peoples whose citizenship is in question. They invoke French xenophobia by naming the Hungarian writer Ágota Kristóf and “her truncated country on a mouth in short sentences” as well as the Algerian writer Mohammed “Dib and his displaced ancestry, the culled strangers on unnamed streets” (64). Stephens alludes to George Steiner’s 1960 essay “The Hollow Miracle” that condemns the German language as complicit in violence, noting “Steiner’s century is closed to further inspection and our books are little else than capsules of complacency” (Stephens 2006, 55). They allude to Simone de Beauvoir’s (1962) story, in *The Prime of Life*, of knowing that her young friend Juan Bourla, a former student of Sartre’s and a Sephardic Jew, was arrested by Nazis in 1943 and taken to a concentration camp. Implying that even de Beauvoir’s sympathetic narrative carries with it a sense of historical inevitability, Stephens’s narrator suggests instead that the “abiding now” might be better viewed from Bourla’s perspective rather than that of de Beauvoir:

Juan Bourla is a voice recorded on paper. A room filled with smoke. History is a provocation...To // Lise he is a body in shadow. To Simone de Beauvoir he is what remains unseen.

In Bourla’s Paris, it is always 1943. The rail lines anticipate stone. (Stephens 2006, 60)

The provocation of history is the temptation to yield to memory as unmediated truth and to a sacrificial narrative as “set in stone.” Eschewing what Rose (1996) calls the “evasive theology, insinuated epistemology and sacralised polity” that “import the features of the City of Death remorselessly” (293), Stephens’s grievous speech points directly to Rose’s “broken middle” of postmodernism. Under these terms, Stephens’s text can definitely be viewed as part of a continuum of elegiac paradox that engages directly with necropolitics in Canadian literature (and significantly elsewhere), and it may also be thought of as a text in which grief scours history for the residue of affliction. The question of what exactly the narrator is afflicted with (or perhaps, what the narrator is afflicting) remains to be answered. Has the narrator been, like Benjamin’s “Angel of History,” effectively “blown backwards” into the future, so that Benjamin’s *nunc stans* can warn us to be perpetually resistant to the toxicity of the utopian present? We could read Stephens’s historically resonant but contextually elusive text as an antidote to civic and elegiac resolution. We could begin, then, with these lines as a guide: “We are walking backwards into our lives. Our cities are incensed. They fester on our thighs. And we lick at them in garish immoderate delight” (Stephens 2006, 9). Mourning has a civic function, and at least part of it, *pace* Rose (1996), is to suggest a mourning practice that resists a prescribed civic sacrifice and a proud nationalist frame on history.

Describing the perceived “utopia” of the present moment as “terrifying” (Eichhorn 2009, 65), Stephens offers the dissonant body as haunted, but definitely not doomed by the “despairing rationalism” of which Gillian Rose warns. Rose (1995) returns to a description of the “City of Death” in the opening pages of her last-composed book, *Love’s Work*, and advises the risk of relation and failure—like the protection of that “small body” to which Stephens alludes throughout *Touch to Affliction*—as the mourner’s true duty rather than a search for the effacement of pain. The epigraph to *Love’s Work*, from the writings of nineteenth-century Eastern Orthodox mystic Staretz Silouan, is “Keep your mind in hell, and despair not” (n.p.), and this aphorism reminds us, as Rose notes, that “existence is robbed of its weight, its gravity when it is deprived of its agon” (Rose 1995, 106). Stephens’s surreal image of the thigh growing a

city is an excellent example of Rose's caveat to retain our agon. With this metaphor, Stephens (2006) suggests the dissonant body is the physical foundation for the city, rather than the more popular opposite: the city as a receptacle for broken and unwanted bodies, the city as "fosse commune" (60). A world in which the dissonant body makes the city is very different from the world in which the normative body makes the city, and is then embraced as heroic and utopic. If it is painful to grow a city on one's thigh, it is matched by the pain of being "broken between morality and legality, autonomy and heteronomy, cognition and norm, activity and passivity" (Rose 1996, 285), and superseded by the task of speaking the impossible grief of a population devastated by war while refusing the efficacy of language and of memory itself.

Stephens challenges the narrative structure of grief in the context of the present as she locates time itself as the "broken vessel" of language (qtd. Eichhorn 2009, 67). The paradox of *Touch to Affliction* (2006) is that language makes grieving impossible: "the distance between the word and the thing" (31) seems potentially infinite, yet only language can point to the "unholdable" past, or as Stephens writes, only language can offer "a measure for what is lost...with our texts full of faces and our hands like water getting into everything" (51). Other elegists have noted, as Stephens (2006) does, that "Inside memory is a failure of memory" (18), but Stephens refuses not only consolation but also pushes against a historiographic narrative of grief. In return, Stephens offers "Finitude Lamentation," beginning with an undoing of the famous first line of Rilke's *Duino Elegies*:

Who cries out anymore?
This arms askew dwindling and furor.
This inconsequential.
This river torn weary and walking behind.
This fantasy touching the curve of gentle.
This finitude lamentation.
This gridded this untraced stoppable.
You bent a body into language. It ran arrested ran.
(Stephens 2006, 39)

One reviewer of *Touch to Affliction* has noted astutely that, "Even the tiniest inversions of diction or unconventional, abstract syntax earn their place in this city. The city could be Paris, to which [Stephens]

makes multiple references, but it could just as easily be 1945-Berlin, or 1917-Moscow, or any other city in time of strife" (Hurtado 2007, n.p.). When Stephens (2006) concludes that though "our languages are infinite and murderous...there is a word for incomplete and it begins inside" (75), we must think of the effort it takes to "bend a body into language," especially a dissonant body whose narrative challenges official histories and sometimes is violently sacrificed to them. Writing necropolitics inevitably engages with an elegy-beyond-elegy, a frame of reference that is excoriated by reductive conceptions of citizenship.

In some ways, power and the possibility of justice seem a long way away from the barren plain of Stephens's City of Death. However, it is just that discrepancy that animates the refusal of the narrator to either yield to despair or to abandon it. The tone of the text seems at first to have plenty in common with "aberrated" mourning in Rose's (1996) terms, the kind of mourning in which an unending despair is conflated with postmodern alienation. But read another way, the unnamed flâneur of Stephens's text is the dissatisfied subject, unwilling to accept the parameters of a language in which the conditions of attention are so closely aligned with the conditions of annihilation. Rose warns that to ignore or efface the brokenness of the middle is to inherit—without surcease—a despair disguised as rationality: "If the broken middle is abandoned instead of thought systematically, then the resulting evasive theology, insinuated epistemology, sacralised polity, will import the features of the City of Death remorselessly" (293).

Interviewed by H. L. Hix in March 2013, Stephens noted that "The city is an architecture; it is also an idea. Its vociferations make something of the structures, which is unscriptable. Maybe it is this which necessitates the intrusion of a foreignness in the body of the city itself" (n.p.). The pun on the speaker as a "foreign body" invading the City of Death to reinscribe elegiac convention as implacable in the face of despairing rationalism is perhaps the best way to consider the place of the affective economy in *Touch to Affliction* (2006), an economy in which "a body that can receive language" and in which "the hands that weigh grief are implacable" (47).

In this light, we can read the lamentation about finitude as being something other than a lamentation

that promotes finitude. Instead, it notes that Rilke's unheard cry undoes itself in perlocution: the question about "if I cried out, who among the angelic orders would hear me?" is not the cry, but if the question is heard, does it negate the need for the cry? Does the question blot out the cry? If, as Stephens (2006) writes, "our century...appeases itself with confession," then the elegist who addresses that world must be by constitution and argument "ungainly and stubborn" (63) in order to offer ways of undoing appeasement and to maintain a sense of affliction as a way of speaking, "getting nowhere with and without our languages. Our bodies breaking form" (23).

As Dionne Brand (2010) notes in *Ossuaries*, historical violence is not only a narrative and an action. It is also the very air we breathe in the twenty-first century, a legacy that is both metaphor and material reality:

in our induced days and wingless days,
my every waking was incarcerated,
each square metre of air so toxic with violence
the atmospheres were breathless there (10)

Brand's and Stephens's narrators could not be said to be equivalent or even to share political solidarity. However, the narrative voices of these two book-length elegies do share the courage to condemn those who cleanse history of its atrocities and an understanding of social and cultural incarceration in the twenty-first century as fashioned by all the centuries preceding. Both of these books demonstrate that the resistance of necropolitical elegies is not a resistance to grief, nor a resistance to history, but rather a resistance to the violent subversion of grief into a narrative of appropriated sacrifice that shores up a necropolitics of late capitalism that is used, more often than not, to strengthen the status quo of nation and homogenous culture. There are moments in *Touch to Affliction* when Benjamin's (1968) warning against the narrativization of time is paramount to identifying and protecting that "small body" as a receptor of language, or as a marker of what drowned in a hundred unnamed and unnameable cities in the mid-twentieth century violence about and against belonging, and still is drowning in the twenty-first century in the necropolitics of migration and citizenship. If we are suspicious of consolation, and take note of Benjamin's warning that "the past carries with it a temporal index by which it

is referred to redemption" (254), then Stephens's (2006) concern about what it takes to "bend a body into language" is fundamental to the affective economy in which *Touch to Affliction* argues for the role of the dissonant body in necropolitics. "Le vide is not nothing," asserts the flaneur-mourner (45) who dwells in the void, and who struggles for the language to speak those "small bodies" into an unconsolated and vibrant mourning.

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