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TO SEE AND BE SEEN: SIGHT, SURVEILLANCE, AND WITNESS

IN WANDA COLEMAN'S POETICS OF LOS ANGELES

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BY

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ABSTRACT

TO SEE AND BE SEEN: SIGHT, SURVEILLANCE, AND WITNESS

IN WANDA COLEMAN'S POETICS OF LOS ANGELES

BY SCOTT SCHOENBERG

Los Angeles poet Wanda Coleman's depiction of the absurdity and obscenity of sight-level judgment, frequently manifested as racism, is a central pillar of her work. The idea of being seen, or being intentionally unseen—often by civic design—weaves through her poems, essays, stories, and interviews as she contextualizes Los Angeles. One facet of my argument is that Coleman's frequent depiction of people as having eye and/or vision maladies is a means by which she defamiliarizes racism and transforms it from a cultural construct into an individual fault of vision and visibility. I also argue that she frames racism along a continuum of visibility, beginning with sight-level prejudice, which then expands into a larger conceptualization of visibility, inclusive of specified *seen* and *unseen* people and populations, and extending to a discourse on surveillance, which finally resolves into a discussion of collective witness.

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Introduction: Navigating the Fantasy Geographies of Wanda Coleman's Los Angeles

Wanda Coleman was known as “the unofficial poet laureate of Los Angeles,” an epithet that speaks to Coleman’s close association with the city, an association that has come to dominate, even eclipse, many other considerations about the poet. Tony Magistrale, the first scholar to engage critically with Coleman’s work all the way back in 1989, identifies the key subjects of Coleman’s poetry to be “black oppression, female persecution, and the inequitable class structure of contemporary America” (Magistrale). Magistrale’s assessment is undoubtedly correct, particularly when discussing her early work. But if these are the key subjects of her poetry, then Los Angeles is certainly her muse, the city often becoming more than mere inspiration and/or backdrop and instead her explicit subject as well. At the very least, it is difficult to decouple the particular imprint of Los Angeles from the subject matrix that Magistrale outlines. What is clear from her work is that Coleman loved Los Angeles even as she criticized it. Or maybe she criticized it because she loved it. “South hell” she calls the city in one of her poems; “Raffia,” after the palm trees that line its streets, in another; the epigraph to “Flight of the California Condor” reads: “*for you, los angeles—you at my jugular.*” In the obituary he penned for her in *The Nation*, E. Ethelbert Miller observes, “Wanda didn’t just live in Los Angeles—she was LA,” a reflection of Miller’s conception of Coleman as being so wrapped up in—and having captured in her work—so much of the beauty and ugliness and contradictions of Los Angeles that any effort to untangle the threads of connection would be an exercise in futility.

Coleman’s life and work encompass two fantasy geographies of Los Angeles, South Central and Hollywood. She lived and worked, especially in the early part of her life, in South Central L.A., a nebulous area with so much cultural baggage that in 2003 the City Council changed its name to South Los Angeles on all city documents. The name change took, and South

Central no longer exists as a specific place at all, if it ever was one, except for a small neighborhood Downtown that the city calls “Historic South Central,” a parcel far removed from the huge swath of the city that South Central used to encompass. Dionne Bennett writes, “South Central has never merely existed; it has been invented and imagined, erased and resurrected through an intersection of competing names, narratives, images, and geographic spaces, some real and some merely represented” (Hunt 217). As she observes, the term was officially used in the McCone Commission Report, “a document that has been criticized for its superficial discussion of the complex events that shaped the Watts riots of 1965.” As she further notes, residents of South Los Angeles reported that the term was not in popular circulation until the report was released. So the name was an invention of the McCone Report, but, for better and worse, it became both the official and unofficial name of the geography of Black Los Angeles. Interestingly, Coleman views the name as a small point of pride for Black Angelenos:

[W]e had red lines, my parents could not live in other parts of the city, they had to live in South, which became South Los Angeles and later South Central and is now going back to South Los Angeles again. To take away its Black identity, even *that* has to be taken away, we cannot have anything that is holding... (Joseph)

Where Bennett sees the term as a media shorthand that “constructed Black Los Angeles as a site of grotesque cultural pathology,” Coleman views it as a sobriquet of Black identity, one that the city changed in its ongoing project of making Black Los Angeles invisible.

Coleman also worked in Hollywood, Los Angeles’s vaunted dream factory and major cultural production center. Unlike “South Central,” there is still a Hollywood neighborhood with distinct boundaries. But just as South Central became a cultural descriptor more than a neighborhood, typically invoked as a shorthand for “Black neighborhood” or “Black Los Angeles” or simply “gang-infested ghetto,” the name “Hollywood” is much more frequently

invoked to describe the entertainment industry and the idea of Hollywood-as-dream-factory than its 22-square-mile physical geography. In the 1970s, Coleman worked in this fantasy Hollywood, and she even received an Emmy Award for her writing for the long-running NBC soap opera *Days of Our Lives* in 1976. The conceit of this fantasy Hollywood is that image trumps everything else. This simple idea reverberates across multiple dimensions of our culture. It is a joke-turned-cliché in Los Angeles to say that the homecoming queens and kings from all across the nation come here to become actors.

If there is an idiomatic throughline to Coleman's work, it is an absolute refusal to indulge in fantasy that is not strongly anchored to reality. There is desire, there is eroticism, there is sex, but there is no *romance* in her poetry, "romance" here referring to an idealization of love. Instead she presents a realism that at once acknowledges the fantasy but insists upon the unvarnished truth that lies beneath the fantastic veneer. The tension between the fantasy and the reality becomes her explicit subject in "Art & Embellishment" (2003):

as we drive the shore in Bondi Beach
 i bend to tie my orange shoelaces under
 a tall pine in Griffith Park as the fey waiter
 at Café Luna tells me they've changed the
 menu and no longer serve my favorite panini
 Paul says this is a bad scene and he can't
 handle it man as I deplane in Honolulu
 i'm overcome by foreboding & disappointment (Ostinato 18)

The stanza, a fantasy interlude of some imagined Hollywood jet-setter's impossibly blessed life, is quickly followed by a shattering of illusion: "when all my untold stories break for the exit / my head explodes." It is the stanza that immediately follows the line, though, that takes the sentiment from the clouds and all but buries it in the dirt:

slavery's been dead nigh a century
 or more but i carry my chain everywhere

i am a lower form of urban intelligence
 traveling the backside of the underground
 stranded where the cul-de-sac crosses
 the dead end. it is 110° in the heat forever
 and the concrete is boiling my feet inside
 this gummy crust that used to be my sneakers

No matter what the speaker does, no matter how much she accomplishes, she can never shed the chain of racism that holds her down. The phrase “stranded where the cul-de sac crosses / the dead end” is a blunt statement of fatalism in the face of this intransigent racism. This is a theme that Coleman returns to time and again throughout her work, most notably in the series of poems called “African Sleeping Sickness.” African sleeping sickness (African trypanosomiasis) is a real condition, an insect-borne parasitic infection whose symptomatology morphs over time. In Coleman’s conceptualization, it becomes a metaphor for the ways in which racism evolves depending on current cultural norms. In her own words, African sleeping sickness is “...a virus that morphs, so the minute you cure it, it takes another shape and continues to proliferate, that’s what racism is like” (Joseph).

Coleman’s depiction of the absurdity and obscenity of sight-level judgment, frequently manifested as racism, is a central pillar of her work. The idea of being seen, or being intentionally unseen—often by civic design—weaves through her poems, essays, stories, and interviews as she contextualizes Los Angeles. One of her most celebrated poems, “Where I Live” (1979), which I discuss below, can be read as no less than an urgent demand for the Black underclass to be seen. One facet of my argument is that Coleman’s frequent depiction of people as having eye and/or vision maladies is a means by which she defamiliarizes racism and transforms it from a cultural construct into an individual fault of vision and visibility. This might seem trite, as, for one thing, any single person’s individual racism is not nearly as corrosive to

society as is systemic cultural and/or civic racism. But in her poems that deal with her childhood awakening to racism, this simple paradigm is extremely affecting and effective. I also argue that she frames racism along a continuum of visibility, beginning with sight-level prejudice, which then expands into a larger conceptualization of visibility, inclusive of specified *seen* and *unseen* people and populations, and extending to a discourse on surveillance, which finally resolves into a discussion of collective witness. There is a direct correlation between a population's being under a state of surveillance and its being invisibilized.¹ In Coleman's verse, surveillance can come in the form of the L.A.P.D.'s helicopters circling the Black population in South Central, or it can arrive via interpersonal interactions, such as when a librarian keeps a watchful eye on the young Black speaker in "Chapter 2 of the Story" (1998). The final plank in this continuum of vision/visibility, that of collective witness, represents an inverse of the surveillance state, wherein the citizens who are under surveillance collectively bear witness to the injustices visited upon them. This theme of bearing witness is particularly present in her poems "Please Please Stop the Madness-Driven Violence," "A Rage Revivified," and "After the Rampage," each of which I discuss below. But as Coleman suggests in an essay she wrote for *The Nation* about Latasha Harlins, the act of bearing witness is not without cost and can collectively traumatize the cohort bearing witness.

Jennifer Ryan-Bryant, the scholar who has most doggedly advocated for Coleman's inclusion in the critical canon, notes that Coleman's frequent use of nonstandard spellings and punctuation, lack of capitalization, and periodic use of midsentence slashes are all devices employed by poets associated with the Black Arts Movement, an informal group to which Coleman is tangentially tied. Coleman brushes off any close association she may have had with the movement but makes allowances for its stylistic hallmarks to have rubbed off on her. She

¹ Please see <https://grammarphobia.com/blog/2022/10/invisibilize.html> for a discussion of the verb "invisibilize."

says, “So while the Black Arts Movement (and E. E. Cummings) influenced me, it did not embrace me, and I was left to find other avenues of expression” (Ryan). Even though these devices were used by others, I think it is worthwhile to consider a couple of potential reasons for Coleman’s use of them, as this is a stylistic choice she employed consistently across the decades of her writing life. For one thing, in a poem such as “Where I Live,” the lack of capitalization at the beginning of the first stanza signals a continuous flow of thought from the title through to the body of the work. The title “Where I Live” segues seamlessly into the first line as one continuous thought—“Where I Live” / at the lip of a big black vagina” (African 21)—the title functioning as a refrain throughout the verse. Coleman identifies as a member of the working class. As such, her practice of opening poems with lowercase letters and closing them without end punctuation is suggestive of a populist stance (in the sense of the word that means “a general concern for ordinary people”²) in which there are no barriers to participation in her poetry. In other words, the poetry is not bound by hard perimeters. There are no *bars* to entry. It can thus be seen as a simple gesture of solidarity with her readers that is in keeping with her unpretentious sensibilities. This corresponds with her consistent and correct use of internal punctuation. The idea seems to be that while she won’t water or dumb down her poetry, she will make it as formally approachable as possible for her readers. As for the midsentence slashes that she frequently employs, this seems to be a direction to the reader for how to approach the cadence of a given line. So, again, her project is at least partially one of concern for her readers.

Wanda Coleman’s parents moved to Watts when it was still predominantly white. Coleman recalls: “They settled in the Watts neighborhood when they were the only African-American couple in a 4 block radius” (Joseph). Born in 1946, Coleman witnessed white flight firsthand, a phenomenon she engages in her poem “Flight of the California Condor (2)”:

² <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/populism>

in 1956
 they were all over the elementary school
 grounds
 but within two years they were all going
 and by 1958 when i graduated
 most were gone (Bathwater 31)

Coleman likens the white Watts residents to an endangered bird, the California condor, because the white residents become rarer and rarer in her environment, to the point of near extinction.

The poem's power derives from Coleman's use of a child's perspective to depict the incomprehensible realities of a society so steeped in racism that the white residents of Watts would rather move to different parts of the city—or flee the city entirely and seek refuge in the suburbs—than share their neighborhood with Black people. And there were lots of new arrivals, as the time period that Coleman's poem depicts is concurrent with the Second Great Migration. Unlike the first Great Migration, which took place roughly between the two World Wars and which predominantly consisted of rural farmers from the South making their way to the Northeast and Midwest, the Second Great Migration saw millions of African Americans leave the South for, yes, the Northeast and Midwest, but also for Western cities like Oakland, Portland, and Los Angeles. Tens of thousands of African Americans came to Los Angeles during this period largely to meet the demand of defense companies who needed to increase their output due to World War II and the Cold War.

Krista Comer notes of Coleman: “She likes cars. She loves the freeway. She is thoroughly preoccupied with issues of space and mobility. What more signature affections could register [her] as an ‘L.A. woman’ and also as a westerner?” (Comer). The complicating factor, as Comer points out, is that Coleman was neither blonde nor white nor waiflike nor demure. No, as a Black woman and radical feminist, she represented a challenge to the popular conception of the “California girl” as a “bikinied nonintellectual” (Comer). But it's her Blackness, more than

anything else, that presented the young Coleman with the greatest challenge when trying to fit into the California fantasy. In an interview conducted late in her life, she recalls:

They [her parents] didn't tell me about racism. It told me about itself. It came along eventually, but the first five years of my life were fear-free. Until I entered the public school system, I thought of myself as this wonderful preacher, getting ready to explore the earth! (Joseph)

Several of her poems deal with the jarring and alienating effects of the racism that she encountered in her childhood and adolescence. She is precise in capturing the difficulties of growing up that *everybody* faces while highlighting this additional cultural violence that only minorities and especially Black people are subjected to in this country.

In one such retrospective verse, “Beaches. Why I Don’t Care for Them,” Coleman writes of this particular complication:

associations: years of being ashamed/my sometimes
fat, ordinary body. years later shame passed
left a sad aftertaste. mama threatening to beat me if i got
my hair wet. curses as she brushes the sand out, "it's gonna
break it off—it's gonna ruin your scalp."
or the tall blond haired gold/bronze-muscled
lifeguards who played with the little white ones but gawked at us like we were lepers
("African" 132)

The shame of being fat or ordinary is the type of shame that is almost universal. But by the time she gets to the end of the passage, the speaker is being gawked at as if she were a “leper.” Her description of the lifeguards as if they are part of the Greek pantheon (“tall blond haired gold/bronze-muscled”) juxtaposed against her recollection of the painful process of having the sand removed from her hair by her mother speaks to the quotidian difficulties encountered by African Americans in a world run by and dominated by white people. The speaker goes on:

...the only time
i like the beach is when it's cold hostile and gray. i feel

kin to it then. or at night. when it speaks a somber tongue
only the enlightened perceive.

It is a profound alienation that the speaker acknowledges when she admits to feeling a kinship not with any other people in the poem but with the beach “when it’s cold hostile and gray.” The grayness suggests a mood while also flattening color differences. There is an almost Buddhist implication here that the speaker has reached a state of enlightenment by way of suffering through being constantly on the butt end of racism.

As Comer notes, freeways figure in Coleman’s poetry, such as in “I Live for My Car,” just as they figure in the lives of everyday Angelenos. Freeways are monuments to movement and sprawl, but they are also monuments to segregation and to the advent of the Black ghetto in Los Angeles. They slice up the city in illogical ways that can only be explained through a history of redlining and eminent domain. The institution and wide adoption of housing covenants explicitly denied sale, lease, or rental of property to African Americans and other minority groups, resulting in the corralling of large numbers of African Americans during the Second Great Migration into urban districts with high rates of poverty, crime, and incarceration, and far out of visible range of the city’s centers of power, whether at city hall or on the Westside.

Coleman writes:

my car’s an absolute necessity in this city of cars where
you come to know people best by how they maneuver on the freeway
make lane changes or handle off-ramps. (“Live”)

As in the “Beaches” poem discussed above, Coleman’s verse suggests both a flattening effect and profound alienation. The flattening effect in this poem has nothing to do with the dulling of colors but instead has to do with the leveling of class strata by way of everybody having to drive through the same traffic to get to where they are going in Los Angeles. This flattening might

seem to be a good thing, but any good feeling is undermined by the alienation that Coleman's speaker conveys when she says, "you come to know people best by how they maneuver on the freeway / make lane changes or handle off-ramps." The sentiment is suggestive of an existence entirely cut off from people. The fuller implication is that the Black speaker of the poem finds sanctuary in her car precisely due to this separation. It is only when she is cut off from people that her actions—and, by extension, her life in full—can be judged meritocratically rather than by sight-level deficiencies. So when the speaker says, "my car's an absolute necessity in this city of cars," she is acknowledging the practical reality of needing a car to go to and from the places she needs to go, but she is also confronting the idea that her life can only be fully realized when she is completely separated from the rest of her fellows. And so her car becomes necessary for self-preservation.

In writing this brief introduction to Wanda Coleman's life and work my aim has been to provide my readers with a sense of the entire milieu from which Coleman's work emerges. It has become something of a cliché to talk about Coleman as the poet of Los Angeles. But as I have tried to illustrate, it is also impossible to decouple her work from the city that she wrote about so frequently. As such, my goal is to synergize this L.A.-centric framework with my particular analysis, that is, an interpretation of her work based on sight, surveillance, and witness.

“Where I Live”: Sight and Exposure in Wanda Coleman’s Los Angeles

“Where I Live” from *Mad Dog Black Lady* (1979), the first collection of Coleman’s poetry from Black Sparrow Press, is perhaps Wanda Coleman’s best known and most celebrated poem. Though a poem through and through, I read it as if it is a manifesto for Coleman’s project, which is, at least in part, a plea for the Black underclass to be *seen* by the culture at large. Brian Kim Stefans writes of the poem’s opening: “‘At the lip of a big black vagina’ might be the scariest invocation of a cityscape since Eliot’s ‘Unreal city / Under the brown fog of a winter dawn’ in *The Waste Land*.” Stefans writes that Coleman’s poem, like T. S. Eliot’s opus, is Dantescan. He writes that it is “a vision of hell... that charts a vast and eternal damnation” (Stefans 273). The speaker of the poem herself also calls it a hell: “eyes full of rainbows looking forward to the / day i leave this hell” (“African” 21). She knows, and we know, that the day she’s looking forward to, the day that she will finally leave “this hell,” is the day that she will die. Death, then, is her only means of escape.

But to take Stefans’s description of an “eternal damnation” seriously, we must look beyond the speaker’s *personal* journey—her journey that ends with death—and look to the entire milieu that the speaker is describing in “Where I Live.” If it is a description of hell, if it is a description of eternal damnation, then it is a description of Los Angeles as a sort of hell. But it is also something else, or not merely a description of Los Angeles qua Los Angeles. It is both more specific and more general than that. The speaker closes the poem by naming the more specific place: “black los angeles” (“she’s the baddest piece of ass on the west coast / named black los angeles”). The question, then, is whether the “black” modifier refers specifically to the Black neighborhoods of Los Angeles, areas *ghettoized* by redlining laws in the first half of the 20th century and made infamous in the public consciousness by way of their association with urban

blight, riots, gang activity, and the crack epidemic, and also just merely famous in gangsta-rap reveries? Or is the speaker referring to something more nebulous, something less concrete, something more general, something more akin to “the Black experience” itself, with her descriptions of a sort of hell on earth? As Tony Magistrale argues, “her characters come to speak for an entire race or gender.” While Magistrale may be slightly overstating the case, her poems aren’t *merely* about the particular individuals that they purport to be about. And in “Where I Live,” Coleman’s pissed-off, irony-laden verse becomes an urgent plea for the Black underclass to be *seen* by the culture at large.

It is illustrative to compare the wasteland in Eliot’s poem to the wasteland of Coleman’s “Where I Live.” Eliot’s “scary” cityscape belongs to London in the years following World War I, a war of mechanized death on a scale previously unimagined and fought for reasons that were obscure even to the combatants. This clear antecedent for Eliot’s poem suggests the existence of a concomitant antecedent for the wasteland of Coleman’s poem. I would argue that the African American experience itself—with its roots in the slave trade, aborted Reconstruction, Jim Crow laws, and the rest—is the concomitant antecedent. The opening line of Eliot’s opus, “April is the cruellest month, breeding,” is a statement, laced with acid irony, of utter hopelessness. Spring’s bringing life (“...breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land”) becomes a potent image and reminder of the limitless cruelty and cyclical violence playing out among the living. It is cruel, even unholy, the speaker seems to be saying, that life insists on perpetuating itself in the postwar wasteland. How can lilacs rise up out of all this death? It is a mocking cruelty that they do.

Like the speaker in *The Waste Land*, the speaker in “Where I Live” also opens her poem with a harrowing depiction of birth and regeneration. She begins her jeremiad by intoning, “at the lip of a big black vagina / birthing nappy headed pickaninnies every hour on the hour.” This

startling couplet, likening the cityscape to a vulva in perpetual birth throes, advances racialized and gendered stereotypes—that women, especially Black women, are nothing more than baby factories; that Black women are both promiscuous and lazy, and thus, the insinuation goes, a burden on society; that Black women are so horny and irresponsible that they forget to use birth control (even though the forces of repression seek to ban prophylactics outright); et cetera. The fact that the insinuations are somewhat contradictory doesn't stop them from being made. The speaker takes on an affect of haughty, boastful pride, embracing and reclaiming the stereotypes and thus defanging them while simultaneously using them as a mirror to reflect back to the reader the nightmarish reality of the Black woman's experience in the American city circa the late 1970s. The “nappy headed pickaninnies” that the “big black vagina” is producing “every hour on the hour” become, in keeping with one particularly virulent stereotype—that of the “welfare queen”—a Black woman's meal ticket. The term “nappy headed” is a derogatory term for the hair texture of people of African descent. A “pickaninny” is not simply the offspring of an African American woman but the dominant caricature of a Black child through most of our nation's history, a caricature laced with the baggage of Jim Crow, the plantation tradition, and slavery. An army of “pickaninnies birthed every hour on the hour” might, in some other fantastical vision, suggest a revolution. But in this poem, told by this speaker, more than anything else, it tells us that she is tired: very tired—physically, spiritually, existentially—and very put upon.

The challenge of being seen despite the risks of exposure that come with being seen represents a substantial prong of Coleman's overall engagement with the issues of visibility. Rebecca Couch Steffy acknowledges that “Coleman risks being read as reinforcing dominant, racist stereotypes of Black female sexuality” with her viscerally flamboyant approach (Steffy).

Steffy draws on a 1994 essay written by Evelyn Hammonds to argue that Black women are subject to an “historical narrative according to which the Black female came to be regarded as ‘the embodiment of sex’ and the hyper-visible, yet voiceless, other to all that white female sexuality could not be.” The trope of the hyper-visible, hyper-sexualized Black woman sprang from aspirational colonial attitudes about white female purity and demureness. Black female licentiousness was thereby constructed as the photographic negative of white female virtue. Consequently, a laudable attempt to resist contributing to the stereotype led to what Steffy calls “protective silences” around the subject of Black female subjectivity. Hammonds, in her earlier piece, writes, “Historically, black women have reacted to this repressive force of the hegemonic discourses of race and sex with silence, secrecy, and a carefully chosen invisibility” (Hammonds). Coleman shatters the “silence, secrecy, and... carefully chosen invisibility” with her poetics of visibility. Steffy concludes that Coleman’s risk of reinforcing racist and sexist stereotypes is worth it. She writes: “[W]e must challenge ourselves to make sense of the risks of exposure that Coleman takes, while resisting the racist stereotyping that would treat the [women] in [these] poem[s]... as inherently perverse.”³ I would go even further and suggest that Coleman’s uninhibited verse self-consciously mocks the idea of decorousness and renders *respectable* ideas about perversity old-fashioned.

The seventh line of “Where I Live” consists of only two words, “bars” and “and,” robbed of their proper spacing and repeated several times: “barsandbarsandbarsandbarsandbars” (“African” 21). Through the repetition of these two simple words, smashed together as they are and stripped of any breathing room, the poem suggests a sense of claustrophobic monotony, perhaps even terror, pervading and circumscribing the speaker’s life. Laurence Goldstein

³ Steffy is writing about “The Woman and Her Thang,” a different poem from *Mad Dog Black Lady*, but her argument is equally relevant to “Where I Live.”

suggests that this is the speaker's "experience of landscape while driving through Watts." He continues: "Bars have usurped the presence of churches in black neighborhoods." It is a "wasteland of sin and crime, where the 'night club' and gambling dens attract 'little gangsters' who pick up 'young bitches' for their pleasure" (Goldstein 175). While there does not seem to be much evidence for a preponderance of bars in the inner city of Los Angeles circa 1979 when Wanda Coleman wrote the line, the speaker of the poem refers to both a "juke" and a "night club" in the text. There is a cultural idea however that has evolved into cliché which says that a proliferation of intemperance, vice, drunkenness, and belligerence blights the Black ghetto, and perhaps the speaker is playing to this perception, much as she plays to the other stereotypes. The word "bars" has multiple meanings beyond drinking establishments though. It can also refer to prison bars, or the security bars that residents install on their doors and windows in rough neighborhoods—a quintessential feature of homes in South Los Angeles to this day⁴—or measures of music, all of which are potentially relevant to Coleman's poem. Even typographically, the b's and d's, with their repeated back-to-back ascenders, become a sort of concrete poetry on the page as they mimic the very bars that they describe. But most germane to the speaker's use of the term here is probably the word's definition as generalized *impediments*. Everywhere the speaker turns, she finds impediments—to employment, to finding a decent home, to schooling for her children, to personal safety, et cetera.

Wanda Coleman's life in letters was circumscribed by impediments that led to her being excluded, and thus unseen, by the gatekeepers and tastemakers that constitute the literary cognoscenti. Tony Magistrale outlines the general dynamic of exclusion and offers some possible reasons for it:

⁴ In a later poem called "this is not my life anymore" from *Bathwater Wine* (1998), Coleman revisits the figuration of security bars: "it belongs to the widow who lives alone behind bars black / enough to resist crack addicts and petty larcenists."

[S]he is a radical feminist who produces poems that are not similar in tone, style, or subject matter to the technically elegant and solipsistic verse that is currently being produced by graduates of advanced writing programs. Since she has never been an "academic poet," making her living outside the world of the university, she has been essentially cut off from the "network" that controls both the dissemination and audience for contemporary poetry. (Magistrale)

Magistrale's explanation posits Coleman as an outsider to current literary fashion. He goes on to discuss MFAs becoming the coin of the realm for poets looking for an audience. Coleman, who had little formal education beyond high school, didn't have an academic position with its potential for networking and professional support to rely upon. Magistrale summarizes the state of affairs succinctly: "Neither white nor male nor university-affiliated, Wanda Coleman remains unread by that small minority of Americans who still appreciate the art of poetry" (Magistrale). Instead, she had to hold down what jobs she could get while producing her writing on the side. She was a working-class writer and proud of it. As Carrie Conners points out, the author description in *Bathwater Wine* (1998) includes the following lines: "As a struggling young welfare mother, she [Coleman] was determined to become a writer. She has worked as a medical secretary, magazine editor, journalist, and scriptwriter" (Conners). I think Conner is right when she suggests that the inclusion of these jobs along with her literary awards and fellowships demonstrates that her work in these jobs held great value for Coleman. But, more than that, I think this is a means by which Coleman can thumb her nose at the literary establishment, in effect saying, "See what I can do? I can hold down a job, raise my kids, *and* produce award-worthy literature. Can you do that?"

Referencing Charles Bukowski, Coleman's stablemate at Black Sparrow Press, Stefans calls Coleman "Los Angeles' other great street poet" as he discusses Coleman as an outsider artist (Stefans 272). But where the white male Bukowski could use and exploit this

“outsiderness” for book sales and fame, this avenue was almost certainly closed to Coleman, a Black woman and radical feminist. Comer picks up on the theme of Coleman as an outsider and expands on it. She imagines Coleman as a sort of double outsider, or in a double bind. She argues that Coleman’s *invisibility* to critics stems from her being an outsider along two distinct geographical tracks, an East-West track and a North-South track. Comer writes:

Centered on the westering experience, on stories of mountain men, on covered wagons leaving civilization behind for the great American wilderness, on searches for the ‘big rock candy mountain,’ the dominant western imaginary charts its principal historical drama in East/West terms. The nonwhites in this drama are American Indians, and, to a far less common extent, Mexican Americans or Asian immigrants. The landscapes which sustain this East/West trajectory—open prairie, majestic mountains, mystical deserts, and so on—are very rarely peopled landscapes. In western criticism, such landscapes are symbols for “the natural” as well as “the wild.” (Comer)

Comer’s argument is that Coleman is left out of the western imaginary due to her Blackness, her urbanness, and her radical feminism. At the same time, Coleman’s status as a Black L.A. poet poses a challenge to critics whose primary lens for viewing African American art and literature is “tied to slavery and emancipation and to cultural forms like jazz and blues, which in spatial terms assume predominantly North/South shapes.” Being thus excluded from the two tracks of geographical heuristics that would be most germane to critical engagement, Coleman is left in a sort of limbo. Comer asks the pointed and necessary question about Coleman’s legacy: “Where, in the above geographic imagination, is there any kind of room or historical logic for representing or understanding the L.A. of Wanda Coleman... the L.A. of Rodney King or the 1992 South Central riots? Where indeed is the twentieth-century city? Or California?”

After Coleman died, her great champion in the academy, Jennifer Ryan-Bryant, organized a special issue of *Hecate* dedicated to the poet’s legacy. Rebecca Couch Steffy’s piece, referenced above, comes from that journal, as does a piece about Wanda Coleman and Black

anger by Shanna Greene Benjamin. Benjamin tracks critical engagement of Coleman's poetry and paints a grim picture: "The dearth of Coleman scholarship is stark considering just how productive Coleman was before her passing on 22 November 2013. There are, at present, approximately six published interviews, seven book chapters or journal articles, and five bio-bibliographic book entries about Coleman" (Benjamin). If anything, the rate of critical engagement with Coleman has slowed down since Benjamin wrote her piece in 2014. As noted above, two of the pieces that I am engaging with in my thesis come from this single edition of *Hecate*, organized expressly to write about her. As I've conducted my research, I have noted that the same few critics come up time and again when I have searched databases for critical pieces about Coleman's work. I have also noted that the dearth of critical engagement becomes the explicit subject matter in several of these essays. This is a phenomenon that goes all the way back to the very first piece of criticism devoted to her work, Tony Magistrale's "Doing Battle with the Wolf" from 1989, which, in large part, was an open invitation to other critics to engage with her work. As Benjamin notes, it was 10 years before the invitation was accepted, when Krista Comer wrote "Revising Western Criticism through Wanda Coleman." Comer's essay, discussed above, is explicitly about the lack of attention that Coleman has received in the academy. The dearth of attention also becomes the explicit subject for part of Benjamin's piece, as it has become an explicit subject for the part of my thesis you are presently reading. The scholars who engage with Coleman's work tend to champion it as well, as if they are boosters. And, because she is still relatively unknown, particularly outside of Los Angeles, they tend to write introductions to her life and her poetry, as I have done here. Benjamin goes on: "When the first edition of the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* was published in 1996, Wanda Coleman boasted seven entries; by the second and third editions, published in 2003 and

2014, respectively, Coleman was nowhere to be found.” Indeed, she was also excluded from the just-released fourth edition, published in 2025.

As noted above, Coleman sometimes depicts characters in her work as having eye and/or vision infirmities as a means by which she can demonstrate the complications engendered through sight-level judgment. A brief perusal of poem titles reveals a focus on eyes and vision: “Blind Betty,” “Watching,” “His Eyes into the Room,” “Doe Eyes,” “Busted on My Watch,” “A View to the Madness,” “Bubble Eyes Declares War,” and that is just a small sample. The fifth part of her *Bathwater Wine* collection is called “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Bluesbird,” and one of her poetry collections is called *Imagoes*, which is a term from psychoanalysis that means “a subjective image of someone... which a person has subconsciously formed and which continues to influence his or her attitudes and behaviour” (“Imago”). Even her series of poems called “Auguries” can be seen as an extension of the idea of what is visible or knowable by a certain type of sight. She titled one of her collections of stories *A War of Eyes*, after one of the stories within, which I discuss in greater detail below. But the idea of “a war of eyes” is a conceptual framework that, for Coleman, extends beyond the boundaries of that single story. She says, “All of the stories in *A War of Eyes*... have to do with how one is visualized. These stories are about how individuals are defined by the eyes of others, and that it is a war to be seen clearly” (Magistrale, Ferreira). I would contend that a great number of her poems also have to do with how one is visualized.

She is talking about racism. But the sentiment goes considerably beyond that. Coleman’s work is also concerned with the ways in which women’s bodies are viewed and objectified by men, and, by extension, by the culture at large. In the eighth section of her “Dreamwalk” sequence from *Bathwater Wine*, she writes:

no boy will call you for a date. and you will
 never attend a prom. you don't need the stars to tell you
 that your bones are too big that you don't have a shape
 that your eyes buck when you get excited that
 your lips are not the kissing kind (Bathwater 22)

This is a very different sentiment than the one in “Beaches. Why I Don’t Care for Them” discussed above. In that poem, the speaker describes a snapshot of a culture wholly corrupted by racism when she relays that the white lifeguards would play with the little white kids but would only *gawk* at her group of Black children as if they were “lepers.” There exists the possibility that the speaker’s memory is unreliable or that, even in the moment, she misinterprets the gawks of the lifeguards. But in a culture awash in racism, particularly if you are on the receiving end of the racism, the default assumption of nefarious intent is justified. And this brings up the related idea of racial trauma and even PTSD.⁵ If somebody is repeatedly traumatized in a specific way, they become conditioned to expect the trauma will continue. In these lines from “Dreamwalk,” though, the visual cues aren’t about race at all. They are about conforming to an unattainable standard of idealized feminine beauty. And this is only underscored by her invoking the Hollywood fantasy world of Bogie, Bergman, and *Casablanca* in the lines that follow the above excerpt: “only the popular girls get to go to Casablanca / to languish over backlot roulette wheels. only the / girls with amber eyes sit with the swells at Rick’s—” The inclusion of the word “backlot” brings the fantasy into reality, for backlots denote movie studios, not the fantasy world that the studios bring into existence. Despite the reference to “girls with amber eyes,” I do not think she is making an argument based on racism. Instead, in imagining this fantasy, one in which having this special feature is currency—amber eyes, which very few people have

⁵ <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-019-00304-1>

regardless of race—she is making the point that current standards of idealized beauty are themselves unattainable and thus fantastical.

In her poem “I Love the Dark” from *Imagoes* (1983), the speaker seeks out darkness as an escape from the unbearable oppressiveness of the light and the risk of exposure that comes with it. Coleman’s speaker avowedly rejects visual perception—definitionally, the ability to detect light to form an image—thereby negating the dominant human sensory system as too flawed a thing and too ripe for corruption by various ideologies. The speaker likens the darkness to “breath,” to the “cocoon at the beginning of my life”; “the dark is omni,” she says, without affixing the prefix to a base word, suggesting that any or every potential base word is relevant. This implies that she has entered a special zone of darkness, one that is beyond the real, or, perhaps, simply death. In a key passage, she homes in on the sense of safety that the darkness brings to her:

storm in his eyes my lover hurt
rainy winter days. hot chocolate and
devil's food cake
it's hide-and-seek i'm safe in its cloak
can't be found or lay in the bed of it eyes open
hungry for his touch (“I Love”)

The speaker associates a particular type of safety with the darkness, one of parental protection, one of the ignorance of youth as protection, even as she acknowledges adult desires. She mentions hot chocolate and devil’s food cake and the game of hide-and-seek, all associations the speaker has with childhood. She says she can’t be found in the dark—the implication is that if she can’t be found then she can’t be hurt. This is not nostalgia for one’s childhood, but rather it is an expression of survivorship, concordant with Coleman’s memory of her parents protecting her from the dominant culture’s racism through the early years of her life. They protected her by not

talking about it, by keeping her in the dark, as the expression goes. Here, she is protected by the lightlessness against being seen, a state of affairs which stands in contradiction to a central plank of Coleman's overall project, which is for Black people, particularly the Black underclass, to be *seen*, as in their bodies and their personhoods and their experiences to be valued and validated by the dominant culture.

This contradiction—needing to be seen, on the one hand, and a rational fear of being seen, or exposed, on the other—obliquely recalls W. E. B. Du Bois's idea of double consciousness. In his conceptual framework, Du Bois posits that African Americans are defined culturally and societally by white ideas of racial hierarchy, postulated as a people and class and cohort through the white gaze. Consequently, African Americans have a double consciousness, one developed through their own inward gaze, their own conception of self, and the other acquired through an internalization of the dominant racist views of Black people by white people. He writes:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois)

In much the same way that parts of Coleman's "Beaches" poem, discussed above, can be universally applied, the "peculiar sensation" of "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" to which Du Bois refers can conceivably apply to any self-conscious person. But he does not mean it to be universal. He is very explicitly writing about the consciousnesses of African Americans as they navigate the unique circumstances of their lived and often contested history in the United States, a history that largely considers them objects of "amused contempt and pity"—and that's on a good day. What Du Bois is describing is the distorting effect that this

double consciousness has on Black people's psyches, and he often analogizes this *peculiarity* to wearing a veil: "Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil." He is suggesting that being Black in America is in some fundamental way akin to being forced to live in the dark. When Coleman's speaker embraces the dark, she is seeking escape from the white gaze. And when what she finds is only a nullity, absolute darkness becomes a viable path out of the quagmire of visibility.

But the poem works along another track of visibility as well. It is not only an escape from the white gaze, it is also an escape from the male gaze. Or, it is perhaps better to think of it as an escape from society's oppressively unattainable standards of beauty for women. The speaker's erotic fulfillment becomes contingent on this lack of visibility. She says, "the dark is omni / (his hand on my breast. my skin sees)." The transference of the locus of sight from eye to skin is not mere linguistic contortionism. In figuring the skin as the site of sight, the speaker imagines an existence beyond the snap judgments of men, the selective lens of unattainable standards of feminine beauty, and the unspeakable crimes of history. In the darkness, her skin, her surface, can *see* where no one's eyes can find it, can *see* where no visual apparatus has dominion. Armed with this second sight, her skin becomes an organ of agency, merging the intimacy and closeness of feel and touch with the distance and separation of vision. Ultimately, the speaker's tragedy here, mirroring the speaker's tragedy in "Where I Live," stems from the inexorable conclusion that the only sure way out of the morass of visibility is death, for it is only in death that darkness is complete: "night wakes / i welcome you dark / soft. gentle. my mother's hands."

The distorting effect of eyesight is a theme that Coleman returns to again and again. She propounds the idea most clearly in her depictions of characters with either injuries to, or

disorders of the eye. The first line of “Flight of the California Condor” is “wind sistuh blooded eyes”; “Twentieth Century Nod-Out (2)” begins, “gargantuan effort bags hurt-stained eyes”; in “Bad Eyes and the Wrong Prescription” she writes of “lust-wrecked orbs” and betrayal by “secret winks.” She wrote poems titled both “Blind Cassandra” and “Blind Betty,” the latter of which I discuss below. In her poem “Chapter 2 of the Story,” the young Black speaker describes the assistant librarian who surveils her as wearing bifocals that “magnified the bigotry in her eyes.” Coleman writes:

Chapter 2 of the Story

the assistant librarian was an old white woman
 with wattles hanging to her brittle neck. (a child
 of ten, i didn't think of them as characteristics of
 aging, only traits peculiar to her.) i couldn't help
 staring because i'd never noticed them on any
 person before—not that close up. i was also amazed by her
 pinched magenta mouth and tweezed-then-penciled-in
 brown eyebrows and how her bifocals magnified the
 bigotry in her eyes as well as those dark amber lashes

her gray eyes policed me thru the stacks like dobermans

she watched me come and go, take books and bring books
 she monitored the titles and after a while decided
 she'd misjudged her little colored girl
 and for a time she tried to apologize in her way. to engage
 in small talk. i never answered back. once, she set
 special books aside to gain my trust respect smile
 i left them untouched

hating her more for that (“Bathwater” 27)

While the explicit subject of the poem is the speaker's experience of the librarian's racism, the subtext is the complicated tangle of sight and visibility that emerges in the verse. For Coleman, this complicated tangle represents not just the illogic and tragedy of racism, but also the entire irrational morass of sight-level judgment. Note the number of words that refer explicitly to eyes,

sight, or visibility: “staring,” “noticed,” “bifocals,” “eyes,” “gray eyes,” “policed,” “watched,” and “monitored.” If we also include all of the references to descriptions that are entirely sight-based, then we are left with only the final few lines of the poem that are not encompassed by this dynamic.

The complications emerge in the speaker’s jaundiced observations about the librarian. The speaker says, “i couldn’t help / staring” at the librarian’s wattles, at her “pinched magenta mouth and tweezed-then-penciled-in / brown eyebrows.” While the speaker provides plenty of evidence of her own sight-level judgments of the librarian, she provides very little evidence that the librarian is motivated by racism. The reference to the librarian’s “bifocals magnifying the bigotry in her eyes” is not evidence, though “her gray eyes policed me thru the stacks like dobermans” perhaps gets closer. The speaker is essentially asking us to take her word for it that the librarian’s actions are motivated by racism. But, and this is crucial to understanding Coleman’s engagement with the subject, we *should* take her word for it. Or, to put it another way, Coleman is not trying to convince her readers that what the speaker experienced is racism—she is stating it as a fact. Recall how Coleman’s analogizing African sleeping sickness to racism conceptualizes it as a constantly morphing phenomenon, a cultural whack-a-mole. She remains interested in tugging at the threads of the sight-and-visibility morass, but she is decidedly not interested in depicting for her readers the entire process by which she came to her views about the librarian. She is simply relaying the librarian’s bigotry as if it is a fact of nature, no different than if she had written that the bifocals magnified the librarian’s pupils or irises rather than her prejudice.

It is significant that the poem is told in past tense and titled “Chapter 2 of the Story.” That the speaker is looking back at this period of her life when she was ten years old allows room for

the possibility that she learned something from this sequence of events, an idea seemingly reinforced by the title of the poem—it is only chapter two, not the finale. But I do not think the point is that the speaker learned to *not* make judgments about people’s racialized motivations. Given the subject matter and the autobiographical tone, it is not unreasonable to assume that the speaker is a stand-in for the poet herself. Coleman was born in 1946, which dates the events that occur in the poem to 1956 (“a child / of ten”). This provides necessary context, as overt racism from white people towards Black people was not only the default condition that people lived under, but it was a condition that was codified by law. 1956 was only two years after *Brown v. Board of Education* and just a year after both the murder of Emmett Till and the bus boycott triggered by Rosa Parks’s refusal. This was right at the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, which is perhaps a better clue to the meaning of the poem’s title. While it is true that living in Los Angeles in 1956 was not the same thing as living in Montgomery, Alabama, or Money, Mississippi, Wanda Coleman’s verse of witness becomes a form of evidence, even if in this particular poem she declines to provide much evidence of the librarian’s racism. It is not a court case, so her word must be enough. The poem is a critique of the librarian’s racism—and thus white America’s racism—even as it acknowledges the speaker’s own prejudices aimed at the librarian—and thus at white America. Though her own prejudices are, in some sense, justified, the greater point is that the complicated gnarl that sight-level judgment engenders coalesces into a master critique for Coleman, which goes something like this: once one goes in for sight-level judgment, it becomes a doomed feedback loop, or, as she refers to it, a war of eyes.

While she is continually calling attention to racism and sexism, her engagement with the complications of sight has implications that extend beyond these perennial challenges. I see an artist who is contending with a culture that values style over substance, privileges looks over

character, and ultimately eschews the word for the image. These are perhaps the hackneyed complaints of the world going to hell voiced by morality leaders since time immemorial, but they are also especially relevant to our modern condition. For Wanda Coleman, given the unique position that she occupied, as a Black woman, as a radical feminist, as an outsider artist, these become consequential matters of life and death. And for a poet specifically, that final piece—the image eclipsing the word—is potentially catastrophic. Coleman’s response to this state of affairs is to expose herself fully in her writing. In practice, this means that no subject is taboo, that honesty is privileged over artifice, and that the risks that come with exposure—her honest evaluation of a collection of poetry by Maya Angelou, for instance, damaged her career⁶—are trumped by the clarity that comes with illumination. And her engagement with the idea of exposure becomes the explicit subject matter in her poetry.

In her satirical prose poem “Blind Betty,” Coleman takes the idea of exposure to a comic extreme, as the speaker in the poem strips off her clothes at a restaurant to get her companion to *see* her. The titular character is not blind but she cannot see. That is, she does not have a physical infirmity that affects her eyesight. The speaker explains: “i called her blind betty cause she always pretended she couldn’t see me when i knew that she could” (“African” 41). The speaker attributes her physical resemblance to Blind Betty to the latter’s inability—or lack of desire—to see her: “perhaps it was ’cause i looked so much like her after the very first glance she felt i no longer bore examination — it isn’t necessary to continually stare at one’s mirror image. one begins to think strange thoughts.” I read the speaker’s reference to “strange thoughts” as a recognition that, as one begins to *see*, the process of defamiliarization can be disorienting. That

⁶ In 2002, Coleman wrote a blistering critique of Maya Angelou’s *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, which created significant backlash. Coleman writes: “The review caused an immediate furor in the African-American community. Subsequently, I was banned from participating in a reading and book signing at Eso Won Books, the leading African-American bookstore in Los Angeles, because of it” (Book).

is, when one observes carefully the constituent parts that make up a thing—a face, for instance—what they see is a collection of discrete features. The *whole* is a culturally constructed product—Black (or white), beautiful (or ugly), rich (or poor), et cetera—whereas the constituent parts of a face—the shapes, the hues (beyond the superficial black-white dichotomy that is not based on observable colors at all but rather on culturally constructed ideas about various shades of flesh), the blemishes, the pores, the wrinkles—are discrete units of observable matter decoupled from their cultural signifiers.

It is this disorienting process of defamiliarization that makes the tangled gnarl of sight-level judgment so difficult to overcome. Because the question becomes, how can we keep the parts of the acculturated whole that we would like to keep—perhaps one's sense of aesthetics, or physical attraction in mates—while dispensing with the unsavory parts? Or is that even possible? Or desirable? Coleman's answer seems to be that we have to be willing to expose ourselves fully while simultaneously challenging ourselves to *see* others as they are. The rest of the poem:

it was cool until one day something bad happened to me. i got sick and i did not feel like suffering through blind betty' s interminable monologs anymore. when i was forced to travel miles to work so i could pay my doctor bills i tried to tell blind betty. but she pretended she did not hear/see my mouth shape the syllables. i shaped them very carefully. i even wrote them down in a book and gave them to her to read. but blind betty couldn't see the pages, being blind.

so one day, when me and blind betty went to breakfast with her gentleman friend, i took off my blouse and bra. blind betty saw me. she let me know in no uncertain terms that she saw me. she didn't like what she saw. her gentleman friend proffered no opinion. i drove blind betty and her man home

i' ve been free and seen ever since

Although the final line is tongue in cheek, I think we should take her sense of triumph seriously, as she seems to genuinely consider her exposure at the breakfast table a small coup. Coleman is

playing with the idea of “seeing” meaning something beyond merely *seeing*. The speaker uses the “hear/see” construction to convey an unsuccessful attempt at communication: “i tried to tell blind betty. but she pretended she did not hear/see my mouth shape the syllables.” There is a sensory transference being described here, as one cannot *hear* a mouth shape a syllable. At the same time, the speaker is describing Blind Betty’s inability to *see* her language as it flows from her mouth. In this way, the poem recalls “I Love the Dark,” discussed above, with its reference to the skin *seeing*. But here, the locus of sight is not being transferred to another sense organ. Instead, with the placement of the intervening slash, Coleman constructs a synesthetic pairing that, at first blush, suggests an entirely new sense organ that can both hear *and* see. But if “seeing” is not merely *seeing*, but something more along the lines of acknowledgement, then the “hear/see” construction is not a description of a new sense organ, *per se*, but rather a description of a breakdown of communication systems, a figuring of both blindness and deafness simultaneously. Blind Betty’s inability to hear or see, then, has left the speaker, strangely, doubly exposed through this negation, and it takes the latter’s extreme act of physical exposure to overcome the interpersonal disequilibrium.

In the last line, the speaker ties freedom to being seen: “i’ ve been free and seen ever since.” We should take stock of the cost of this freedom. The speaker in the poem has had to strip down to her skin, publicly exposing her breasts, in order to be seen. This takes us headlong into the logic of exhibitionism, of sensationalism, of individualism, which is at a point exactly antipodal to Coleman’s project of elevating the visibility of the *collective* Black underclass. But it also takes us headlong into the realm of satire, a realm that is always lurking around the edges of Coleman’s verse. Here, it becomes central, and I read the poem as a broad satire of visibility—visibility here meaning acknowledgement and respect but also, perhaps, fame—and

the lengths that people will go to achieve it. As such, Coleman's prose poem becomes a comment on a culture that rewards individual notability at the expense of collective solidarity. In this culture, visibility is a currency which one can use to purchase freedom and autonomy. But the cost is clear: If any one person must go to such an extreme to gain their visibility, and with it their freedom and autonomy, then there is little hope that one's entire cohort will go to the same lengths. Moreover, if one's entire cohort were to express itself in this manner, then the gesture would cease to have any impact. What emerges is a capitalization of culture, one that mimics the economic system's rewarding of those who have access to scarce resources. Visibility is the scarce resource in this paradigm. And what seems at first to be genuinely subversive in the speaker's delight in her public exhibition becomes instead the speaker's mere saccharine high in besting her friend in the contest of visibility—one rises as the other falls.

In casting visibility as an individual rather than a communal resource, the entire paradigm of visibility that I have been discussing—that is, visibility as acknowledgement—shifts. Instead of drawing attention to an underserved people, this reconfiguration draws attention to an individual at the expense, potentially, of a people. Writing critically about Objectivism, Ayn Rand's philosophy that posits that human knowledge and values are part of an objective reality and not the result of human consciousness or thought, Roxanne J. Fand makes a distinction between equality and difference that is relevant to this shift:

Part of the ethical confusion about individualism lies in its opposing principles of equality and difference. On one hand, equality treats individuals generically as members of the human species with characteristics and rights in common, holding their differences in abeyance. On the other hand, capitalist individualism validates rewards based on competing individual differences, which are easily related to one's immediate subjective experience of being unique and apart from others. Equality, by contrast, is an abstract principle derived from cumulative experiences of empathy or solidarity that are extended inductively to all of humanity and thus harder to realize. (Fand)

Discussing the internal contradictions of individualism, Fand posits an “ethical confusion” based on “opposing principles of equality and difference.” Equality and difference, as two issues in conversation but in tension, map almost perfectly onto the contradictory planks of visibility in Coleman’s work that I have been noting, i.e., raising the visibility of the individual at the expense of the group and vice versa. Fand goes even further though, ultimately arguing that “egalitarian democracy conflicts with the meritocracy espoused by competitive capitalism.”

Fand is drawing a distinction that underscores the tension in the relationship between egalitarian democracy and competitive capitalism, between individualism and collectivism, but there are limitations to her argument. The primary one for my purpose is that Fand only briefly engages with racial identity in her argument about egalitarianism and meritocracy: “Less superficial [than lifestyle choices that signal nonconformity], but still tying individuality to group conformity, is racial and ethnic identity.” This is understandable to the extent that her essay is not explicitly about race. But for Wanda Coleman, race can never be a second thought,⁷ nor can it ever be decoupled from discussions about equality and difference. This is what her poetry tells us over and over again. Additionally, Fand’s argument points toward two new avenues of engagement with Coleman’s poetics of visibility, namely, a discussion of surveillance and witness, both of which dramatize the interplay between the collective and the individual, which I will discuss in the next sections of my thesis.

Coleman’s ideas about visibility reach a sort of apotheosis in her short story “A War of Eyes.” She imagines achieving liberation through a contest, figuring sight itself as a weapon of personal power to be wielded in the pursuit of individual and, potentially, collective justice. It goes further though, taking on the trappings of a revenge fantasy. In the story, Coleman depicts

⁷ Her speaker says, “even heaven is segregated,” in “Talk about Your Daddy” from *African Sleeping Sickness* (1990).

an avant-garde theater production in which the players—half of them Black, half white, and half male, half female—participate in a ritualized rehearsal of battle through staring at each other. A literal war of eyes. But it doesn't seem to be mere rehearsal, nor does there seem to be an actual performance for which they are rehearsing, though the first-person narrator suggests that they are moving towards one. Instead, it seems more like a “happening,” the term Allan Kaprow coined to describe various types of performance art, but with existential implications that remain murky. The director of the happening, “Blue-Eyed Soul-Mama,” instructs the players as follows: “You will seek out your enemy, move in and destroy that enemy. You may form alliances if you like, across boundaries of race and sex. There are only two laws. No one may speak. No sounds. And... [y]ou absolutely *must not touch!*” (“War” 167).

The protagonist, “Black Doña,” is the largest of the women, and she is aware of an awesome power that she holds within her being. Blue-Eyed Soul-Mama casts her in the role of Earthmother, and Doña proclaims,

Now, at last, she provides the opportunity for me to experience myself as I truly am: the consummate woman warrior. Ready to die at peak battle if not to emerge victorious. Now I will be free to unchain my war lust — my fantasy. To be a splendid fighting animal; the ebony Amazon, subservient to none. Free of historical chains. Free, in that room, as never before. Unleashed. (“War” 168)

She is preoccupied with being *free* of metaphorical chains. She states that she is “free to unchain [her] war lust,” “[f]ree of historical chains,” and “[u]nleashed.” And the way she expresses this freedom, or perhaps it is more accurate to say that the way she *feels* this freedom, is through warring. She calls the play an “opportunity for me to experience myself as I truly am: the consummate woman warrior.” She is saying something troubling about our kind. She is saying that the *natural* reaction, the *gut* reaction, to violence and oppression is to partake in violence and oppression, to give in to the draw of revenge. And this becomes more clear as the story

develops. She continues: “Some of the men, aware of my potential, start to take me on. But I see they can’t take war with a ‘girl’ seriously” (“War” 170). So even as she sloughs off some historical chains, others seemingly remain. She is a woman and is thus seen by the men as an object to be protected rather than as a target, fully equal in battle. She is objectified, considered unworthy, even as she is spared. So she turns to the other women as adversaries: “The women, black and white alike, are up for conflict. But when I increase my transmission even slightly, they retreat from my line of fire, singed.”

Eventually, Black Doña finds her target:

White Deborah. She is the ‘princess,’ a spoiled, wealthy, snotty bitch. Of all the white women, the blacks in our group dislike her most because of her arrogance and reserve. Her femaleness is all that we hate in life; all our society has made us suffer. I will seek revenge. I will war upon this opposite of myself: blue-gray eyes, hip-length blonde-brown hair, her fine-boned ‘daintiness.’ She is all I hate. I will obliterate her. I will slay and dance a ritual in her blood. (“War” 171)

The semicolon after the word “life” is instructive. On the left side of the semicolon, “we” is the subject of the clause, and their (the Black female participants) shared hatred of Deborah’s femaleness is the object. The semicolon’s softer-than-a-full-stop pause connects their collective hatred of Deborah to society’s having made them suffer. Targeting Deborah in this way, then, becomes an inversion of the logic of collective punishment. Deborah is held to be personally, *individually*, responsible for society’s ills entirely due to her physical appearance. This is the trap of sight-level judgment that Coleman repeatedly highlights in her work. It is a trap that cycles through her poetry and stories as it reverberates through our history. Here, as in most of her work, Coleman is not concerned with solutions; she is content to elucidate the problem. At the end of the story, White Deborah is saved by Black Johnny, who is sent by Blue-Eyed Soul-Mama to intervene. It turns out that Deborah is Blue-Eyed Soul-Mama’s daughter. It also turns out that Blue-Eyed Soul-Mama would rather save her daughter than save the integrity of her play.

“her gray eyes policed me thru the stacks like dobermans”: Surveillance and Visibility in Wanda Coleman’s Los Angeles

In an interview conducted near the end of her life, Wanda Coleman notes that she and her children were forced to move out of their South Los Angeles neighborhood when a newly ubiquitous type of gang activity came to prominence, threatening their safety and wellbeing—“one that did not make the ‘old school’ distinctions when it came to violence” (Ryan). As Coleman makes plain with her reference to this new type of gang activity, the crime wave of the 1980s and 1990s was a real phenomenon, one that had material effects on the lives of the people who lived in the inner city. In reaction to this crime wave, a climate of carcerality descended upon the nation, a response to a marked increase in violent crime that sociologists have traced back to the 1960s and that culminated in the early 1990s. While there are various theories for the reasons behind the increase (legalization of abortion in 1973, an enormous amount of lead in the physical environment, the crack cocaine epidemic, demographics, et cetera), the important point is that the increase was not just a figment of some opportunistic politician’s imagination, not *just* a convenient excuse to crack down on the minority classes. It was a real and quantifiable phenomenon (O’Brien).

In reaction to the crime wave came a conservative backlash that prescribed increased incarceration and oppression as its favored policy responses, leaving residents of the inner city squeezed between poverty and violence, on one hand, and the subjugating presence of the state on the other. A significant part of the crackdown in Los Angeles was the buildup of a robust surveillance apparatus led by Daryl Gates, the chief of the L.A.P.D. from 1978 to 1992, a period in which the violent crime rate rose year over year. In an interview conducted after his

resignation,⁸ Gates said the following: “We went after crime before it occurred.” In South Central Los Angeles, this “going after crime before it occurred” consisted primarily of terrorizing the residents by way of a fleet of L.A.P.D. helicopters constantly circling the area. Nick Shapiro, an anthropologist who studies the environmental impact of helicopters, ties the advent of the helicopter as the L.A.P.D.’s preferred apparatus of surveillance to the Watts uprising in 1965: “The history of the police helicopter in LA is heavily tied to racialized surveillance. They were first used for full-time patrol work in 1965 during and after the Watts riots...” (Léon). Mike Davis, writing in the preface to the 2006 New Edition of his seminal study of Los Angeles urbanism, *City of Quartz*, ties Gates’s heavy-handed tactics directly to the “apocalyptic uprising” that became the 1992 Los Angeles riots. He writes, “LAPD Chief Daryl Gates’s ‘Operation Hammer’—with its Vietnam-like neighborhood sweeps and indiscriminate nightly harassment—was universally viewed as a deliberate provocation to riot” (Davis v-vi).

It is unsurprising, then, that Coleman broached the subject of helicopter surveillance in “Where I Live,” her manifesto for Black underclass visibility. The speaker captures succinctly the interplay between street crime and state intrusion by which the residents of the inner city were squeezed:

bullets and blood
see that helicopter up there? Like
god's eye looking down on his children.

Taken as its own work, this tercet becomes a haiku from hell. Metrically, the trochee-followed-by-an-iamb construction of “bullets and blood” highlights the plosive “B” sound, setting up the alliteration to have maximal impact. In both words, “bullets” and “blood,” the plosive “B” is followed by an “L” sound. The “L” sound is what linguists call a “liquid” consonant. So in the first line of the tercet, the speaker gives us two words, “bullets” and

⁸ Gates resigned after the L.A. uprising of 1992.

“blood,” that each follow the same plosive-liquid construction—and the neutral schwa (or something close to it) for its vowel sounds—comprising a linguistic mirroring of the content of the line, the hard bullet puncturing the soft flesh and spattering liquid blood. Neither “bullets” nor “blood” is an example of onomatopoeia, but, in this line, in the particular way the speaker has combined them, they become something close to it.

The speaker continues: “see that helicopter up there? like.” The line’s four trochaic feet, plus the dangling stressed syllable of “like,” are somewhat at odds with the structuring of the sentence as a question, producing a tension between meter and content that will only be resolved in the next line. The tension is produced via the question structure impelling the reader to stress the final syllable of the trochee, “up there,” thus negating the metered mechanics as the line is constructed. It is a negation, but it is also a nesting of simultaneity, a *superposition*. Like the speaker’s simultaneous boasting and rejecting the stereotypes that she embodies, that her neighborhood embodies, that Black Los Angeles embodies, it is an insistence that two contradictory things can be true at the same time. One can be proud of one’s community while simultaneously pointing out its significant flaws, even its significant dangers, just like one can live in fear of street crime while also living in fear of the state’s response to it. One can even, perhaps, come to view the latter as more corrosive to their lives and to society as a whole than the former.

In an interview conducted after his resignation from the L.A.P.D., Gates said, “No one seems to talk about the civil rights violations of the good people out there . . . that are caused by gangs. Those gangs are so oppressive to those individuals who live within that community. All we talk about is have we violated the civil rights of these idiot gang members” (“Interview”). Putting aside Gates’s blithe dismissal of the universality of civil rights, it is illuminating to

compare the speaker's experience to Gates's ex post facto rationalizations. For the speaker in "Where I Live," the threats are flattened. That is, there is no sense that the street violence evoked by "bullets and blood" is, as a threat, greater or lesser than the state's surveilling apparatus. They are both part of a threat matrix that makes up her daily life, her hell. But interestingly, there is little indication that the speaker views any of these things as threats at all. They are simply part of the milieu in which she lives, an internalized hell, an internalized prison. She tosses off the question, "see that helicopter up there?," with a breezy casualness that belies the seriousness of the implication: that the surveillance state is so ubiquitous that she can look up to the sky more or less at random and point it out its embodiment. The further implication is that they—those in the helicopter—can look down from the sky and single her out, perhaps through the site of a long gun.

The following line of the tract—"god's eye looking down on his children"—is the structural and contentual finale of the tercet. The police helicopter, that is, the representative of state power, becomes equivalent to God while the residents of Black Los Angeles are likened to his children. For if the helicopter is "god's eye," and God is all-seeing, then there is nowhere that one can go to escape being watched. This is a description of a panopticon. In his paradigm-shifting 1975 work *Discipline and Punish*, post-structuralist theorist Michel Foucault formulated the panopticon prison as a metaphor for the internalized condition of individuals being under constant surveillance in modern societies. He famously wrote, "Visibility is a trap," which has enormous resonances with my essay. But the particular model of the panopticon that I am currently discussing is not as subtle as Foucault's idea. This is raw state power reverberating in one's eardrums, a panopticism that can shine a light into your window, into anybody's window, to make sure you're not doing anything that you shouldn't be doing, anything naughty.

In its desire and readiness to imprison half of the Black neighborhood's young men,⁹ it is hardly an overstatement to say that the state apparatus has also become prison guard to the population as a whole.

Structurally the line consists of two and a half trochees followed by two additional trochees, making for nine total syllables. The two stressed syllables of “down” and “on,”—a splitting of the trochee—one after the other, creates a natural caesura between the two halves of the line, allocating consequential weight to the latter half in the same way that a punchline is emphasized at the end of a joke: “...on his children.” On the one hand, this is a sort of infantilization. The speaker is asserting a parent-child relationship between the state and its citizenry by way of comparing the Black population to children and the helicopter to God, an inversion of the nation's foundational creed. In this context, that is, the infantilization of Black people by the white hegemon specifically, this inversion has a long and loaded history. Words like “master” and “slaveowner,” words like “slave” and even “boy” were not mere *innocent* words depicting the socioeconomic relationships between the enslaver class and the enslaved populations of antebellum America, or later analogs in the Jim Crow South. They were then, as they are now, loaded words that describe a hierarchical relationship that encompasses everything from the mere socioeconomic relationship between the cohorts to ideas of nascent superiority and inferiority and respective intelligence quotients. As Karen Stollznaw points out, depending on context, a seemingly inoffensive word like “boy” can become loaded and even turned into an offensive slur when used to address adult men, while “I am a man!” became a rallying cry as a declaration of civil rights (Stollznaw).

On the other hand, in likening the residents of her neighborhood to “children of god,” the speaker is tapping into a rich vein of African American activism. Michael Haspel argues that the

⁹ Elizabeth Hinton's scholarship suggests roughly a 50% incarceration rate for African American men.

idea of people—or humanity itself—being children of God has been crucial to the theological underpinnings of civil rights activism: “The concept of children of God becomes the theological bedrock for universal equality and dignity of all human beings” (Haspel). The strategy here, undertaken by Martin Luther King and others—and not at all lost on the speaker—is to appeal to the better angels of the white hegemon by proffering the idea that if Black people are also the children of God, then they are worthy of the same rights, privileges, and dignities that the white population takes for granted. It is a powerful rhetorical tactic aimed at disarming the self-consciously pious white population, primarily in the Southern states. But here, in the speaker’s line, already laced with a multiplicity of meanings, her invocation of this high-minded phrase becomes an ironic sneer, for the “god” looking down on them is no more or less than a Daryl Gates functionary.

As mentioned above, Foucault’s metaphorical panopticon, imagined as a state of panoptical internalization by the individual under presumed constant surveillance in modern society, does not quite fit this situation. To be more precise, Foucault’s model is operative in the sense that the individuals in the inner city are subject to the same internalization of panopticism as the rest of society, but as a model it is far more subtle than the one under current discussion, a sidebar to the brute exercise of the overt surveilling power of the state. The source material upon which Foucault bases his model, Jeremy Bentham’s 19th-century theoretical panopticon prison, is closer to the mark. Davis, meanwhile, writes of an L.A.-specific innovation in panopticism that, in its coupling of the state’s security apparatus to the enticements of consumerism, is especially germane to our discussion, namely, “the panopticon mall.” He describes a situation in which inner-city Los Angeles had been subject to “retail flight”: “After the 1965 Watts Rebellion the handful of large retailers in Southcentral Los Angeles took flight while viable small

businesses were asphyxiated by discriminatory bank ‘relining’ practices” (Davis 242). As a result, its mostly Black and Latino residents were forced to travel far and wide to shop even for essential items. The major retailers considered South Central too crime-ridden to expand into, and promises from the city to the residents went unheeded until developer Alexander Haagen stepped in with an elegant solution to the problem. Davis writes, “His ingenious solution... was a comprehensive ‘*security-oriented*’ design and management strategy” (emphasis in original). Davis continues: “The prototype plan shared by all four shopping centers plagiarizes brazenly from Jeremy Bentham’s renowned nineteenth-century design for the ‘panopticon prison’ with its economical central surveillance” (Davis 242-3). Davis goes on to describe a central observatory (“hidden above a public library branch”) that “contains the headquarters of the shopping center manager, a substation of the LAPD, and a dispatch operator who monitors the video and audio systems as well as maintaining communication ‘with other secure shopping centers tied into the system, and with the police and fire departments.’”

In an interview from 2011, Wanda Coleman described the experience of shopping while being Black:

I enter a store, it's immediately assumed I'm guilty of something so I'm suddenly being watched. Why am I being watched, because it is assumed that I'm going to steal something. I'm a thief so, when I approach a store, I'm a customer, but when I go through those doors, I'm a THIEF! What's changed? What happened in that space, in those seconds and when I entered the building? I didn't change! What changed? The environment has changed. So outside of this environment I'm a customer, inside, I'm a thief. (Joseph)

Coleman’s description of her situation—one in which she is only a thief when she is *in* the store, but she is not a customer unless she’s *not* in the store—is a description of a descent into the absurd, into the Kafkaesque. While she is “assumed” to be “guilty of something,” no charge is made, no accusation issued. She is held in suspicion but cannot possibly clear her name because

she cannot *not* be Black. She can be surveilled, arrested, indicted, judged, and imprisoned as an individual, but she will always first fall under suspicion as a representative for all of Blackdom.

The idea and reality of being held to represent an entire cohort comes up in Coleman's poetry. To return briefly to "Chapter 2 of the Story," we see the author noting the special attention she received in her youth solely due to her being emblemized in this way. She says of the librarian who watches her:

her gray eyes policed me thru the stacks like dobermans
 she watched me come and go, take books and bring books
 she monitored the titles and after a while decided
 she'd misjudged her little colored girl ("Bathwater" 27)

After the librarian has "policed," "watched," and "monitored" her for some time, we are told that the librarian sits in ultimate judgment of the young speaker: "she'd *misjudged* her little colored girl" (emphasis mine). This is a description of a trial in which the speaker is unwittingly made defendant and the librarian is made judge. It is only after the librarian has surveilled the little girl for a period of time that she deems her passable to her standards of respectability. But even when she lives up to these standards, the speaker cannot get out from under the imposition of hierarchical constraint through the culturally-derived power that the librarian wields: "she'd misjudged *her* little colored girl" (emphasis mine). Paradoxically, the power dynamic playing out is unconscious for both participants even though they are both also aware of it. So when the speaker says, "her gray eyes policed me thru the stacks like dobermans," in effect giving agency to the librarian's eyes, it is as if the librarian's eyes are themselves the conscious actors here. They're surveilling her, hounding her, and potentially biting her. This arrangement of power allows the librarian to embody the threat and dominion of authority while holding herself innocent to any particular claim of transgression, maintaining for herself a perch of detachment

and lightheartedness. “It’s not me, it’s only my eyes,” you can almost hear her saying. The speaker notes that the librarian attempts to make amends:

and for a time she tried to apologize in her way. to engage
in small talk. i never answered back. once, she set
special books aside to gain my trust respect smile
i left them untouched

hating her more for that

Even as a young girl, the speaker is *onto* the situation. She grasps intuitively the disequilibrium and arbitrariness of the power dynamic and is justified in her hatred of the librarian, even if “hatred” might seem, on first reading, to be an overly harsh reaction.

Joseph Heller’s famous line from *Catch 22*, “Just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they aren’t after you,” has resonances with Coleman’s “White Wall Syndrome—A Study.” The racialized surveillance the speaker is subjected to is ever present and becomes a fixture even in the privacy of her home. This raises some questions: Should we take the speaker’s word for it that she is being surveilled? Or is she just paranoid? Or is she getting at something that’s entirely different? She says,

the sheetrock has eyes that follow me
everywhere i go, to the kitchen, to the bathroom
where i take long soaks and scrub
my brownness raw with green soap
and mint leaves in late winter afternoons. they
peer from the bedroom’s whiteness
watch me moan under his attentions
which i’ve done for many years—now,
spying as he spills his happiness into
my willful devotion. and later—as we snore—
pry into our love-spent swoons (“Ostinato” 51)

I think she is getting at something slightly different. First of all, the sheetrock does not have eyes, so we can dismiss a literal reading out of hand. Also, sheetrock is a synonym for drywall, but,

like kleenex, it is a brand name that has become genericized. So immediately the speaker is thrust into a zone in which she is unable to escape the ubiquity of commodification. She is thus followed by the eyes of capital even in her most intimate moments. The speaker tells us that they follow her “everywhere i go, to the kitchen, to the bathroom.” It is in the bathroom that she scrubs “[her] brownness raw with green soap.” Is she trying to rub the brownness away? I don’t think so. I think she is just scrubbing her skin in a manic attempt to get it cleaner than clean, to achieve a flawlessness of appearance that is entirely unnatural, which is in keeping with her career-long engagement with the subject of unfair cultural standards for feminine beauty.

The suite of verbs the speaker uses—“follow,” “peer,” “watch,” “spy,” and “pry”—are all perfectly apt to describe the state of surveillance under which the speaker finds herself. But I would like to home in on that last word, “pry.” The sheetrock’s eyes “pry into our love-spent swoons,” the speaker says. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “pry” means “to look closely or inquisitively,” and in this sense, the verb is just one more in the list of words describing surveillance that I have collated. But “pry” also means, “to raise, move, or pull apart with a lever.” This double meaning creates the suggestion that the eyes in the sheetrock have designs beyond surveilling the speaker; they want to both surveil *and* pull her away from her lover. The eyes of capital want to follow her, want to understand her, want to know her, want to know her desires, her wants, her needs, her loves, but, beyond all of that, they want to isolate her and de-collectivize her. This is what Mike Davis is getting at in his conception of the panopticon mall. And it brings us back to Roxanne J. Fand’s argument about the innate and irreconcilable contradiction between equality and difference in individualism. It also moves us toward an environment in the present day in which we find ourselves either the unwitting targets of, or the

enthusiastic participants in—or both—a techno-surveillant culture beyond the wildest imaginings of Bentham or Foucault.

“After the Rampage”: Bearing Witness in Wanda Coleman’s Los Angeles

In February of 1993, Wanda Coleman wrote, “I am terrorized by the murder of a child” in her column for *The Nation*. Coleman was writing from a particular retrospective perspective. The specific child that she is referring to is Latasha Harlins, a 15-year-old girl who was shot to death one Saturday morning in March of 1991 as she attempted to purchase a bottle of orange juice from her local convenience store. She was killed by Soon Ja Du, a 51-year-old Korean immigrant, the proprietor of the store who mistakenly thought that Harlins was attempting to steal the \$1.79 bottle of orange juice. An altercation ensued. It became physical. Grainy footage from the store’s video surveillance camera documents the incident: Du reaches for Harlins’s knapsack and ends up grabbing the flap of her jacket. Harlins retaliates by either slapping or punching Du in the face several times. A stunned and panicking Du then fumbles with the .38 caliber pistol that she and her husband keep below the counter in case of robbery. After they each appear to gather themselves, Harlins picks up the bottle of orange juice and puts it on the counter. As she then turns away to leave the store, Du shoots her in the back of the head, Harlins’s body instantly collapsing onto the floor. It had been less than two weeks since Rodney King was severely beaten by the L.A.P.D. on the side of a city street when this incident happened. Tensions, already high, were set to go kinetic.

The particular retrospective perspective from which Coleman is writing in early 1993 comes from having recently *lived through* these two events, noting the ways in which justice was or was not meted out in each case, bearing witness to the unrest that exploded into the LA riots, and observing the ways in which the media portrayed each of these elements. But it is a particularly modern form of “living through” these events that she notes:

In March and April 1991, a year before South Central L.A. erupted, local residents repeatedly witnessed news broadcasts of the videotaped Empire Liquor Market killing of

15-year-old Latasha Harlins by 51-year-old Soon Ja Du. Central to black-Korean tensions that fueled the riots, this incident was barely a footnote in national media coverage of the riots” (“Blacks”).

In her observation that “local residents repeatedly witnessed news broadcasts of the... killing of... Latasha Harlins,” she is not merely saying that residents *saw* the footage. Instead, in her insistence that they “repeatedly witnessed” the tragic incident, she is describing a population that has been traumatized by the repetitive broadcasting of the grainy surveillance video of the shooting death of Latasha Harlins. Coleman’s accusation is that, on the one hand, the media bears some responsibility for the unrest; on the other hand, the media’s failure to highlight the Latasha Harlins killing in their coverage of the L.A. riots led to the riots not being viewed in their proper context.

The fact that the killing of Latasha Harlins was caught on surveillance video and then broadcast continuously through mass media has profound implications about panopticism as theorized by Foucault. It is also extremely germane to my paper’s engagement with issues pertaining to sight, surveillance, and witness. In “The Viewer Society,” Thomas Mathiesen analyzes and critiques certain aspects of Foucault’s argument about panopticism. He characterizes Foucault’s overarching argument to be one of transformation from society as a civilization of spectacle in antiquity to its being a civilization of surveillance in modernity. As Mathiesen puts it: “To Foucault, panopticism represents a fundamental movement or transformation *from the situation where the many see the few to the situation where the few see the many*” (emphasis in original). But, as Mathiesen points out, one of the most basic experiences of modernity is that the exact inverse of Foucault’s idea about panopticism is broadly in effect and counterpoised to his idea of a surveillance society in which “the few see the many.” Mathiesen’s harshest critique of Foucault’s argument, then, has to do with the latter’s failure to

consider mass media, which is the instrument that enables this inversion, namely, the condition in which the many see the few:

As a striking parallel to the panoptical process, and concurring in detail with its historical development, we have seen the development of a unique and enormously extensive system enabling the many to see and contemplate the few, so that the tendency for the few to see and supervise the many is contextualized by a highly significant counterpart. I am thinking, of course, of the development of the total system of the modern mass media. It is, to put it mildly, puzzling that Michel Foucault, in a large volume which explicitly or implicitly sensitizes us *inter alia* to surveillance in modern society, does not mention television - or any other mass media - with a single word. It is more than just an omission; its inclusion in the analysis would necessarily in a basic way have changed his whole image of society as far as surveillance goes. (Mathiesen)

Mathiesen uses the word “synopticism” to describe the condition through which the many see the few. He argues that a more complete picture of modern society includes both panopticism *and* synopticism aligned in a parallel and synergistic dynamic. As he says, “...panopticism and synopticism have developed in intimate interaction, even fusion, with each other. The same institutions have often been panoptical as well as synoptical.” With Mathiesen’s insight about mass media representing a synoptical counterpoint to Foucault’s conception of the panoptic society, the surveillance video of Latasha Harlins’s killing, broadcast over and over again through mass media, becomes an artifact of this synergy, a fusion of the panopticon with the synopticon.

As I mentioned in the introduction, bearing witness in some ways represents an inversion of, or, perhaps aspirationally, an undermining of the surveillance system, a condition whereby the citizens who are under surveillance collectively bear witness to the injustices visited upon them. Collective witness is also an embodiment of synopticism, and, as such, it is a democratizing counterweight to the state’s surveillance apparatus. But as Coleman points out, bearing witness through mass media can become a source of trauma even as it is a necessary tool of liberation. In “Please Please Stop the Madness-Driven Violence,” published by the *Los Angeles Times* in

August of 2013, only three months before she died, Coleman's unadorned verse becomes a direct plea for compassionate people to rise up to stop the killing of innocents. But in this direct plea, I detect a traumatized exhaustion in the speaker as she has *witnessed* through the mass media so much unnecessary death. Trayvon Martin, who was the teenage victim of vigilante surveillance, stalking, and murder, is fresh on her mind, but she goes on to name several other victims of murder motivated by bigotry:

Please Please Stop the Madness-Driven Violence

In the name of Trayvon Martin, just Americans
must rise up and stop this monstrous domestic brutality
motivated by bias and bigotry, justified by fear,
a vigilante violence that has claimed too many lives to count:
Like 19-year-old Michael Donald, kidnapped at
random and beaten to death in Mobile, Alabama,
on March 20th 1981, courtesy of the Ku Klux Klan.
Like 20-year-old, mentally disabled Melvin Eugene Hair
who succumbed to a carotid chokehold by a
Tampa, Florida police officer on February 20th 1987.
Like 19-year-old Jerrold Hall, accused of stealing a \$60
Walkman, felled by a shotgun blast to the back of his head,
issued by a BART transit cop on November 15th 1992.
Like 16-year-old exchange student Yoshihiro Hattori, shot
dead for trespassing by an irate property owner in Baton Rouge,
while on his way to a Halloween party on October 17th 1992.
Like 21-year-old Matthew Wayne Shepard, mistaken for a
scarecrow after being tortured and tied to a fence outside
Laramie, Wyoming, October 12th 1998, because he was gay.
Like 19-year-old Tyisha Miller bullet-riddled 12 times by
Riverside, California officers during a brain seizure, a semi-
automatic allegedly in her lap, that December 28th, 1998.
O Trayvon, Trayvon! Far too many were martyred decades before you.
Too many to name, too many to remember:

Who says they got what they deserved?
What kind of justice was served?
Where is empathy and respect for human life?

When will there be an end to this God-ugly strife?
 Why the shoot-first-and-ask-questions-too-late?
 How many unarmed or incapacitated victims of hate?
 These names in the name of Trayvon demand we defend The Dream
 with unrelenting commitment,
 with protests against and repeals of unjust laws,
 with hearts and eyes that refuse to be blinded by lies.
 In the names of innocents slain, the compassionate must rise.

More than anything else about this poem, I'm struck by the directness of its title, by the directness of its sentiment, and by the lack of any cleverness or humor. I am also struck by the correct use of language mechanics throughout the poem: words are capitalized at the beginning of sentences, the punctuation is conventional, there are no intentionally misspelled words, nothing slangy. The conventionality of the verse and the directness of the sentiment point to a desperate desire on Coleman's part that her words not only be heeded but that they be understood by the largest number of people possible. Perhaps this was even a precondition for her being published in the *Los Angeles Times*. The repeated "please" and the emphasis that it is a form of "madness" that has "driven" the violence are both sentiments of exhaustion and impotence. The repetitive invocation of "Trayvon, Trayvon!" strikes me as an attempt by the speaker to rally herself as she notes that Martin Luther King's "Dream" lies undefended. Her use of alliteration and consonance to form word pairings—"monstrous"—"motivated," "vigilante"—"violence," "courtesy"—"Ku-Klux-Klan," "carotid"—"chokehold," "blast"—"back,"—is counterposed against her use of line breaks to separate other natural pairings—"shot / dead," "semi- / automatic." These broken pairs signify, perhaps, the shattered lives that are left in the wake of such violence. But on the page, as opposed to aurally, they comprise a brief caesura as the reader's eyes scan from the end of one line to the beginning of the next. In that moment of brief caesura, there is a

fleeting hope that perhaps the particular innocent wasn't gunned down, wasn't tortured and tied to a fence, wasn't bullet-riddled, that the bullet did not find its body.

This brief *suspension of belief*, the doomed hope that effect doesn't always follow cause, reverberates in her poem "A Rage Revivified" from *Bathwater Wine* (1998). The poem is prefaced by an italicized line: "*bones bearing the weight of bones*," and the sense is that bearing witness is internalized in the body, stretching back generations. There is no sense that the bones are becoming stronger through this exertion; they are simply bearing weight whether they are capable of it or not. As in "Please Please Stop the Madness-Driven Violence," the speaker in the poem longs for an uprising. In the former poem, there is an urgency in her plea, perhaps because Coleman knew that she was facing death: "In the names of innocents slain, the compassionate must rise." In "A Rage Revivified," the speaker imagines a scenario in which the disillusioned, alienated, and suicidal, suffering alone, rise up together, their anger reborn. But here it is a fanciful wish, a doomed wish, predicated on a reversal of temporality:

A Rage Revivified

the suicides have returned
sailor's knots & nooses are undone
they climb down from stubby-legged stools, seize
bolted doors by their knobs
fling them open
drink the heat of hungry things

the pills jump whole from the trembling
palm, which becomes a fist,
back into the bottle like a spent jinn

bullets gone listless drop bloodfree to backshed floors

wrists glisten
return notepaper & apologies
to letter drawers
uncut, as immaculate
as the razor's gleam

something strident has been remembered
 bursts thru the muddied window
 so strong it liberates the lungs
 from the enormity of gas

the suicides are risen
 revolt on Main Street/a riot of
 rebuffed silences
 the suicides are raise-fisted
 reach deep into foam-stained pockets
 bash the merciless with algae-covered stones ("Bathwater" 157)

In the opening, she tells us that the suicides have returned; in the final stanza, she tells us that they have risen. The atemporal logic of the poem keeps repeating itself. The suicides that have returned and risen are now rioting as they "bash the merciless with algae-covered stones." The impossible dream here is that the great mass of wounded people rise up against those who wound, those who are merciless. The idea of bashing the merciless recalls philosopher Karl Popper's paradox of tolerance, first elucidated in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* from 1945, which states that if a society extends its tolerance to intolerant people, then the intolerant faction will come to dominate, eventually creating an intolerant society. Coleman is saying that we must be merciless with the merciless, or we will be doomed to live in a merciless society. That she is imagining a disruption of cause and effect, a collective uprising that comes only after all of these individual suicides, tells us that it is already too late, that it has always been too late. The poem is thus simultaneously bleakly pessimistic yet somehow, despite itself, inspiring, communicating the idea of struggle—in the face of insurmountable odds and ultimately unwinnable—for its own sake.

In "After the Rampage" from *Ostinato Vamps* (2003), the speaker surveys the streetscape after such an uprising has come:

After the Rampage

detect the bits of smashed beer bottles
 husks of dreams and crushed expectations
 triangular shadows leaning sunward

molecules of sweat and thatches of hair
 flies and ants grasping what's edible as it rots
 against the cement, under broken branches
 bus benches overturned, lampposts busted

reconnect the severed wires that dangle
 strangely on the acrid air. rebuild the ruined
 territory formerly owned by dwellers on the edge
 measure the prayers it will take to balance the fear

revisit the enthusiasm that once connected
 meaningful to challenge. survey the ancient wisdom
 reconfigure plate glass, twisted gropings
 and burned-out intentions

apologies wishes regrets ("Ostinato" 43)

The speaker's use of the imperative mood throughout the poem, which would typically imply a directness of speech, counterintuitively communicates a sense of detachment here. At first blush, there is no urgency in her words, no action she deems necessary. The tone is dispassionate, even clinical, and could not be more different from the urgent tone the speaker strikes in "Where I Live," for example. Here, she is seemingly content to observe, to *witness*, through her own small sensory window the aftermath of whatever upheaval has transpired. Everything that she observes and comments about is in her direct line of sight. There are no broad appeals, no sweeping conclusions drawn.

In the opening stanza, the imperative "detect" calls attention to itself in its strangeness. She is not saying "see" or "observe," she is saying "detect," which implies a discovering, or a finding something out that isn't readily apparent. This makes "the bits of smashed beer bottles" to which she directs us an interesting target for this imperative, for she is asking us to detect what is already imminently detectable, a sentiment which carries over to the next line and through the

rest of the first two stanzas. The “husks of dreams and crushed expectations,” are juxtaposed against the little observable details: “molecules of sweat and thatches of hair / flies and ants grasping what’s edible as it rots.” Of the imperative verbs that she uses—“detect,” “reconnect,” “rebuild,” “revisit,” “survey,” “reconfigure”—all except “survey” are derived words, i.e., they have prefixes affixed to a base word (“detect,” from the Latin *dētegĕre*, which means to uncover—“de,” as in undoing the action of the base word, *tegĕre*, “to cover”). She is thus asking her readers to undo something that has already been done. In this sense, the poem follows a similar logic to “A Rage Revivified,” except here there is no disruption of cause and effect. She is seeking, then, simply to fix what is broken. It is simple but it is not easy. As I mention above, Coleman is not typically interested in providing solutions to the societal ills that she describes in her work; elucidating the problems is enough. But here, in “After the Rampage,” she has issued a series of imperatives. And in the final line—“apologies wishes regrets”—which seems at first to be a tossed-off shrug of apathy, a perfunctory closing to one’s correspondence, I see an acknowledgement that writing itself, as a form of bearing witness, is not sufficient to the challenges we face.

An Awful Lot: Closing Thoughts on Wanda Coleman's Los Angeles

Wanda Coleman died in November of 2013, less than a year before Black Lives Matters emerged as a movement in the wake of Eric Garner's and Michael Brown's respective murders at the hands of police officers; two years before white supremacist Dylann Roof murdered nine African-American worshippers at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, the oldest Black church in the South; three years before the nation elected an open racist to the presidency; four years before the white supremacist Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, featured protesters who shouted "Jews will not replace us" and the Nazi slogan "blood and soil"; seven years before the COVID-19 pandemic shut down our economy, ultimately killing over a million Americans and seven million worldwide, the same year that George Floyd was choked to death by police officers; eight years before Trump-supporting rioters stormed the Capitol in an attempt to disrupt the certification of Joe Biden's electoral victory; nine years before *Roe v. Wade* was overturned by the Supreme Court; and 12 years before wildfires devastated Coleman's hometown of Los Angeles.

There has been a lot to witness in that time. And as I sit here writing about Wanda Coleman in 2026, I am aware of the various worries that I am harboring. Big worries about the state of our country and the world, all of which are no doubt justified, and smaller, but still important, worries. For instance, I share Shanna Greene Benjamin's worry that Wanda Coleman is being left out of the literary canon. As I have conducted research for this thesis, I have been keenly aware of the fact that there are very, very few works of criticism about her work. As I mentioned above, when Tony Magistrale noted the same dearth of criticism all the way back in 1989, he attributed it at least partially to Coleman's being "a radical feminist who produces poems that are not similar in tone, style, or subject matter to the technically elegant and

solipsistic verse that is currently being produced by graduates of advanced writing programs.”

Coleman was extremely prolific, and one gets the sense when surveying her catalog that she was somewhat improvisational in her approach to poetry. As a jazz enthusiast, this improvisational approach was probably appealing to her, but it likely hurts her reputation with literary critics. Her work can seem unpolished at times, she can come across as overly eager to end a verse on a punchline, and she is entirely disinhibited when it comes to her sexuality. Carrie Conners tells us that Coleman chose poetry as her preferred form “because she could do so in the brief spaces of time between her various jobs and responsibilities, including waiting tables, typing, and caring for her children” (Conners). But it is precisely because of all of these reasons that her poetry resonates so strongly with me and so many others. Jarvis McNinnis describes Coleman’s oeuvre as distinctive because of “its raw, unflinching representations of the violence, poverty, racism, and profound inequality of the urban landscape” (McNinnis). I tend to think that that raw and unflinching quality that defines her work, that makes it so distinctive, is incompatible with a more polished verse intended for an established literary market of academic and increasingly visible independent publishers. Brian Kim Stefans calls her one of “Los Angeles’... great street poet[s]” (Stefans 272). Perhaps that’s where her poetry will remain then, on the street.

I also share Coleman’s worry that the population of African Americans in Los Angeles is falling, that the city is becoming increasingly inhospitable to those who earn below a certain high-dollar threshold, that there is no place left for people like Wanda Coleman in this city that was founded as the town of Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Angeles de Porciuncula on September 4, 1781, by 44 people, more than half of whom were women and men of African descent. In an interview conducted by scholar Charles Joseph towards the end of her life, Coleman reflected on this particular worry:

The African American population has been pushed out of the city after the 1992 riots, that was one of the things that happened in the aftermath of the events, far from the media focus that was long gone. To disperse was the new rule, so you don't have a concentrated community of African Americans to move against you, so to speak, so the landlords have been very effective in pushing African Americans into bedroom communities, Rancho this, Cucamonga, or Palmdale, we're living there now because you can't get jobs, they make the city unlivable for you, and force you out of it. And that's essentially what has happened in post riot 1992 Los Angeles. (Joseph)

A brief perusal of Wikipedia shows that, as a percentage, the African American population in the city of Los Angeles has roughly halved since 1980 (~16% then to ~8% now). The reasons for this population decline are complex and multifaceted, due to trends in the economy and culture, due to a lack of careful civic planning, due to new opportunities for African Americans in places like the Inland Empire, and, of course, due to a long history of racism in this city whose citizens like to think of themselves as stalwartly progressive. The reasons are no doubt important. But as I sit here sipping tea in a Starbucks, putting the closing words together for this thesis, with US bombs falling on Tehran, with masked agents of the government dragging people off of our city streets, with techbro men-children foisting AI into every nook and cranny of society while financing fascist movements at home and abroad with their bottomless pockets and endless cynicism, with the right wing consolidating control of our information systems, with all but the most successful artists unable to make a living plying their craft, I can say with all honesty and humility that I simply don't care about the reasons at this moment. I care only that a lot has been lost, an awful lot.

As I wrote in my introduction and have endeavored to show in this essay, Coleman's engagement with sight-level judgment leads to her plotting racism on a continuum of visibility. She defamiliarizes racism by attributing it to the visual impairments of her characters. This continuum of visibility extends to a discourse on surveillance and witness. Given this facet of her artistry and her close association with the city that names her its "unofficial poet laureate," I

think it's appropriate to give her the last word, to close my essay with one of Coleman's many poems about Los Angeles. This one, from *Imagoes* (1983), fittingly touches on "illusions" and the vistas that her "eyes capture" as she looks out on the beautiful cityscape (as the world goes off):

Prisoner of Los Angeles (2)

in cold grey morning
comes the forlorn honk of workbound traffic
i wake to the video news report

the world is going off

rising, i struggle free of the quilt
& wet dreams of my lover dispel
leave me moist and wanting

in the bathroom
i rinse away illusions, brush my teeth and
unbraid my hair
there're the children to wake
breakfast to conjure
the job
the day laid out before me
the cold corpse of an endless grind

so this is it, i say to the enigma in the mirror
this is your lot/assignment/relegation
this is your city

i find my way to the picture window
my eyes capture the purple reach of hollywood's hills
the gold eye of sun mounting the east
the gray anguished arms of avenue

i will never leave here

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