“do not abandon us, hear our pleas”:

(Re)sounding Loss in
Anna Rabinowitz’s *Darkling: A Poem*

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I. Introduction

As a text that is itself stitched and unstitched, Anna Rabinowitz’s *Darkling* amasses a series of letters, photographs, liturgy, and literature—all interspersed between fragmented pockets of verse—in a move that directly de-situates the speaker from her possession of voice. A nearly eighty-page poem grappling with the fractured debris of the Holocaust, *Darkling* introduces from its outset a speaker whose own sense of subjectivity emerges as a response to an inheritance of trauma. Reverberating with the empty sounds of the speaker’s own echoing voice, the first page of the text, which is offset from the rest of the poem, isolates her from the allusive and elusive materiality of the Holocaust: “Bear with me for singing their song / They are not here to sing / They did not want to sing” (1). Standing apart from the rest of the text, this moment—even as it highlights “They” who “are not here”—foregrounds “me.” In doing so, it suggests that the attempt at reconstructing a narrative for the lost will depend on the capability of both readers (who, as ones being commanded, must “bear”) and speaker (“me”) to engage in the process of “singing,” of using their voices to externalize in a continuous present (singing) the “songs” of those lost. And yet, the selves who occupy this role must concurrently renounce their senses of self. Whereas the victims occupy a status as the grammatical subject of “their” sentences, “me” finds itself rendered object, as though the speaker’s self-conceptualization depends on the actions in which “they” would beg she partake.

The convoluted relationship between “they” and “me” is set against the backdrop of an otherwise empty page, which intrinsically refuses the material function of its “page-ness,” of its supposedly intended utility. Insofar as the words on the page linger within an overwhelmingly empty canvas, readers’ attention is drawn not to what is present, but to what is absent. Much like the bodies, stories, and lives of the victims of genocide, the page itself imbues a sense of its own
Because interacting with the material of *Darkling* is such an important part of reading the poem, I have included various facsimiles of it throughout this paper.
impossibility, of its inability to (re)constitute both a sonic and somatic pre-Holocaust corpus. By virtue of its vast, unused expanse, the page begs readers to question: how does devastation—particularly the horror of the Holocaust—percolate into and define the experiences of those who come after it? How does the residue of perpetual grief define the “songs” sung by future generations, coloring their tones with an unending tinge of lament? And how might this ultimate failure to recapture the voices of the lost, the bodies and stories that once were, exacerbate the generational losses of memory that might otherwise evoke what Rabinowitz deems the “emotional landscape of that terrible time” (Rabinowitz 2017)?

*Darkling* constitutes one of four volumes of poetry produced by Rabinowitz, all of which grapple with intimately human(istic) questions regarding the interwoven nature of bodies in and out of community. Beginning with her 1997 release of *At the Site of Inside Out*, Rabinowitz has sought to circumvent the sociohistorical foreclosure of the political within poetics, to undermine the status of poetry as “shy[ing] away from [the] real” (Rabinowitz 2012). As author and composer Michael Tyrell notes, “She is drawn to forbidden spaces in living experience, language, and visual art, and devises novel means to enter them” (Tyrell 1). Indeed, as indicated by an interview appended to *Darkling*, Rabinowitz conglomerates a series of “featherings, hatchings, bleeds, filaments, drips, and daubs” from her predecessors (Rabinowitz 85). In mingling these external fragments with the linguistic ingenuity of her unique acrostic form, Rabinowitz’s texts fight to reanimate both an intellectual and literary corpus to prioritize the realities of loss, inequality, and artifice.

In her project of poetic reconstitution, Rabinowitz challenges Theodor Adorno’s oft-quoted post-Holocaust dictum that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (Adorno 34). By writing poetry specifically based on a Holocaust narrative, she proposes a new model for understanding
the capacious possibilities latent within the lyric. Rather than simply reduce poetic musings in the modern era to a state of barbarism, Rabinowitz demands that the lyric serve as a site of memory and revision, as a space for grappling with the dilemma of understanding the human condition in a post-Holocaust world. In a sense, then, her refutation of Adorno’s conflation of the poetic and the barbaric insists that to not write poetry would be to produce what philosopher Emil Fackenheim terms a “seamless reading,” one which neglects to account for the social realities and necessities of a post-Holocaust world. Where she equally views the post-modern lyric as problematic because it “has shied away from the political” (Rabinowitz 2012), Rabinowitz does not reject poetry but instead fights to reanimate the poetic as a means of achieving the embodied form of remembrance that tragedy requires:

I have this quasi-insane mission to alter the face of poetry. And I don’t know where it’s going to go, but I feel that we have a problem…. I think that poetry is very marginalized in our society. I think that most inventive, new art forms are marginalized…. We’re living in a world that’s bloated with so much. It’s not a quiet little world with only a few reference points—quite the contrary. (2006)

Rabinowitz—particularly in her “quasi-insane mission” of poetic redefinition—illuminates the forms of liberation that emanate from poetry as a result of including, occluding, or blending the essences of materiality. In “alter[ing] the face of poetry” by encouraging the interaction between the artistic and the real, Rabinowitz refuses Adorno’s desire for the devolution of poetry. As a result, she highlights how the lyric that grapples with the sociohistorical devastations of the Holocaust a priori can productively strive towards persistent forms of regeneration.

Dated January 1, 2000 as a subtle nod to Thomas Hardy’s January 1, 1900 publication of “Darkling Thrush,”2 Darkling stems from, remains acutely aware of, and resists its own material

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2 Rabinowitz used “Darkling Thrush” as an armature for the poem, which she suggests functions as a means of reflecting on the horrors of the past while gesturing toward a future filled with optimism and possibility: “I found myself... haunted by ‘The Darkling Thrush’—by its tone of millennial mourning, by its note of hope in the thrush’s song, and most especially by its opening line which situates the poet as he meditates on the passing century: ‘I leant
fragmentation as a means of internally seeking to reconstitute people lost in the Holocaust. Emerging as the sutured product of “truncated histories, sketchy memories, bits of narrative, and the contents of a shoebox containing old photos and letters that had been translated” (Rabinowitz 83), *Darkling* refuses readers’ overarching desire for narrative structure by presenting a series of disjointed experiences addressed to referents and recipients unknown. Interweaving and desituating verse, the speaker grapples with her memories of emotionally distant parents—so-rendered as a result of their guilt surrounding survivorship—and her post-memorial inheritance of Holocaust-era catastrophe. Crafting a narrative directly out of the voices of these temporal, spatial, and memorial others, *Darkling* thereby depends, as Rabinowitz suggested in our correspondence, on the “reader com[ing]away having experienced an emotional transformation that brings her closer to an understanding of that which must be said but cannot be fully understood” (Rabinowitz 2017).4

In vying to confront affiliative traumatic experience,5 the speaker of *Darkling* vows to dedicate her memory to the events which transpired prior to her birth. However, the speaker’s

upon a coppice gate.’ I, too, felt as if I was peering into a coppice—a wood or thicket characterized by a dense, often tangled, underwood of stump shoots and suckers encouraged into being by the periodic cutting down of trees” (Rabinowitz 83). In acknowledging the resonance between her existence and “the periodic cutting down of trees,” Rabinowitz gestures toward the circumstantial luck that many second- and third-generation Holocaust survivors often feel in relation to their lived experiences (e.g., “I am here because they are not.”) At the same time, in her musings on the “millennial mourning,” she suggests that, even as a “note of hope [exists] in the thrush’s song,” she would be remiss to move beyond the century lost, to fail to mourn the losses of both time and bodies at the conclusion of the century. In this way, using “Darkling Thrush” as an acrostic armature embodies and embraces the interstitial experience(s) of post-memorial Holocaust survivors who fight to reconcile the possibility of greatness during their own lives that was painfully extinguished for those murdered by the Nazis.

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3 Post-memory is defined as “the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated” (Hirsh 22).

4 This reflection is drawn from my personal email correspondence with Anna Rabinowitz in November of 2017. I am deeply indebted to her and grateful for her willingness to share the profundity and brilliance of her thoughts.

5 Claudia Ingram loosely refers to “affiliative traumatic experience” as similar to (though not quite the same as) post-memory, wherein an individual endures the trauma of their relatives secondhand. Critically, however, I suggest that affiliative traumatic experience ought to be understood not as “secondary” or “other” to the horrors endured by the victims and/or survivors of atrocity. Rather, the individual (e.g., the speaker, in this case) remains in close proximity to the genocide while never having endured it herself—that is, her own skin puckers under the image of her family members’ and/or loved ones’ corporeal mutilation. Indeed, she may begin to feel some level of guilt for not having
narrative does not concern itself with proving in exact terms the circumstances surrounding the Holocaust; rather, it looks to “bear witness” to the loss, to create a hypothetical account of terror, fear, and corporeal decimation. Jacques Derrida, in his *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, explores this critical distinction between “proving” testimony and “bearing witness” to the Holocaust:

“I bear witness”—that means: “I affirm (rightly or wrongly, but in all good faith, sincerely) that that was or is present to me, in space and time (thus, sense-perceptible), and although you do not have access to it, not the same access, you, my addressees, you have to believe me, because I engage myself to tell you the truth, I am already engaged in it, I tell you that I am telling you the truth. Believe me. You have to believe me.” (Derrida 76)

Embedded within Derrida’s definition of bearing witness is a sense of temporal and spatial immediacy (“that was or is present to me, in space and time”), yet the post-memorial subject still bears witness. In fact, she does not merely inherit the role of “believer” that Derrida projects onto her. Rather, she occupies a dyadic role as “listener” and “disseminator,” entrusted not only with the responsibility of believing but also with that of historicizing, of re-telling. Although it is true that, as an initial addressee, she cannot have “the same access” to the survivor’s story, she, as an arbiter to the next generation, must, as the speaker states in the poem, “name, rename, unname” the testimonies she has received to the best of her ability (Rabinowitz 29). In this mediating role—where she internalizes and reproduces Holocaust testimony, begging that the next generation, too, “Believe me. You have to believe me”—the speaker’s relationship to both the lost and the survivors is solidified.
By producing a form of memory that pervades *l’dor vador* ("from generation to generation"), *Darkling* fights to globalize feelings such that the reader can empathize with the emotional, physical, and spiritual pains inflicted upon the bodies of the lost. Functioning to produce the impressions of a "universal" feeling of sorrow, the text imprints a sense of imminent devastation onto readers’ bodies akin to what Sara Ahmed suggests is only an approximation of feeling: “It is not so much that we are ‘with them’ by feeling sad; the apparently shared negative feeling state does not position the reader and victim in a relation of equivalence. Rather, we feel sad about their suffering, an ‘aboutness’ that ensures that they remain the object of ‘our feeling’” (Ahmed 35). And yet, even as readers can empathize with—though never truly feel—the pain felt by an other, *Darkling* embraces a quasi-kenotic form of “emptying” emotion into readers’ bodies that counters the notion of “aboutness”: the inundation of material remnants and lyrical fragments within the text viscerally transposes the pain imprinted onto the flesh of the lost and replicates it such that it becomes overwhelmingly *real* for readers. Ensnared in the evocative space conjured by Rabinowitz’s speaker, readers’ own throats tingle as they read about children whose arms “choked the wind with their necks” (Rabinowitz 63), their eyes flutter as they read how “they sliced off Moishe’s lids” (63), their hearts lurch as they realize “and now—/ and now—/ oh god—/ they’re dead” (4). *Darkling* thus defies the delineation of “our feeling” and “their feeling” by suggesting that the they captured in photographs, that the they whose letters are scrawled throughout the text, that the they who begged and pleaded and failed to save themselves, just as easily could have been us.

As we—the readers of *Darkling*—grapple with the re-inscription of pain onto our own bodies, the fragmented permutations of the text fight to revivify the dead. Perhaps more painful than the presence of material in the text are the spaces marked by its absence. Overwhelmed by a
paradoxical inundation and ongoing fragmentation of material, *Darkling* does not simply fight to recraft the lost by renewing their lives through those living. Instead, it looks to reanimate the voices of people who once were, by rendering the “absent present” (Rabinowitz 2017). Where Claudia Ingram argues that semantic re-creation in *Darkling* produces alterity between a post-Holocaust self and a destroyed other, I contend that the text leans towards a form of somatic reconstruction that does not, in fact, “dramatize the honoring of distances” as Ingram suggests (Ingram 156). Rather, the blending of “the intermittent I-speaker” with the voices of the dead emphasizes the impossible task of recovering the victims while also immersing them in the space of the living and, by extension, giving them life. In doing so, *Darkling* approximates the genre of a Holocaust-era *yizker-bikher*, a collection of stories about individuals and communities described by Marianne Hirsh as an “act of witness and site of memory… [that] evokes and tries to re-create the life that was… [at the same time as being an] act of public mourning, form of a collective Kaddish [ritual prayer]” (Hirsh 247). Thus, the text struggles to reconnect not only the speaker to decimated communities, but also the lost to that very same space.

Though the speaker tries to secure a form of corporeal and memorial revivification for the lost vis-à-vis the readers’ living bodies, the juxtaposed inclusion of material letters and immaterial voices refuses her desire to actually create and consume holistic life narratives. Solidifying the “without”-ness of the lost—who lack name, context, community, and story—the text rejects the speaker’s attempt to transform the lost from lifeless objects into relational beings. In foredooming the possibility of narrative reconstruction, the text emphasizes the fragmented nature of unconscionable loss. Where Ingram suggests that “the poem *imagines* words and syllables themselves as resistantly material or as painfully mortal” (Ingram 167, emphasis added), the imaginative inclination itself supersedes the realm of the strictly “material” and “mortal,” as the
speaker finds that her project of imaginative regeneration remains confined to the space of the text. Merging the physical body with the literary corpus, the text reclaims it fundamental control over the bodies of the lost, reinstating the object-status of the dead.

Although incapable of physically resuscitating the lost, the speaker—in the midst of a fractured sense of selfhood exacerbated by the inability to reconcile past histories—finds that the visceral (r)ejection of the most transient parts of her own body allows her to ameliorate the burdens of her traumatic inheritance. Using the poem such that “phonetic speech, oral utterance, sound itself, become text” (Kristeva 53), the speaker’s reintegration of perpetual pain into ephemeral noise allows for the jouissance-esque release and relinquishment of suffering. By transforming vocalization into text and text back into vocalization, the speaker “bears witness” in ways that reciprocally transmute the temporary body such that it becomes “permanently impermanent” (Rabinowitz 38), the vestigial remains of a human essence that supersedes strict materiality. As a result, the decayed bodies—even in their inability to be revived—are not truly gone. The various iterations of the “human” that rise to the fore defy the captivity of embodied materiality such that memory carries with it the legacy of the deceased. “Bearing witness” thus overcomes the fleetingness of life itself.

In presenting accounts of loss, Darkling achieves its end-goal of corporeal reconstitution by contorting and manipulating readers’ bodies such that they both experience the pain endured by the lost and find that they themselves emerge as receptacles for the narratives of the dead—that is, they serve as sites of memory, as vehicles for containment, and as spaces for embodied preservation of those lost in the genocide. By blurring the boundaries between the somatic and the sonic, the material and the immaterial, the living and the dead, Darkling not only manages to provide a highly coveted response to the dead’s ongoing supplication to the living—“do not
—but it also moves beyond “hearing” to engender a form of internalization that allows the lost to overcome death. Indeed, by forcing readers to use their bodies as sites of both internment and circulation, of encapsulation and vibrant perpetuation, *Darkling* challenges them to reanimate the deceased by allowing the lost to live in and through them. And yet, readers also find that ethical quandaries abound in the speaker’s subsequent appropriation of the voices of the deceased: in re-producing and bearing witness to the lives of the lost, the speaker challenges readers to consider the potential violence perpetrated by memorializing those whose voices remain almost inaccessible. In affirming the ongoing need for narrative reconstitution and collective memory, *Darkling* instills in readers a sense that they can never truly re-sound loss, even as “forgetting is [itself] a death.” Still, readers are tasked with both embodying and vocalizing the pain of the dead within the limits of this work. To do otherwise would be to inflict a more painful, life-ending violence onto the bodies of those murdered in the Holocaust.

II. *Co*-respondence and *Co*-respondents: Re-sounding Lost Voices

For the speaker of *Darkling*, the voice—despite its immaterial ephemerality—remains inextricable from the body itself: rather than distance voice from body, the speaker recognizes voice and body as pieces of each other, the locus for understanding life as “permanently impermanent / imperfectly true” (38). Particularly crucial to her project of understanding the sonic-somatic construction of life is the speaker’s fusion of the visceral and the vocal, the mechanisms by which she creates a poem that gesticulates and manipulates the bodies of both the dead victim and the living reader. From the very outset of the poem, the speaker underscores the intimate connection between body and voice:

\[
\text{Inside: a story — inventories, incidents —}
\]
pleading to be flossed
from the teeth of silence

Leaching congealed vowels
lately of / longing for / words

Explanations not yet factored into claim: —

this is this —

that is that —

As in first annunciations / as in debuts
for old roles /

as if to atone:

yes, I love you —. (3)

Despite distancing herself from truth by claiming that what lies “Inside” is “a story” (rather than the “story”), the tension within the speaker’s grammatical play underscores her refusal to accept reductive dichotomies between “Inside”/outside, apart/together. The colon that follows “Inside” complicates the notion of alterity that would otherwise characterize the relationship between the speaker and the lost. In a sense, the bifurcation of connection (as exuded via the colon) and separation (as illustrated by the spacing within the text) lays the foundation for a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between physical corpus and ethereal voice.

Rather than create an experience predicated on mutually exclusive categories of “body” and “voice,” then, the text blurs the boundaries between the two, thereby undermining conceptions of (im)material space. Situating the “inventories, incidents” of the lost (read: their overarching narratives) within the remaining gaps of the decaying body (“teeth”), the poem underscores the ways in which the voice itself is housed within and held intently by an individual’s corporeal frame. In suggesting that the “vowels” themselves are “congealed,” the speaker evokes images of blood as it “congeal[s]” and coagulates when emerging from the body. The process of “congeal[ing] vowels” thereby intimates a visceral voice, one which is em-bodied, rather than
distanced from that same body. The text thus suggests that the voice flows through the body much like blood itself, as the substance whose circulation is responsible for life. And yet, the speaker’s description of the “vowels” subject to “leaching” also illustrates a process of expulsion. By extension, the aural possibility of hearing “leaching” as “leeching” re-situates the extraction in the space of that which concurrently removes and gives life, which “passes out” yet forces in. In a sense, the speaker re-situates the sonic-somatic relationship such that the voice may be expelled from the body yet still retain physical, life-producing properties.

So too are readers involved in the process of deconstructing boundaries between the visceral and the vocal. In calling upon some other to engage with the text and “floss” it from the “teeth of silence,” the speaker implicates readers’ bodies in the process of narrative excavation. As they envision themselves quite literally reaching into the apertures between hardened “silence” and dislodging fragments of decomposed, partial narrative, readers occupy a space as “floss”-ers, as the individuals interacting with the archival corpus that lies before them. As “floss”-ers, then, they must work to unearth the voices—and, by extension, the bodies—of the lost from within the confines of “the teeth of silence,” to assist them by answering their “pleading” calls, interrogating the sounds of genocidal loss.

These sounds are echoed by speaker and readers in howling, guttural emphases, and gesticulations. The speaker’s use of italics on the page functions to contort readers’ bodies as they interact with the text. In specifically denoting that “this is this—/ that is that—” and “yes, I love you—,” the poem does not simply gesture towards the possible introduction of another voice. Rather, it evokes the strident whisper and/or gentle cooing of that “other” voice, therein changing the ways in which the readers’ own eyes and throat respond to the text. In fact, the inclusion of the
virgule\textsuperscript{6} within statements like “lately of / longing for / words” re-routes readers’ interaction with the text: they must read across and pause in places that feel almost as unnatural as the deaths that the victims themselves experienced. As a result, the lost—even as they engage in “pleading”—demonstrate some semblance of autonomy through their narratives, as though they still command and dictate the actions of the living body and voice.

In granting the dead this agency, the text further uses the virgule to complicate the peculiarity of living-dead (dis)embodiment. Rather than assume that one simply occupies a single body which is either dead or alive, the text suggests that voice has the potential to disrupt the delineation between life and death. Controlling the visual momentum of readers’ engagement, the poem gestures toward “first annunciations” and “debuts / for old roles.” On the one hand, the text locates the “story” of the Holocaust within the space of new-ness, futurity, possibility; on the other, the plural “annunciations” and “old roles” point toward a perpetual past. Coupled with the subtle, oral pun that links “annunciations” to “enunciations,”\textsuperscript{7} the poem emboldens the liminal navigation of past, present, and future. In doing so, it creates a sense of transcendent temporality, such that readers, text, and victim move through and beyond the confines of time. Latent within this \textit{in-between} capacity of the voice, then, is the suggestion that the new can occur alongside the old. In a word, the past seems inextricably linked to the future. By tying all of these temporal moments together, the poem embraces Lawrence Langer’s notion of \textit{deathlife}—the idea that, where the termination of life seems to constitute death, the Holocaust survivor perpetually finds that continuing onward in life produces a rebirth, such that the survivors and the victims remain in a purgatorial state between “life” and “death” (Langer 10).

\textsuperscript{6}The virgule is “a thin sloping or upright line (/, |) occurring… as a mark for caesura or as a punctuation mark” (OED). It also appears in the statement that what occurs is “As in first annunciations / as in debuts // for old roles.”

\textsuperscript{7}Fascinatingly, the pun can be \textit{heard} but not necessarily seen. This realization suggests the primacy of aurality and orality within the text, locating voice as the immediate contender for revivifying the narratives of the lost.
In this purgatory, the speaker extracts the narratives of the deceased, using her own literary and physical corpus as a space for reanimation. She wades through the material that lies before her, embracing the circulative capacities latent within her own veins and reinventing the dead. The task, however, is daunting. In reflecting on the remnants of the past lingering before her, she exclaims, “This paper life! / How I hate this paper life!” (42). The merger of “paper” and “life!” illustrates the ways in which the “paper” itself carries a sense of “life!” from the past and into the future. Indeed, the voices leap off the paper, creating a sense of the material lives that existed in the past. The speaker’s turn to letters allows her to grapple with the (albeit devastating) process of de- and re-constitution. As the speaker contends with and against the recognition that recomposing the dead also requires a violent form of de-constitution, she finds that the material fragments of the lost hold the key to honoring their memories to the fullest: the paper—and, specifically, the letters sprawled across that paper—becomes the corpus of the dead, such that the universal experience of travesty comes to create an ongoing community pitted against the perpetuation of pain and continued legacies of loss.

In a series of the victims’ unanswered letters, the text differentiates between the various voices of the lost. Identifying how “the shoebox…one-third full of letters”\(^8\) (35) begets a new form of knowledge for her, the speaker incorporates direct snippets of letters.\(^9\) The polyvocal text

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8 The speaker’s amassing of letters that contain the voices of those who feel they have been forgotten suggests that, though the letters were eventually received, they were received too late: the family likely did not have the ability to respond to them, exacerbating the tragedy of the voices lost even further.

9 By specifically procuring the voices of the dead as a means of constructing her poem, the speaker creates what I term “episteme-ological” fodder for re-imagining the voice(s) of the lost themselves. By my definition, “episteme-ology” is a body of quasi-universal foreknowledge and post-knowledge produced in a series of “dossiers” that transcends temporal and spatial fixation—that is, it suggests that the letters that the speaker incorporates contain within them not only information relevant to their present situation, but also \textit{nunc stans}-esque body of sociohistorical thought that allows “modern” readers to recognize their own painful experience in the words of the victim-author. Essentially, it is out of this “episteme-ology” that the speaker: (1) engages with the voices of the past in order to conjecture their bodies in the present and future; (2) allows herself and readers to engage with the lost themselves; and (3) ultimately dissimulates the relationship between readers as “other” to the Holocaust and victim as akin to it by implicating the voice—and, by extension, the body—of readers in the process of reconstructing the dead. For more on \textit{nunc stans}...
manages to refuse readers’ desires to understand who exactly speaks at any moment. To an extent, readers cannot fully understand whose voices ring out, since they all blend together in the polyphony of death. Such a move, in turn, reimagines the commonly-held belief in death as a force that silences. At the same time as it suggests that a collective scream rings out, the text refuses to deny the individual subjectivity that the lost experienced in life. That is to say, each of the many voices that arises in the text emerges as distinct. The decision to italicize appears not only to mark the alterity that separates the speaker from the Holocaust victims she describes, then, but also to offer the voices themselves an overflowing sense of personality, individuality, and life:

“Nat sent $5. And you? Have you forgotten to love us? your father, Shlomo C.”

“To my dear brother and sister-in-law, Have you been gone so long to write so little? Upon our knees, we beseech you — do not become Strangers, keep us informed... Taste our cries, touch our fires do not mention us in passing — .................................................................

I kiss you with all my shattered heart... your sister, Royzeh M.”

In an initial reading of the two letters, four distinct differences between “Shlomo C.” and “Royzeh M.” are apparent: (1) their disparate initials (“C.” and “M.”) suggest that they are from different families; (2) where Shlomo C. offers a blunt, somewhat antagonistic voice (“And you?”), Royzeh M. upholds pleasantries, addressing her “dear brother and sister-in-law,” and offering them her love (“I kiss you”); (3) Shlomo C. manages to use his brevity to compound a sense of urgency (“Nat sent $5.”) and hint towards a command, where Royzeh M. begs for sympathy through the temporal, see Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in which he describes history as intrinsically dialectical, heterogeneous, and full (Benjamin 261.XIV).
evocation of her body (“Taste our cries”) and passions (“touch our fires”); and (4) based on both the tonal distinctions within their letters and the gendered, age-based differences between the “father” and “sister,” the voices sound different to readers, who anticipate that the father speaks in a raspy, aggressive tone while the sister is wistful and affectionate yet desperate and imploring.

Even as the differences between Shlomo C. and Royzeh M. abound, the two emerge nonetheless as linked by feelings of neglect. They stand as those who will always be perceived as gone. Aching for the reassurance of their family members, both question the delayed response to their letters (“Have / you forgotten us?”, “Have you been gone so long to write so little?”). In a text that meticulously separates lines as a means of literalizing isolation, the enjambment of Shlomo C.’s question leads to a form of scrambling. Because “Have” is separated from “you forgotten us?”, readers—assuming each line to be both part of the whole and its own unique idea—fill in the gap: “you [Have] forgotten us.” In fact, through the textual (dis)integration of Royzeh M.’s letter, the enjambment of her assertion that her family “do not become / Strangers, keep us informed” forces a similar separation, one in which it appears as though her kin stand alone as “Strangers.” Capitalized and, by extension, foregrounded in Royzeh M.’s language, “Strangers” appears to be the foremost reality she experiences. The text suggests that, by virtue of her family members’ continued failure to respond (they “write so little”), the affiliative bonds that connect them have been disrupted. Those left in Eastern Europe have become Strangers, forgotten.

In response, the speaker adopts her own voice as a mechanism for externalizing the reply coveted by the lost. She engages in a process that I term “co-respondence.” Though she cannot materialize the literal resurgence of the dead, the speaker still can provide the lost—through the provocation of her voice, the evocation of their voices, and the stimulation of the readers’ voices—the acknowledgment and quasi-metaphysical life (“do not abandon us, hear our pleas” [51]) they
so desperately seek. Critically, the distinction between “co-respondence” and “correspondence” is that the hyphenation marks, to an extent, the level of separation between the co-operating parties (e.g., the “dead” and the “living”)—that is, the speaker does not look to answer the lost directly, but instead looks to answer to the lost. Amidst the boundary blurring of the sonic and the somatic, co-respondence activates the bodies of the living such that they re-place those of the dead in ways that transcend temporal, spatial, and geopolitical bounds. In a sense, co-respondence centers around those guttural, transient emanations from the living throat such that they acknowledge certain horrific realities while also warding death off.

As a hermeneutical tool for examining Darkling, co-respondence functions linguistically and formulaically to unite the voices of the past and present in order to reimagine isolation. The text allows both reader and speaker to immerse themselves in the pain of the past such that they can no longer remain Strangers to it. Dissolving the distance between present-self and past-other, the text wedges together the two affiliated halves to compete in, yet complete, a narrative of loss:

Unending hungers, absent beds, blank walls  
when the sun scoursthe earth it will go blind

Faith graying — O excrement of ash  
months with no news, send clothing, send food

Fluent with anecdote torn from their mouths  
nouns orphaned by verbs gone blood-raving mad

Locutions of this are not — cannot be — that  
there are times a letter means more than money

Enigmas fuel the lines, the smudged borders  
we fled to Ostrov, to Tsekanovtze, to...

Dossiers begging escape to the grave  
today father died of these privations
In tabulating couplets of italicized and non-italicized verse, the text evokes both the voice(s) that have been silenced (those of the dead) and the voice(s) of the speaker, situating them in co-respondent space. By extracting bits and pieces of information from an uncertain volume of letters, the text creates its own episteme-ology of quasi-universal foreknowledge and post-knowledge produced in a series of “dossiers”—understandings of the “unending hungers” and “half-lived lives,” the “sufferings,” “fuss[ing]”—that transcends temporal and spatial fixation. Indeed, where the letters of the past present an underlying concept (e.g., “father died” or “naked where lost days roll”), the speaker herself co-responds (e.g., “escape to the grave” or “Unrobed for the shadows”), thereby amplifying the voices of the lost. By foregrounding her own intensification of past voices, she prefaces the past with the present, creating a sense of the universal tragedy present in their lament. Her voice, then, becomes a conduit for acknowledging the lost, always already answering to their concerns and, by extension, suggesting that she, too, has inherited their pain.
This visual ululation of the text implicates readers in the process of inheritance as well. By forcing the eyes to rock back and forth in the process of reading about the strife endured ("no news, send clothing, send food"), corporeal decomposition ("worms fuss with our bones"), and communal decimation ("there are no Jews left in Brok"), the text enables readers to feel the sorrow of those who lived through the Holocaust such that readers can sing their own requiem for the lost. The formatting sways their bodies, choreographing its own lament for the dead. And yet, in doing so, the text obfuscates the funerary finality of the requiem. It transforms the elegiac tone of devastation from one of stasis into dynamism, reiterating the continuity of the lives of the lost. By re-situating readers’ bodies and coercing their very movements, the text highlights the readers’ capacities to emerge as tertiary co-respondents, to use their own bodies as loci for answering to loss. In involving readers in this process, the text apposes past (the lost), present (the speaker), and future (generations of readers); likewise, it undermines spatial fixation, emanating beyond places like “Brok,” “Ostrov,” and “Tsekanovtze.”

By creating a series of co-respondents, the text places the voices of the lost into the throats of the living. In so doing, it re-imagines the space of loss such that, even amidst the possibility of perpetuating violence, hope can remain. To an extent, it seems that the inclusion of ellipses in the poem marks a sense of dragging uncertainty. However, insofar as the descriptions of location are followed by ellipses (e.g., “there are no Jews left in Brok...”), the poem allows the reader to choose how they resituate the deceased: they can either eclipse their lives by refusing to fill in the “to...,” or they can elect to re-imagine the spaces occupied by the lost within their own bodies. Rather than punctuate the text and enforce the finality of death (e.g., “no Jews left.”), the ellipses provide readers with the power to read as they will, to re-envision loss as silence or screeching. The bodies of readers, as the latest destination for “our wanderings,” become sites of potential
restoration or calamity, as they can fight for the memorial resuscitation of the lost or inflict yet another form of violence onto those killed in the genocide.

In an attempt to instill hope into the vocal trajectories of the dead, the text challenges its readers to sacrifice their own bodies such that they themselves feel the pain endured by the lost. By begging that they “floss” the narratives of the lost from the “teeth of silence,” the text asserts that readers must accept the inevitable bleeding of their own gums, the chapping of their own lips. Just as co-response to the past depends on the speaker and readers mingling their bodies with the lost in order to become plural selves, it also reciprocally immerses the reader in the past, forcing them to feel the imminence of the pain endured by the deceased. Explicitly pointing to the “Unending hungers, absent beds, blank walls” in the present voice, the text de-situates the devastation of the past from any verb tense. As a result, the experience is universalized across time, suggesting it belongs to both victim and reader alike. The readers’ bodies thus must feel the “sufferings,” endure the “wanderings” in the space of the vocal: their own words begin enduring a “Laconic… galloping,” traipsing and “maneuver-ing” through the world akin to that forced upon the bodies of the lost. In a sense, the sonic itself—the “particles of data,” the “dossiers”—challenges the boundaries of what can and cannot be experienced in the present-tense. Such is the nature of the “smudged borders” of temporality and spatiality underscored within co-responsive space: the transient voice begins to question the ephemerality of experience, the wispy ways in which it can be refracted and reposed in different forms and onto different frames.

10 In this sense, the text echoes Thomas Trezise’s concept of narrative pluralism, described in his “Unspeakable.” Centering his conversation around Levinas’ concept of Saying, “an intersubjective relation in which the listener, while unavoidably attending to the Said (Dit), more fundamentally eliciting the very act of speaking interdicted by the Final Solution,” Trezise highlights the ways in which the Holocaust survivor’s language refuses the silencing that the Nazis looked to impose upon the Jewish people (Trezise 60). As such, he suggests that the language of the individual survivor becomes imbued with a multiplicity of selves, such that “selfsameness” dissolves and the “I” comes to stand in for a series of others (i.e., “sing… your song[s]”) despite the presence of only “one” voice.

11 Insofar as the text marks the “maneuvers” as “Mossy,” there is a sense of the natural that pervades as well—that it is only natural that experience can transcend its unilaterality and be reflected onto the bodies of the living.
III. Enough is Enough: The Dayenu Prayer and Violence

The text’s co-respondent nature percolates further into its appropriation of traditional Jewish liturgy in ways that immediately center the voice as a means for re-imaging and re-imagining the corporeal pain inflicted upon the dead. In particular, the text uses the Dayenu prayer as a means of exploring the forms of violence continually perpetrated against the lost. The Dayenu prayer, recited on the Jewish holiday of Passover and translated to mean “It would have been enough,” generally marks the celebratory triumph of the enslaved Israelites over their captors. Performed by a congregation or group of individuals, the song is sung in an upbeat tone, unifying the voices present at the Passover seder in joyous re-memory and triumphantly marking a sense that the God of the Jewish people has solidified His/Her/Their support of them by doing more than just saving them. At the same time, Darkling offers a sense that the Dayenu prayer is complicated. Although it marks the victory of the Israelites over their Egyptian captors, the song also celebrates the deaths of countless (arguably innocent) Egyptians who, while complicit in the systemic oppression of the Israelites, did not necessarily deserve to die. In fact, the line “If He had smitten their first born, and had not given us their wealth, Dayenu” from within the original prayer lionizes the deaths of newborn Egyptian babies. The Dayenu prayer, then, presents a narrative of accomplishment doused in senseless violence.

Rewriting the Dayenu prayer within co-respondent space, the text re-imagines narratives of triumph from the eyes of the defeated, downtrodden dead. Insofar as the overarching tone of the

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12 Modern feminist theologians have debated the gender of God, suggesting that masculinized God language (e.g., referring to God using “He” and “Him” pronouns) reifies the social hegemony afforded to patriarchy in modern societies. Though this thesis does not look to put forward an overarching argument about the nature of God language, it does look to embrace feminist theologians’ complications of patriarchy by embracing a “non-pluralistic” multiplicity of pronouns for God. Rather than suggest that I wholeheartedly can conceptualize the gendered form that God may take, I present a series of gender pronouns for God in an attempt at suggesting the possibility of divine gender transcendence and de-situation.
prayer becomes marked by a sense of devastation, the poem somberly revises the meaning behind the proclamation that “It would have been enough”:

Whittled regions, watery seasons
A landscape never to be read
or rewritten

if they had hammered nails to our guns
and not cut off our hands

“Such joy we had this Sabbath eve
When your letter arrived after five months”

Raw eyes rime the wrecked roads

if they had sliced off Moishe’s lids
and not forced Channah to eat them

Dayenu

If forgetting is a death...
The urgency to remember a walling up...

Their marks:
canvas of shadow
palette of dung

Erosrattle in their groins

“Nekleh, Meyer and Soreleh moved in with us”

“On Sukkes your mother had a heart attack”

“Nathan, the baker, owes Hershl for a bale of flour”

“Tevyeh Khaneh Khaye’s offered five zlotys for each dollar you sent...Eren Yossel, the fool, knows they give seven for one right here on my street”

if they had shorn arms from the children
and not choked the wind with their necks

Dayenu
“Rokhl and Hershl are in Tshekhanovtse
Rivke Malke’s and Yossel in Zembrova
Ephraim in Vilna, Alter, your father, in Sokolke
Shmülke an orderly in Minsk
Tereye in Tashkent”

O starstammer, smoke-
Roar, trains race to deceit.

if they had crushed us on broken glass
and not hollowed our eyes with bayonets

Dayenu

“I rolled the zlotys in my hand and flung them to the floor”

“An action in Khelm: firemen smashed the roofs of our
Landsmen’s stores while they prayed”

if they had twisted screws in Soreh’s legs
and not ripped the lips from Faigel’s face

Dayenu

These are the generations of Ostroleka, of Brok, of
HELL on earth

In the days when
No skins radiated,
    having spoken with Him,

when
God
Slept in

as ifs begat and begat and begat

Dayenu
Claiming that the historical trajectory of the Holocaust lingers in a “landscape never to be read / or rewritten,” the text calls attention to its own subversive nature—that is, at the same time as it suggests that locations cannot be “rewritten,” the text engages in an active process of rewriting of past, violent victories. The eerie juxtaposition of a triumphant song with the violation of “the children” compels the reader to question the historical hegemony afforded to narrative discourses surrounding the Holocaust. Insofar as the text both feigns memory and yet categorically forgets each individual within the group of “children,” readers are drawn to weigh the unequal distribution of memory. In a word, the text invites them to consider how focusing on key perpetrators (e.g., Hitler, Himmler, Goebbels, etc.) who themselves have become named, remembered, infamous, commits yet another form of ghastly violence against the dead.

In an attempt to refuse the perpetrator’s ownership of memory, the text humanizes catastrophe. The prayer centers specifically on the atrocities committed against the mouths (“gums” and “lips”) and throats (“choked”) of the deceased. As a result, the text not only underscores the horrific corporeal decimation that transpired during the Holocaust, but it also focuses on the visceral tragedy specifically in the realm of the elimination of the vocal. As readers encounter the text—“if they had hammered nails to our gums”—their own mouths tingle with the possibility of depravation coupled with overwhelming, unimaginable pain; as they imagine having to “eat [Moishe’s lids]” they find themselves gagging, their hearts sinking; and as they envision another person “rip[ping] the lips from [her own] face,” their fingers begin to trace their lips, begin to feel their overwhelming presence and the possibility of their violently being torn, removed, without a trace. Though the presence of names (e.g., “Moishe” and “Soreh”) marks a sense of specificity, the continued “nam[ing], renam[ing], unnam[ing]” that pervades the text
exacerbates the feeling that the terrifying silencing perpetrated against unsuspecting bodies could—and can—just as easily have been inflicted upon readers’ own bodies.

And yet, the text does not simply allow readers to sentimentally imagine themselves in the places of the lost; it asks them to use their own throats to refuse the violence committed against the dead. Situated in present-space, the text envisions the individuals ensnared within ghettos and concentration camps, remarking that “Raw eyes rime the wracked roads… / O starstammer, smoke- / Roar, trains race to deceit.” The text’s infusion of alliteration on the r and s sounds implicates the reader’s throat in multiple ways. First, by electing to use rhotic13 (e.g., “hard”) r sounds (as opposed to non-rhotic utterances), the text creates a quasi-guttural rasping sound. The rasping sound blends with later usages of s-sounds, and the sibilance echoes this shrill harmony in forcing the reader to resemble a snake, an animal traditionally associated with evil and sin. The production of each sound requires some sort of continued breathing, an inhale that inevitably produces an exhaled release of noise. Insofar as both sibilance and rhoticity cannot be produced without the reader’s production of aspiration-sounds,14 readers find themselves out of breath, panting, much like the lost did in life. Indeed, as the text itself becomes navigated like a “wracked road”—disjointed, muddled, filled figuratively-speaking with potholes—readers must recognize that dissonance counterintuitively emerges amidst the supposed alliterative harmony. Their imaginative inclinations cannot simply waver at thinking of “Moishe” and “Soreh” as others to

13 The creation of the term “Erosrattle” also plays fascinatingly into the notion of the “e-rhotic”: condensed within the articulation of the one word is not only rhotic sounds, but also a subtle sibilance, a wavering between the two that elucidates much about the condition of the lost. The “rattle,” which resonates with a snake-like image, emerges as subtly phallic, evocative of the sexual experience of the lost which has toxically been “shaken” (e.g., removed) from them. The rhotic as “Eros” coupled with the phallic image of the “rattle,” then, situates sexual pleasure in the realm of the out of breath, painting a more holistic understanding of the bodies lost in the Holocaust—that is, the text suggests that the totality of their lives was not simply their suffering, but rather their status as humans who were prematurely disconnected from both the pleasure-filled and tragic experiences of humanity. In a sense, the word itself fortifies an image of the dead that resists subsuming them exclusively in the realm of the dead victims and instead portrays them as what they were: human beings.

14 Linguistically, the process of creating breath is known as “aspiration” (Steliotes 2017).
themselves. They must instead wedge a gap between their temporal-spatial separation from the lost such that they do not feel for the dead, but actually become the dead.

Becoming the dead, however, entails a direct form of memorialized violence. As readers metaphorically occupy the voices of the lost, they imagine a Moishe and a Soreh, a Faigel and a Channah who, for them, never existed. Readers never heard the noises emanating from the throats of the dead, never saw how their vocal cords riffed up and down as they produced sound, never knew the laughter or screeches, the exclamations or cries of the lost. Indeed, the text subtly marks the alterity between readers and the lost by reimagining the spaces that both parties occupy. At first, the text positions readers and the lost in a unified group: “if they had hammered nails to our gums.” At the same time, however, the poem marks both a necessary specificity of place (“These are the generations of Ostroleka, of Brok…”) and a sense of past time (“In the days when / No skins radiated”). In doing so, it emphasizes the ways in which readers can only approximate loss, can never fully experience the pains of the dead. Amid this tension between a self that both claims to know the dead and yet has never heard them, the text poignantly enunciates the overarching ethical questions that characterize its discourse: How might materializing deceased bodies through an immaterial voice commit an act of violence? How, in this process of re-embodiment, do readers “colonize” the bodies of the lost by putting words into their mouths? In enacting this form of corporeal “colonization,” how does the speaker impose optimism onto lives that were marked by the absence of hope? And, as both readers and speaker alike work through and with the material remnants of the victims, can they ever be free of these quandaries?

As the text begins to grapple with readers’ positions, it indeed recognizes how their vocal occupation overwhelms and drowns out the actual experiences of the dead. Ending the Dayenu prayer, the speaker remarks, “as ifs begat and begat and begat / Dayenu.” On the one hand, the
text’s acknowledgment of the propagation of “ifs” seems to identify the ongoing repetition of the word within the prayer. This suggests that, had even one death occurred, it would have been enough, let alone eleven million. On the other, the text does not offset “ifs” from “as,” producing a possible reading of “as ifs” as the subject of the sentence, rather than “ifs” alone. Marking the hypothetical in the form of “as ifs,” the text draws readers to recognize the potential for the poem itself to mark a sense of the imagined, the unreal, the untrue. Readers, as the individuals who “begat and begat and begat” stories of the lost that can never fully encapsulate their truths (and may, in fact, attribute imagined stories onto their bodies in order to stitch together a narrative of loss), emerge as potential arbiters of additional violence. Painting the bodies of the lost with a “canvas of shadows / a palette of dung,” the reader literally exaggerates the obscurity of lost narratives and soils them. Though the text acknowledges that “forgetting is a death…,” it does not then conclude that remembering is a life. In fact, in its evocation of memory, the text expressly states that “the urgency to remember [is] a walling up,” as though the production of memory both blocks the individual from excavating truth and creates a sharper boundary between the living and the dead.

The performative nature of the prayer itself, however, marks a form of re-creating a community between the past, present, and future. Insofar as it is generally sung collectively, by groups of people coming together to remember and rejoice, the genre itself marks the establishment of community: it not only reminds the living of their histories, but it also reanimates the lost by keeping their memory alive. Through the speaker’s remark that “These are the generations of Ostroleka, of Brok, of / HELL on earth,” a sense of community reemerges. Despite the referential nature of “Ostroleka” and “Brok,” which seems to situate the prayer within the past, the use of the term “these” is twofold: on the one hand, “these” could refer to the referents described within the
prayer, those who experienced corporeal violence firsthand. On the other, “these”—in its evocation of things present and nearby—also points toward the group giving voice to the lost. In the ambiguity latent within the term “these,” the text invites readers to recognize their own places within the space of the past. They too become part of the generations of “Ostroleka, of Brok, of / HELL on earth.” Just as the readers’ bodies become relocated and reimagined in the inferno that was the Holocaust, so too do victims become propelled into the modern Jewish experience, preserved through the throats of the living. Even as the prayer acknowledges the possible violence entailed through memory, then, its oral transmission creates a communion that recognizes the pain of the deceased not just as a historical relic but as a significant feature of a modern Jewish social imaginary.

In its final two pages, *Darkling* doubles the last lines of Hardy’s “Darkling Thrush,” twice creating the acrostic “AND I WAS UNAWARE.” In its first iteration, the letters are condensed and filled in. The lines run together as the speaker writes, “Now I remember I breathe a breath of you each / Day I remember as then you were with me…. (78) Emphasizing the role of “breath,” the speaker illustrates how the process of remembering the deceased involves inhaling narratives of loss. Even as the enjambment renders it apparent that “each / Day” marks a crucial sense of temporal continuity in memory, the separation between the lines conveys another message: “I breathe a breath of you each.” In underscoring the role of “each,” she suggests that bearing witness to the Holocaust is an act of circulating and respiring the individuals lost, the “Soreleh[s] at my side.” There is the suggestion that the victims of the Holocaust walk alongside the living each step of their way, allowing reader and speaker alike to move forward without leaving the dead behind.
As they arrive at the final page of the text, though, readers are confronted once more with overwhelming absence. Whereas the rest of the poem dedicates itself to filling in the gaps of its acrostic form, its final lines waver, leaving just the first letters to spell, “AND I WAS UNAWARE.” At first glance, the turn to unawareness seems to mark a resistance to memory, to capitalize and emphasize the state in which the reader will be left. However, as the text guides readers’ eyes down the page, it moves the readers’ vision towards rather than away from them. In doing so, it drives readers back into their own bodies, leaving them with the overwhelming feeling that, even as the narrative has finished, it has also been refracted back onto them. The poem’s account of loss can never truly be complete, for it remains within the bodies of the readers. So too
does the emptiness of the page resonate with this message: once more refusing its status as a page, the paper leaves an abundant gap, a sense of complete blankness. The reader recognizes that both the first and last moments of the text are materially defined by absence; the end, in this moment, has become both the termination and the beginning of the poem. Left again feeling a sense of responsibility to “floss” the holes between each letter in order to continue extracting the stories of loss, readers cannot walk away from the text or move on from it. In a word, the text makes it clear to readers that there will always be narratives to restore, lives to uncover, voices to hear.

In its refusal to end, Darkling illustrates the quintessential dilemma of the Holocaust lyric. In its need to reject a comprehensive resolution to pain and to mark violence as personal yet perpetual, the poem reimagines the landscape of bearing witness by providing a model for re-sounding loss. The task is to mingle the voices of the lost with those of the living in order to create a community of mourners, the lament-filled cries of a collective kaddish. The kaddish, a ritual prayer mourning the lost, is typically recited in synagogues in the eleven months following a death and once a year thereafter. Critically, whereas the kaddish is almost exclusively recited by the bereaved, Darkling reimagines the space of mourning such that it becomes universal: the bodies of the victims, of the speaker, of the readers each become drawn into the moment of tragic lament, to use their voices to unite the generations lost and those remaining such that they can move towards—but never fully reach—healing. The poem transforms the Holocaust into a space of both personal and global loss, inviting readers to bear witness for those who the speaker has loved but never known, lived with but never heard. At the same time, it emphasizes the need to seek collectivity to move towards allaying the overwhelming pain of catastrophe. Working through the paradoxically cacophonous harmony that is memory, the poem reminds readers that their voices never truly stand alone. Just as the memory of catastrophe begins to fade, a sharp, guttural exclamation will always be waiting
to restore it back into collective consciousness. It is in its refusal to forget—to leave readers “UNAWARE”—that *Darkling* demonstrates how, in a post-Holocaust world, readers can never “abandon us,” can always “hear” the residual voices of the lost.
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