Who Holds the Knife

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Abstract

Ma’Khia Bryant was killed by a police officer on April 20, 2021, at the age of 16. Ma’Khia held a knife, as the officer pointed his gun and fired four shots. Police officers across the globe have taken the lives of many since, and if the current “justice” system is not transformed, they will continue to take many more. Through the following poem, I ask the reader to reflect on the violence and collective suffering that is perpetrated through state power and policing. I ask them to look upon the world through the lens of Foucault’s biopolitics and Mbembe’s necropolitics, to recognize the insignificance of Ma’Khia’s knife within a social order that marks us all as either deserving of life or deserving of death. By including the voice of white supremacist carcerality within my account, I encourage readers to consider how they hold this knife; that is, how they help to fix this violent, punitive system in place. Most importantly, by inviting readers to participate in the healing of collective wounds, I offer an abolitionist call to action. Content warning: this poem contains discussion of state violence, police brutality, and blood.

Keywords

biopolitics, necropolitics, state violence, police abolition, prison abolition
When the cops saw Ma’Khia Bryant, they saw a problem to be managed

      Well, she should have dropped the knife

When I saw Ma’Khia Bryant, I saw a scared child
When I saw her run Eco Styler gel through her hair in a Tik Tok, I saw myself
But my life goes on
Hers gets cut short
Cut out of this world
When state violence takes one of us
The cut hurts us all
The knife sharpens instead of getting dull, and moves closer to our throat
Some of us get cut deeper than others
Some find a cut-out where a loved one used to be
They are cut the deepest

      These things happen

Why do they happen
Can we stop the bleeding
Can we prevent the cutting

      Somebody has to do it

To draw blood
To selectively carve
To cut in the interest of others
To draw out, to extract, to drain
What is the alternative
To triage
To repair
To heal

To move on

I cannot be held responsible for what my ancestors did

Your ancestors’ work is unfinished

Ongoing

My ancestors’ work is too

But while we do our work, we bleed

We all bleed

All blood matters

Blood is spilled and we are made to watch

We look upon death, upon murder

Searching for the facts of the matter and finding

our own blood

Who is “we”

Go ahead

Make it about race

Make it about colour

It pours out red

The blood will always be red

It will never be any other colour

Blood can’t be blue

And lives can’t either

Our bodies alike, our functions at odds
They cut and we bleed

The blood hemorrhages

But it is politics, not biology, that assures its flow

Biopolitics

Necropolitics

Carceral capitalist politics

Don’t talk about politics

Then I can hardly speak at all

Find me a subject devoid of politics

An object of truly apolitical speech

Consider what politic apoliticism advances

Please drop it

Please drop the knife

Let it fall

Tend to the wounds
Author Biography

Naiomi Marcia Perera is a Black and South Asian MA student and sociologist at York University who uses she/her pronouns. Her research interests include critical technology studies, race, culture and social regulation. She is currently researching the use of Internet filtering software for the purpose of countering radicalization to violence. She hopes that this research will allow her to develop recommendations for, and additionally, facilitate, the exploration of intervention strategies that do not rely on surveillance and punishment. Naiomi began organizing with the Toronto Prisoners’ Rights Project in 2020 and incorporates her abolitionist activism into her thinking and research.