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Duration of the Archive: Soundscapes of Extreme Witnessing in Divya Victor's *Curb*

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the significance of soundscapes in the Tamil American poet Divya Victor's reconstruction of the archive of anti-South Asian violence in her acclaimed poetry collection *Curb* (Nightboat Books, 2021). Being a continuation of the poet's investigation of the limits of conceptual and "documental" poetics (Michael Leong), advanced in her *Natural Subjects*, *UNSUB* and *Kith*, *Curb* appropriates public and personal records to critique discrimination against the South Asian community in America's post-9/11 political landscape. Victor's poetics enact extreme witnessing, re-establishing the archive's unheard durations that her modality of the lyric upholds, and recovering locutions of the Indian diaspora eroded or erased by anti-immigrant and anti-Asian racism. Tracing the dynamics of location and locution at the sites of violent events as well as their barely audible frequencies registered in the sequence "Frequency (Alka's Testimony)," I argue that the archive's duration in *Curb* is extended by forms of "sonic agency" (Brandon LaBelle). I further show how, through the poetic work of hearing and sounding (including such techniques as echolocation and ventriloquy), Victor creates a simultaneously critical and lyrical space akin to auditory experience where the text's multiple durational vectors throw into sharp relief the lives "curbed," diminished, or destroyed by wounding, fear, and trauma, testifying to the extremity of the very act of witnessing. Finally, focusing on opacity as a fundamental quality of the archive, I also turn to Carolyn Chen's concrete sound compositions and Amarnath Ravva's assemblages that traverse *Curb*, accompanying the poet in collaborative hearing of the archive's spatial, temporal, and sonic dynamics.

Keywords: archive, duration, conceptual poetry, documental poetics, extreme witnessing, lyric, anti-South Asian violence, sound, soundscapes, sonic agency.

“Air is forced out of the lungs up the throat to the larynx where it causes the vocal cords to vibrate and create sound. The metamorphosis from sound to intelligible word requires
(a) the lip, tongue and jaw all working together.
(b) a mother tongue.
(c) the overseer’s whip.
(d) all of the above or none.”
(Philip 33)

“What makes inconvenience into an event, and not just a state, is the architecture of duration.”
(Berlant 6)

“When any writer is operating in the duration of ‘post’ in the wake of any catastrophe, we have a responsibility to observe how our relationship to this duration stains the materials, the composition, the methods, and the very nest in which our dreams work to revise the day’s drafts.”
(Victor, “I Had to Grow a New Tongue”)

“This wound sound is the sound of the poetics of ventriloquy.”
(Victor, “Cicadas in the Mouth”)

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POETICS OF EXTREME WITNESSING: LISTENING FOR THE ARCHIVE'S SOUNDSCAPE

In the Tamil American poet Divya Victor's conceptual writing, scholarship, as well as curatorial and editorial activity, preoccupation with the lyric's role in upholding and augmenting the archive's duration entails a direct, concrete engagement with extremity as immanent to the poetry of witness genre. In her conversation with Michael Nardone, Victor comments on this aspect of her engagement with contemporary US reality as “writing from and within the periphery,” explaining that

writing in the margins has been a way of resisting or responding to the dominant narrative. Writing on the edge is where inversion happens. That is important for *Curb*, which is a book that examines the edges of domestic and public spaces as battlefields. The edge, however clear-cut and sharp, is the most ambiguous space: on the body, at an ecological zone, in built environments. (“Tracking the Traffic”)

At the same time, curbs demarcate physical boundaries in the urban landscape that constitutes shared public space, reconceiving the notion

of any boundary as a “common border” from both sides of which the neighbors casually greet each other, watch their own and their neighbor’s children (*Curb* 5). The awareness of writing at the limit, edge, curb, margin, periphery, or extremity informs Victor’s poetry of witness in significant ways, giving it social immediacy and political urgency, as well as an imperative to address questions of colonial history, distance, scale, movement and duration in contemporary poetics more broadly. As a key term in this essay, extreme witnessing helps capture the radical quality of Victor’s conceptual writing as preoccupied with some of the most drastic, yet not always immediately graspable aspects of the immigrant experience in the present-day US.

Reflecting on the difficulty of curating an archive of citizenship and belonging, the late American scholar and cultural theorist Lauren Berlant writes in their posthumously published *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (2022):

It requires thinking about a whole range of impacts and intensities that may or may not achieve significance, consciousness, politics, or clarity. It also requires thinking about how the vertical hierarchies of privilege capture and recast the tone of ordinary social frictions to naturalize, weaponize, and calcify a self-interested defensive/projective dynamic. To get at this material requires tracking patterns and historicizing the means through which we are trained to live inside many genres of the brush of the world. Citizenship, social membership, belonging, being a neighbor or a regular, being the conveyor of bodily dynamics are some of these genres, but many of the familiar dings are so nonnarrative that they’re hard to archive, even in concepts like gesture, because we’re talking about actions that dissolve the fantasy that the impersonal is distinct from the personal, the intimate. (8)

Making concrete Berlant’s theoretical reflection underlying the archive’s social and intimate dimensions, *Curb* unfolds as a streetwise book that has been “made to witness” the horrific events that resulted in the deaths of four South Asian men: Balbir Singh Sodhi from Mesa, Arizona; Navroze Mody from Jersey City, New Jersey; Srinivas Kuchibhotla from Olathe, Kansas; and Sunando Sen from Queens, New York (Victor, *Curb* n.pag.). Their names and deaths, listed as “irreducible facts” on the unnumbered page of *Curb* following the book’s contents, will be remembered as only several among many other anonymous victims of the anti-South Asian violence that has been escalating in the post-9/11 United States. Telling the stories of South Asian Americans who have been mistreated, assaulted, or killed, either as a result of misrecognitions, or due to suspicions of domestic terrorism, *Curb* transforms the lyric, conventionally focused

on self-expression and individual voice, into a poetic mode preoccupied with their irreducibly social entanglement, even as it manages to carve out a space for intimacy and grief. As I will demonstrate further through close analysis of poems from Victor's book, her writing documents and registers acts of hostility and aggression, refusing to provide comforting answers and upholding the archive through staging confrontations between the lyrical mode and flat dehumanizing discourses, bringing the reader closer to documented events. Resonating both within *Curb's* boundaries and without, Victor's writing creates durations invested in bridging its conceptual (critical, documental) and lyrical (intimate, affective) capacities in ways that mobilize its potential for expanding the concept of witnessing to account for present-day instances of witnessing *in extremis*.

Victor's poetics of extreme witnessing is investigated here as an outstanding example of the turn in poetry that Michael Leong aptly defines as "documental" in his recent study *Contested Records: The Turn to Documents in Contemporary North American Poetry* (2020). Leong examines the crucial work of poets who "cite mostly publicly available texts in order to return them, rhetorically transformed, to the public sphere" to convincingly argue that documental poetics performs crucial social work (3). In his account, "reconstruction through a practice of textual resocialization; that is, through a citation, re-citation, even recitation, of what has been filed away" becomes a practice through which "pre-existing documentation" is treated "as a shared resource whose manipulation might propose the reconstruction of the social order" (7). Taking into account both Victor's work with the available records and her refiguration of the lyric form, I situate *Curb* as a text invested in re-establishing, upholding, and projecting forward the archive's unheard durations. Exploring the significance of the concept of duration in *Curb* as a vehicle of spatial-temporal as well as sonic complexity, I turn to Brandon LaBelle's *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance* (2018) and his sense of "sonic agency," sensitive to postcolonial contexts and defined as "a means for enabling new conceptualizations of the public sphere and expressions of emancipatory practices—to consider how particular subjects and bodies, individuals and collectivities creatively negotiate systems of domination, gaining momentum and guidance through listening and being heard, sounding and unsounding particular acoustics of assembly and resistance" (4). LaBelle specifies four sonic figures, "the invisible [also referred to as the acousmatic]," "the overheard," "the itinerant," and "the weak," which resonate with *Curb's* focus on what LaBelle terms "unlikely publics," situated "on the edge of appearance" (1). In his account, their unlikely status results from being unseen, or "being beyond the face," yet recognized "through a concentrated appeal to the listening sense," being overheard or misheard

in the world's global networks, subject to lyrical "intensities of listening" complicated by transience, migrancy, homelessness, and movement, or struggling to uphold sound uttered "according to a condition of weakness" (33, 94, 127). The critic listens out for

this sound that relates us to the not-yet-apparent. A gathering of listeners, in the squares, or in the classrooms and market places, the backrooms and storefronts, may perform to create a gap, a duration drawn out, detouring the flows of normative actions, of declarations and decrees, with a persistent intensity—a nagging quietude, possibly: this act of *doing listening*, together; and by gathering attention it may also create an image: the image of the listener as one who *enacts* attention or consideration and, in doing so, nurtures the condition of mindful engagement. (161, emphases in the original)

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In my reading of *Curb*, LaBelle's speculative account of sonic dynamics becomes a productive backdrop for grasping an expanded field of soundscapes that one encounters in Victor's poetics. Sharing a conceptual affinity with LaBelle's sonic agency, *Curb's* soundscapes rely on spatial-temporal-sonic durations drawn out through (re)constructions of ambient environments whereby the poet enacts her social critique. Situated at the intersection of currently burgeoning studies of documentary poetry and sound studies, my reading of *Curb* shows how Victor's poetics critically expand and lyrically reconstruct soundscapes of extreme witnessing accompanying fatal events that continue to threaten lives of her South Asian *kith*, the word denoting closest relatives that has gained strong resonance in the poet's work.

Originally published as an artist's book designed to resemble a foldable travel map, Victor's poems were accompanied by rubbings made directly from sidewalks and curbs. In the trade paperback edition, some pages have their upper-right corners marked with the exact coordinates of the violent events' locations that can be tracked with a navigation application. Evocative of "affective geology," defined by scholar Dana Luciano as "a turning of the necessarily speculative work of geology into a form of aesthetic and sensory experience" (Roudeau 2), Victor's method of documenting these places does not simply turn them into traceable sites of violent assaults disturbingly wedged into the fabric of the present; rather, she stages her own and the reader's encounters with displaced or erased bodies at the exact locations of oppression. Such affective encounters are framed in *Curb* as milestones, related to the migrant bodies impacted by the psychic pressure connected with displacement and permanently marked by oppression, yet remaining perpetually on the move and marking distances measured by the entire colonial history of people's movement:

“the tension and displacement of a body in / memories of having traversed, of having been moved, of having / been so utterly moveable” (*Curb* 64). Such spatial-temporal dynamics is explored in the “Milestones” section of the book, where the people’s movements of the colonial past strongly resonate for the present-day traveler, even when she takes an Uber to nearby destinations. The series of “Milestone” poems, documenting the poet’s Uber rides to poetry readings and university classes, brings home the awareness of movement’s irreducible embodiment, its entanglement with technology, as well as the urgent need to build continuity between past and present immigrant experiences. The poet insists on foregrounding the body’s role in tracking distance, movement, and memory as crucial markers of colonial history. The displaced body becomes a marker of the archive’s duration, within which the realities of location and locution are entwined. The archive’s “contested records,” to use Leong’s term, are appropriated in Victor’s writing to gain better focus on concrete instances of extreme witnessing as embodied actions (im)mobilized by sound as much as they are (im)mobilized by word or image, and operating as such both for the poet and reader as implied witnesses-listeners of the poems’ durations.

As a conceptual text attentive to soundscapes, moreover, *Curb* presents a challenge for Leong’s claim that in twenty-first century documental poetry “we are frequently seeing a new literality, . . . a rejection of verse’s rhythms and sonorous musicalities” (110). In *Curb*, however, the reader encounters extended poetic sequences that make rhythm and sonority paramount to the book’s expansive sonic landscape. In the section “Hedges,” for instance, devoted to the birth of Victor’s daughter and sounding a critique of the official documentation related to reporting a birth abroad to US immigration, the poems’ rhythmic intensity hinges on interweaving transliterated lines from a popular Tamil lullaby, or *thaalatu*, which, as the poet explains in the text’s endnotes, means “tongue rhythm” or “tongue rocking” (142):

were the parents held by the law?

FS-240

did they love in the same language?

DS-1350

they first lift

serosa from serosa

arouse all the roses, prick each thorn

hum *sub rosa*

a song known to someone born
before you

aari ro ari raro

aari ro ari raro

aararo ari ra ro

(8-9, emphases in the original)

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The conceptual make-up of sonic elements and structures found in the collection moves beyond familiar prosodic patterns conventionally encountered in poetic writing. Victor's book expands the reader's idea of what might constitute prosody in lyric poetry by exploring the musicality of traditional forms such as songs, lullabies, or, as we can see elsewhere in "Hedges," evoking the devotional practice of rhythmic recitation of God's names. *Curb* recognizes these musical elements' communal, familial value and incorporates them into experimentation with the shape and sound of documents and found materials refigured in the poems. Building on Michel Serres's idea of "common tangency" of the body and world, *Curb*'s robust sonorousness takes into account the embodied quality of sound and voice production as a prerequisite for drawing out and upholding durations of archival soundscapes and radically reinventing the lyric convention (80).

Commemorating the lives lost as a result of anti-South Asian violence, *Curb* focuses on trauma and psychic pressure resulting from the knowledge and awareness of life-threatening situations impacting Indian-Americans and Indian immigrants who navigate across the shared borders of sidewalks and lawns as friends, loved ones, close relatives, and neighbors. Words of the poet's mother, included at the beginning of the book, powerfully capture the fear of anti-South Asian violence in Trump's America: "yes; I am / afraid all / the time; all the places are all / the same to me; all / of us are all the same to all / of them; this is all / that matters; all / of us don't matter at all" (1). Serving as a powerful opening of *Curb*, the citation signals the text's decolonial orientation, situating the mother's words as insistence on the on-going scrutiny of coloniality's persistence in modernity. Her emphasis on the appearance of uniformity in both the surrounding landscape and social architecture and the constant fear of being misrecognized as an individual who might constitute a threat to public safety are exacerbated by the feelings of insignificance and unreadability. The poet's insistence on mapping specific sites of wounding as well as identifying, recognizing, and telling the reader both about the

victims and targets of violence must be seen as a response to the mother's fear of being misrecognized and her sense of being utterly lost in the suburban grid-like landscape. The women's words echo the archive's fundamental opacity captured by Édouard Glissant's famous lines from his *Poetics of Relation*: "There is opacity now at the bottom of the mirror, a whole alluvium deposited by populations, silt that is fertile but, in actual fact, indistinct and unexplored even today, denied, or insulted more often than not, and with an insistent presence that we are incapable of not experiencing" (111). While Glissant's reflection on opacity suggests indistinct presence in the visual domain, the reader additionally discovers in *Curb* emphasis on the many ways in which the victims remain unheard or misheard, making LaBelle's reflection on sonic agency and his concept of "the overheard" relevant to the discussion of the text: "The productive forcefulness of the overheard is one that exposes us within a scene of alterity: a figure, a voice, a sudden assemblage by which subjectivity is interrupted or unsettled" (70). Overhearing in the sense of interrupting and unsettling becomes a crucial strategy in *Curb*, where Victor foregrounds the problem of indistinctness in relation to hearing and listening, showing the repercussions of her kith's presence and visibility in the public domain and, consequently, their position within the regime of visibility (location) as significantly complicated by their troubled sonic agency (locution).

In *Curb*, close attention to exact locations of anti-South Asian oppression aims at figuring extreme witnessing in direct relation to locution, which makes interrelated questions of the movement of immigrants and diasporic time central to the poet's sense of the archive and its duration. As the scholar Julietta Singh observes in her book *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements* (2018), it is Franz Fanon's seminal work, particularly the first chapter of his *Black Skin, White Masks* "The Negro and Language," where Fanon directly relates the notion of locution to location, pointing to, as Singh puts it, "the arduous labor of the speaker who endures a civilization's 'weight'" (70). Deeply preoccupied with trauma, such work constitutes the ground of *Curb* and Victor's poetic labor more broadly, evocative of Sujaya Dhanvantari's question whether colonial trauma is "a spectral force at work in new psychic wounds" (337). Like Victor's earlier works *UNSUB* and *Natural Subjects*, both of which examine the limits of citizenship and imaginary belonging, or *Kith*, which unsettles the nationalist idea of India, *Curb* attends to the ways in which the entanglement of location and locution shows witnessing as embodied labor that emerges as situated *and* endowed with particular sonic agency, expanding protocols of documental poetics. Such work is visible in *Curb*'s section "Locution / Location," which lyrically enacts historical changes in social attitudes

toward pronouncing words in ways that deviate from the standard US model. The poem's repetition of the word "haitch," which in American English has been more often spelled as "aitch," and pronounced without the "h" sound, weaves in the less commonly used "haitch" as a refrain evocative of a great-grandmother's singing to her great-granddaughter, bridging the generational, geographical, and linguistic gaps between and within each of them through repetition of non-standard "haitch" with the letter "h" insistently materialized and reclaimed in the soundscape produced by the lyric. Remarking on how Southeast Asian immigrants have been expected to neutralize their accent and adhere to standard pronunciation in the notes to the poem, Victor sees this pressure in hegemonic and neoliberal terms "as part of the service industry's commitment to providing monolingual Americans with an emotionally secure and trustworthy consumer experience" (*Curb* 150). The lyric's emphasis on upholding continuity of family ties and the shared language they carry stands in stark contrast to the anxiety provoked by their particular use of words and sounds. The physical presence of "h" drawn out in the poem impacts duration and movement ("taut and long"; "a letter the length of a coast, the width of a gull's caw" [*Curb* 47]), sounding a critique of linguistic norms that exposes language itself as an embattled domain always already shot through with racism and classism rather than designed for emotional comfort or physical safety.

In her 2014 *Leslie Scalapino Memorial Lecture in 21st Century Poetics*, titled "Cicadas in the Mouth," Victor recounts her personal struggles of having been repeatedly corrected and coerced to speak the way a speaker of standard American English is expected to sound. It is in these experiences that Victor's poetics of lyric appropriation originates: "a poetics of the inappropriate tongue is also a poetics of the appropriated tongue—one that borrows other people's tongues, tries them on for size, pilfers, loots, happily assimilates, or courageously tests in the live flesh through ventriloquy" ("Cicadas in the Mouth"). She further explains the function of ventriloquy performance in her poetry as follows:

What becomes really obvious is how little of *us* there is in our speech. And this absence is unbearable. . . . What is heard is *loqui* (speech) + *ventri* (through the belly)—speech through the belly. This is a poetics that draws a tension between speaking from the gut, the absolute figure for sincerity and intention—one "spills one's guts"—and speaking another's language.

A tension marks the acts of ventriloquy that, in all these recent instances, show the poet mouthing belated documents to witness violent and catastrophic events into legible forms in illegible bodies. This tension

marks a refusal to be transparent on stage. These are acts that witness legible forms of discourse through suddenly illegible or confrontational bodies. These are live rehearsals of sensory exchange—a confession of what it feels like to utter alien discourses out loud. This is a recitation that tests what words can and cannot be said before you are escorted off the stage—sequined shibboleths that we have trained with—language competency exams in discourses that we both create and are constituted by. ¿Dónde está *el baño*? *Vous êtes-vous plu ici*? आप कहाँ से (आए) हैं? This is the cicada's innards running back into your own. Abiding alienation. (“Cicadas in the Mouth,” emphases in the original)

In *Curb*, Victor seeks to refigure the archive out of official documents, forms, and public records that she sees as “dead,” and whose presence in her work shows the inhuman scale of interpellating, marking, misrecognizing, misidentifying, and murdering entire groups of citizens as much as it tries to preserve their individual names and memory as fathers, mothers, sisters, spouses, and neighbors (“Solidarity”). To do so, Victor complicates the relation between the intimate, personal mode of expression such as the lyric and the public documental mode. In her poetry, these two modes inform and transform one another; the lyric is freed from the illusion of the singularity of voice and its supposedly autonomous, private observation of reality, while the documental poem is traversed by the lyrical mode to return the records from the official domain to the public world, in line with Leong’s definition of documental poetics as invested in reconstituting the social. Dismantling constructions of diasporic subjectivity, however, entails both the necessary frustration of the reader’s hope for transparency or easy assimilation and the author’s realization of her own complicity in the oppression with the victims of which she feels compelled to empathize. To address the problem of complicity, *Curb* also raises the issue of colorism that continues to shape racial dynamics in the US and that the poet approaches as “the moral work of acknowledging anti-blackness in South Asian communities” (“Solidarity”). As Victor points out in her conversation with Caleb Beckwith, she chooses “a poetics of racialized experience that remains inassimilable for both marked and unmarked audiences, and this has often meant withholding pleasure, divesting the audience of its pursuit of happiness” (Beckwith).

The poems’ intimate tone does not fall into conventionally lyrical notes; rather, Victor considerably complicates her reinvented lyric’s resonance to capture the ambivalence of addressing public issues and living one’s life as a South Asian American citizen and a mother-to-be. In this respect, the sequence “Threshold” is particularly striking, where the poet juxtaposes the difficulty of integrating the experience of

pregnancy and the urgency of constant observation of external reality, recursively emphasizing in the poems harrowing news about the murder of Srinivas Kuchibhotla, who was misrecognized as an illegal immigrant from Iran and shot by a white supremacist. Both the speaker's fear for her unborn child's safety and her physical reaction to reading the news about the shooting show the need for an extreme degree of vigilance and produce unbearable psychic pressure. The poem sequence frames the speaker's constantly displaced perception of internal and external reality not just in terms of reading words on newspaper pages, but also, much more viscerally, in terms of the body's reaction and the way the speaker's hearing is affected:

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When I read the news
of the shooting, this belly
plumed into an apse—it distended
upward, a balloon hollow
but leaden, these lungs lifted
here—this diaphragm fled, bore through
a tent made of ligament
& rope. *The billow screeched*
in these ears, pulled here—these legs apart
these toes went numb & cold. The ground
beneath me collapsed, turned to dunes
& the sand quickened. Here—this belly
carrying those pounds of flesh
began to take flight
(*Curb* 53–54, emphasis mine)

The phrase “the billow screeched / in these ears” communicates the extremity of discomfort caused by a particularly unpleasant sonic sensation. “The billow,” signifying a large mass of steam or air producing pressure, pushes outward and emits a screeching sound, becoming a powerful image of the body gathering strength to take flight. Further in the sequence, references to hearing emerge as closely aligned to the notion of sonic agency: “When I read the news / of the shooting, these ears rang / the phone-lines of the dead” (57). The ringing heard in one's ears changes in the poem into the ears that ring; a sudden reversal of sonic agency that in the poem is seen as enabling the speaker's communication with those who no longer live. The imagery related to ears and hearing, prominent in the entire collection, returns in the closing section of the sequence: “her sweet ear flung & clinging / to a parapet. & at that cleft / for the first time, I saw / —here— / her as mine & then, hearing canons / sung in double-time / I knew being mine / would clip her life” (57–58). In these lines,

the homophonous proximity of words such as “ear,” “hearing,” “here,” and “her” (as well as of “flung,” “clinging,” “cleft,” “cannon,” and “clip”) creates a sonic intensity that points to the poet’s extreme witnessing of horrifying reverberation of the shootings as acutely perceived soundscapes that become sites of hearing *in extremis*, experienced within and without the speaker’s and her unborn daughter’s bodies at once.

Discussing her writing in terms of “conceptualist autopoiesis,” Victor explains her process as “emptying already existing forms onto durations that are unavailable in their original iterations” (Place). Similarly material understanding of form, crucial in investigating the archive’s duration also in the spatial and temporal sense, can be found in French philosopher Catherine Malabou’s influential inquiry into how the form lives through and beyond the event of its own deconstruction, presented in her *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*. Victor’s complex conceptualism involves temporal refigurations that hinge on appropriations of depersonalized bureaucratic templates, or, using more casual language, bringing to life lifeless documents. In *Curb*’s section “Petitions (For an Alien Relative),” the poet rewrites official immigration forms used by the US Citizenship and Immigration Services, transforming them into prose poems that lyrically refigure the dehumanizing racism of immigration procedures designed to contain relatives as designated “aliens,” mobilizing durations that recontextualize their stories and show these persons as closest family members and loved ones, cherished for all their habits, quirks, and idiosyncrasies; as one’s kith whose lives depend on the procedures that *Curb* critiques:

SECOND PETITION

A.

Use this form if you are a citizen or lawful permanent resident (LPR) of the United States who needs to establish your relationship to an eligible relative who wishes to immigrate to the United States.

Write here, if you know this place as home, about a beloved whose skin you cannot live without; whose fingers know why the jasmine bushes will not flourish in your backyard in El Sobrante, why your batter sours too late, why no amount of sugar will make your tea sweet, why your front yard is scattered with pinions, why all mail arrives like a bird strike to the fuselage (the dotterels dawdling & then shredding the turbines); whose letters you fold & unfold until the creases give way & you put the pieces back together on the dining table—to make a map for a country made of vein & sinew with hands pulled clean of wedding bands & raw rice, a map for a country of two.

(41, emphasis in the original)

LAST PETITION

(or, USCIS FORM I-130 Spring Night Pastoral for Alien Relatives)

Ma, remember when we waded
 into the form-field & pulled pussy willow
 with inky palms, flicked buckeyes
 into checklist boxes
 swung on drop-down menus
 like banyan branches, cut terraces
 into the small print marshes, dragged
 yoked highlighters through, roved through the footnotes
 as you roamed unthreshed paddy,
 & we—yes, *I remember, we*
parceled our family
into placeholders
that September,
& huddled in the warmth of an archive
set on fire
 (44, emphases in the original)

In “Last Petition,” a poem drawing on the pastoral convention, bureaucratic format of immigrant forms is unsettled by references to elements of natural landscape and memories of a family gathering during which they sit by the burning archive. Such linguistically inventive lyrical appropriations of official documents and forms effect an alternative modality of the lyric that refigures the impersonal and alienating bureaucratic activity of documenting persons as an intimate yet simultaneously public mode of writing. As such, the poems also become a reckoning with the tremendous affective cost of “minor feelings,” explained in Cathy Park Hong’s recent work as “the racialized range of emotions that are negative, dysphoric, and therefore untelegenic, built from the sediments of everyday racial experience and the irritant of having one’s perception of reality constantly questioned or dismissed” (Hong 55).

**HEARING EXTREME WITNESSING: “FREQUENCY
 (ALKA’S TESTIMONY)”**

Beginning this section of *Curb*, Victor factually recasts the 2010 violent group assault on Dr. Divyendu Sinha, who was attacked near his own house while taking a walk with his wife and beaten into a coma. The brief note on Sinha’s death includes facts about his profession, which involved work with life-support technologies. The note’s factual detail related to the assault and to Sinha’s job places particular emphasis on its personal and public consequences: a loss of individual life as well as a loss that the man’s death

causes to the community of those whose lives he can no longer save. The opening poem offers several available definitions of the word “frequency.” Victor presents the term’s rich etymology, initially pointing to its immediate associations with technology, connecting this aspect of the word with Sinha’s job. She then ventures deeper into its original Latin meaning of crowding, or gathering of people, gesturing toward the South Asian community that suffers an increased rate of violent attacks. The scientific vocabulary used in the poem sounds impersonal notes of technological jargon that shows extreme distance between Sinha’s dedication to saving lives, predicated on his trust in life-sustaining technology, and the horrifying reality in which his own life ended after he was brutally attacked and fatally beaten. What follows is a sequence of poems that continue to explore the notion of frequency in the context of the ambience of the courtroom where Sinha’s wife Alka’s testimony took place.

Victor poetically reconstructs the courtroom’s ambient environment during the wife’s testimony as sonic background to an audio file with Sinha’s greeting left on the answering machine also used as evidence during the hearing. Alka asks the judge’s permission to play the file with her late husband’s voice and their brief exchange is cited by Victor, becoming evidence in its own right evoked in the scope of the poem. The judge initially does not hear, or fails to understand the woman’s request due to its indistinct articulation. It is only after Alka rephrases the question, using properly impersonal language, that official permission is granted. The sequence of ten poems that follow is a lyrically refigured transcript of courtroom ambience that appropriates the noises produced by moving, lifting, dropping, and flipping various small objects against different surfaces:

SEQUENCE 5

- f* A hollow, sharp, & bent note of feedback from a distant source (above witness)
- f* A distant click (from left of witness) of camera shutter or snap of thin plastic
- f* The wispy slide of two or three fingers over a page
- f* The flipping or counting of a series of thin sheets of paper folded towards each other in a deliberate, slow succession (to left of witness)
- f* A cluster of thin & metallic crumpling sounds—a cold or crisp page being turned, lifting into still air & then settling on a podium (stapled stacks in humid rooms clatter less)
(*Curb* 122)

The poem's *tour de force* reconstruction of the soundscape accompanying activities mechanically performed in the courtroom hinges on the spatial dynamics of the "hollow, sharp" notes produced by objects and their shifting positions with respect to the stationary witness. The objects' unsettling animacy ("a cold / or crisp page being turned, lifting into still air & then / settling on the podium") is amplified and contrasted with the virtual absence of any details about the body of the witness at the scene staged in the poem, which brings home realization of the extremity of Alka's objectification during her testimony.

Other evoked sounds include breathing, clicks of the camera shutter, as well as crackling or static sounds audible in the answering machine recording before Sinha's voice can be finally heard. Victor figures the soundscape as a dehumanizing backdrop against which a person's voice must be recovered: "[t]he drone of static in a recording prior to the presence / of a human voice" and "[t]he hum enveloping the flesh of a human voice / recording" (119). Furthermore, by foregrounding the ambience surrounding Sinha's recorded greeting as well as Alka's live voice, the sequence simultaneously registers, augments and extends the duration of the actual testimony that lasted only eight minutes. Evocative of the question asked by Sandra Ruiz and Hypatia Vourloumis in *Formless Formation: Vignettes for the End of this World* as to how "we listen for the form that deforms itself in the name of deep noise" (48), Victor's conceptual poetry seeks to investigate such speculative inquiry along concrete lines by listening out for durational frequencies in negative space and lyrically modifying dehumanizing forms of transmission. *Curb* exposes and lyrically amplifies institutionally sanctioned misrecognitions and dismissals by retrieving silenced or unheard voices from the drone of static.

In his review of Victor's *Natural Subjects* aptly titled "Expression Concrète," Felix Bernstein discusses her poetry's sonic "contrarian" trajectory as "a new form of opacity" that "qualitatively represses certain kinds of authentic vocality in order to produce objects of study and concentration that remain always polyvocalizable and musical, no matter how legalistic, speculative, communicative, confessional, pastiche, banal, and doctrinal their content may appear." Heard along these lines, the concrète assemblage of courtroom ambient sound in "Frequency (Alka's Testimony)" merits further analysis in relation to the work of Dana Luciano and Mel Y. Chen (mentioned by Victor in her conversation with Beckwith) on non-human objects, and Thomas Keenan and Eyal Weizman's concept of forensic aesthetics, the intersection of which helps to better situate objects themselves as witnesses and offer additional context for Victor's poetics of extreme witnessing. Luciano and Chen foreground questions of

objectification and dehumanization not as a way to dissolve the boundary between the human and the non-human, but to see “how those categories rub on, and against, each other, generating friction and leakage” (Luciano and Chen 186). In *Curb*, such material rubbing reverberates in the soundscape staged in the poem sequence “Frequency (Alka’s Testimony),” where the sounds produced by non-human objects offer the sonic backdrop of the poems’ critique of the dehumanizing environment of the courtroom space. In Keenan and Weizman’s study, the concept of forensic aesthetics focuses on the role of objects *as* witnesses in forensic procedures, which, as I will further show, sheds light on the poem sequence. As they argue, forensic procedures often entail aesthetic operations, showing that the process of establishing facts “depends on a delicate aesthetic balance, on new images made possible by new technologies, not only changing in front of our very eyes, but changing our very eyes—affecting the way that we can see and comprehend things” (23). In “Frequency (Alka’s Testimony),” Victor’s poetic enactment of courtroom ambience mobilizes the lyric mode to bring into sharper focus dehumanizing procedures that constitute the reality of South Asian people’s lives in America, drowning out their voices even in these situations when they stand before the law and demand a hearing.

Victor’s lyrical appropriation of courtroom ambience creates an environment where it is possible to *hear* Alka’s testimony in ways that bring out and thus recover what has been lost in the official court proceeding. Poetic reconstruction out of sounds produced by non-human objects, such as pencils, pens, paper sheets, camera shutters, plastic items, or metal clips enveloping Alka’s words and Singha’s recorded greeting function as witnesses that reclaim the victim’s human voice that the judge, despite his authority, has been unable to hear. In an interview with Andy Fitch, Victor explained her sense of the relationship between location and locution in the following way:

I like to think about “situating” as an echolocating act. I write to emit sound, and the environment of the poem returns this sound to my ear, triangulating my location within an imagined community I belong to (“kith”). This compositional act becomes a co-constituted environment, where the poetic line is the azimuth—a way of imagining a direction towards a place where kith lives, rather than a geographic residence in itself. (“A Home in My Ears”)

Echolocating human voices in the deep noise of dehumanizing political regimes and technologies becomes a crucial aspect of Victor’s poetics, tapping into Glissant’s idea of *écho-monde* (English: echo-world), aptly explained by LaBelle as “an ecology of the senses and of the sensible; of errant subjects and oral mosaics, diversal positions and poetic

knowledge” (102). Victor’s lyrical reconstruction of courtroom ambience investigated throughout this section can be construed as a force field, filled with what LaBelle refers to as “‘sonic objects,’ whose density, texture, and frequency appeal to the deep listener” (33). In the last section, I examine the contributions of Carolyn Chen and Amarnath Ravva, the artists who collaborated with Victor on extending *Curb*’s archival durations toward deep listening.

DIASPORIC TIME’S DEEP NOISE: CAROLYN CHEN AND AMARNATH RAVVA’S ENGAGEMENTS WITH *CURB*

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To augment *Curb*’s resonance, Victor has created a companion webspace where her poems’ durations are projected alongside and through the work of other writers and artists who have been collaborating with the poet on intensifying the collection’s impact beyond its pages and toward other artistic domains and media. Two particularly notable collaborations that I briefly discuss in this concluding section of the essay have been contributed by artists Carolyn Chen and Amarnath Ravva. Chen, a composer and sound artist based in Los Angeles, has created sound assemblages for several poems from *Curb*, including a piece for “Frequency (Alka’s Testimony)” composed as “a musique concrète montage assembled from snippets of foley library impact sounds and non-verbal ‘room sound’ sections” of Alka Sinha’s recorded court testimony (*Curb* Webspace). Chen also created sound effects for “Curb 4,” a poem commemorating the death of print-shop owner and immigrant Sunando Sen, pushed under a rushing subway train by a woman who later admitted that she had hated Hindus and Muslims since the events of 9/11. Chen’s composition contains elongated and variously modified sounds of the rapidly approaching train that concatenate the words and significantly extend the poem’s duration, expanding the text’s lyric modality and reconstituting interrupted diasporic temporality within and without the poem’s boundaries. Performing the poem with Chen’s composition, Victor initially recites the text’s word segments at a normal pace, but later her reading accelerates and intensifies as if in an effort to prevent her voice from being muffled by the repeatedly played rumble of the train’s arrival. The poem’s performance registers the extremity and shock of Sen’s horrific, senseless death, making it impossible to assimilate the event. Another assemblage, inspired by *Curb*’s poem sequence “Threshold,” analyzed earlier, captures the pregnant speaker’s reaction after hearing the news of Srinivas Kuchibhotla’s shooting. Adding another layer to her

powerful interpretation of the poem, the composer has also integrated a recording of her own daughter's heartbeat into the piece. Incidentally, this work was composed when Chen herself was moving into the third trimester of pregnancy, just like Victor at the time of writing the poem.

Amarnath Ravva, an experimental author living in California, has created a series of visual collages including Google satellite imagery and video that expand *Curb's* emphasis on duration by rendering temporal aspects of the "Milestones" section of the book. As we learn from the brief description of Ravva's contribution included in *Curb's* webpage, his pieces reflect on the societal habit of situating an event through police-like tracking of the body's exact coordinates, drawing chalk contours around it, and documenting the site with photos. For Ravva, these procedural activities show how we collectively choose to mask reality through supposedly ordinary shared gestures. His collages, preoccupied with exact locations as much as historical and geographical distance, combine satellite views of the static suburban grid of East Lansing, Michigan, with embedded video overlays projecting images of the Kaveri river in India with its rustling greenery, sun-lit rocky banks, falling rain, with only occasionally transpiring sound effects. Seen through the prism of *Curb's* poems, the feral, dynamic images of the river superimposed on the static, parceled land become largely silent meditative nature-culture objects contrapuntally related to *Curb* that create an immersive environment of the archive's near and far sites of displacement. Evocative of Victor's lyrical refigurations of official documents typically void of signs of life, Ravva's assemblages throw into relief Victor's sense of diasporic time and its projective durations. Pointing to pervasiveness of surveillance technologies in contemporary landscape through unsettling imagery generated by digital satellite maps, punctuated by superimposed footage with images and sounds related to nature and weather phenomena (river, trees, rocks, rain), Ravva's work also reflects on the procedures of monitoring immigrants' movements in urban environments and on their bodies' emplacement against which "the wedging body creates a space, insisting on mattering" (Victor, *Curb* 61). Victor begins one of the readings of *Curb's* "Milestones" section by telling the story of the South Asian immigrant and community activist Kala Bagai, a crucial figure in the history of the South Asian diaspora in the US, then performs her own work to the visual accompaniment of Ravva's assemblages ("C__P__Time"). The poet's performance brings into sharp focus spatial, temporal, and sonic dynamics of diasporic time and generates unheard durations drawn out through direct engagement with archival material and the life narrative of the entire Bagai family. Identifying many of her poetics' sonic elements in her own family narratives, Victor recalls that they always belonged to the voices of her closest relatives:

My parents would gather up slivers of language, vocal gestures, chipping events from the boulder of the past and placing them in front of me like intricate miniatures. From this method of storytelling, I came to understand polyphony; from the repetition and variation of these stories, I understood improvisation, syncopation, citation; from the grand and ambient churn of the train's wheels, I learned rhythm; from my father's voice, I learned of the work of my own tongue as a teller of stories. ("Strangers")

In her poetry, soundscapes perform the work of establishing locutionary modalities that prevent the events' erasure from their original sites even as their original formats are transformed in the process, projecting forward the archive's historical, cultural, political, economic, ethical, and affective implications. *Curb's* attention to the durational aspect of the archive relies on iterations that expose constructions of voice through strikingly complex polyphony underlying witnessing in the present-day conflicted ambience defined by extremities of deep noise and concrete sound.

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