



---

## QUEER EMERGENCIES, 5.26.2017

---

**Collin Whitworth**  
Southern Illinois University  
[com.whitworth@gmail.com](mailto:com.whitworth@gmail.com)

**Colin Whitworth** is a Ph.D. candidate in the Communication Studies Department at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale with a focus in performance studies. His research focuses on two primary tracks: the intersections of queer and regional identity and the relationship between art, and critical applications of method.

**Abstract:** Hal Foster (2015) asserts that art should address emergencies. While he speaks of visual and performance arts, I extend his claim to poetry. As such, I use my positionality of queer individual as an entrance point to using poetry to address queer emergencies. Starting with Hegel's (1975) articulation that the lyric form of poetry starts with our own subjectivity and shows a "coming to consciousness" (Culler, 2015, p. 2) through thought and reflection, this poetry addresses a pressing queer emergency of our current political moment (Chechnya), while also extending its reach to/through the intersections with other queer emergencies of today's climate. Through this inscription of the present, I strive to illuminate the personhood of queer victims, the intersections of current queer emergencies, and the temporal and real proximity of emergency to those of us who might feel safe based on other identity intersections.

**Keywords:** poetry; LGBTQ+; queer studies; Chechnya; social justice

Hal Foster (2015) asserts that art should address emergencies. While he speaks of visual and performance arts, I extend his claim to poetry. As such, I use my positionality of queer individual as an entrance point to using poetry to address queer emergencies. Starting with Hegel's (1975) articulation that the lyric form of poetry starts with our own subjectivity and shows a "coming to consciousness" (Culler, 2015, p. 2) through thought and reflection, this poetry addresses a pressing queer emergency of our current political moment (Chechnya), while also extending its reach to/through the intersections with other queer emergencies of today's climate.

As I experience an embodied response to audiencing these emergencies—Chechnya, Pulse, the grind of U.S. American legislation—I turn to poetry with the knowledge that my experience is tied to the language I carry with/in my body (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Through addressing the present, though, I attend to the unique responsibility of the artist/scholar to archive the times that we exist within, as well as to Mark Doty's call, "to write a poetry that hasn't already been inscribed" (Dumanis & Marvin, 2006, p. xxi).

Through this inscription of the present, I strive to illuminate the personhood of queer victims, the intersections of current queer emergencies, and the temporal and real proximity of emergency to those of us who might feel safe based on other identity intersections. These are admittedly lofty goals, and the success of their reach is ultimately up to the individual reader. There is, however, value in trying. Halberstam (2011) points out that, "failure sometimes offers more creative, cooperative, and surprising ways of being in the world" (p. 2). Through addressing queer emergencies, I hope to offer up creative and surprising ways of coping both within and with this world where these are our realities.

***"...this poetry addresses a pressing queer emergency of our current political moment (Chechnya), while also extending its reach to/through the intersections with other queer emergencies of today's climate."***

## Queer Emergencies, 5.20.17

I am standing here, and  
I wonder: if a man  
came up to you and said,  
    "Kill him or I will do it for you"  
what would we do?

I think of the baby I was  
    locked  
in your arms,  
charmed by my brown eyes, my red  
cheeks, my little baby  
    laugh and  
I wonder:  
what would we do?

Today, our government took away healthcare for millions:  
poorfolkblackfolkqueerfolkbrownfolkwomenfolk  
folk with pre-existing conditions that are prescriptions written  
at birth, and  
I wonder:  
what would we do?

As we inch closer to custom  
made dystopia, culled from  
1984<sup>1</sup> to now, a Brave New World,<sup>2</sup> like Clockwork Orange<sup>3</sup>  
Orange Man burning us up at a rising degree  
of Fahrenheit,<sup>4</sup> and

*Hey!*

*HULU just premiered their adaptation of  
    The Handmaid's Tale,<sup>5</sup>*

And did you know  
that in a gradually heating  
bathtub,  
you'd be boiled  
    to death before  
        you knew it?



*for the sake of our bloodlines, because  
it is (you are)  
unclean.*

Can my identity be  
a pre-existing condition, does  
a condition exist when there is no  
proof, but  
pen to page, the agentic claim  
of avowal:

q. u. e. e. r?

Am I a pre-existing condition for  
our family,  
needing to be starved, beaten,  
humiliated  
away, before you are called, and told,  
looking at the baby once  
locked  
in your arms,  
“Kill him or I will do it for you.”  
What would we do?

You look at the baby once locked  
in your arms.  
A thought: death can be preferable.  
Death saves shame, an  
honor killing  
billing our family with the same  
letters scrawled on secret pages.

My queerness vibrates in my limbs,  
feeling a pendulum in the pit  
of my stomach.  
A thought: death can be preferable to  
“disappeared”  
torn from my home,  
unknown until a  
black sack is thrown over my head.  
Preferable to thorns in nail-beds, beaten

with cords, prodded and stabbed  
lanced at a distance because  
*it is better if we do not touch them.*

Look at the tear tracks, at the bruises,  
Look at the light in eyes fading,  
A faith in humanity greying away  
And you act like this is some gray space.

That this is not our business, but  
it is becoming.

\*\*\*\*\*

Danger has always felt abstract,  
mapped  
onto my body from  
a distant projector, prompting  
thought,  
intangible  
reflection,  
a fragmented  
fractal reality  
casting me into a skin  
that never really felt like mine.

Danger has always existed in  
dark alleys and  
vans with candy and  
nails on a fencepost, a  
frozen scarecrow in what?  
1996?  
I was like 6 then,  
so whatever, and  
a-a-a-a-a-a  
-all the way  
across oceans: in Serbia  
in Russia, in Uganda, in the  
past. Until

I poemed my grief, *pulsed*  
it onto paper, falling,



*CH-ch-CH-ch-CH-ch-Ch*

*The sound of floors passing, blurring  
by a head plummeting after  
being thrown from the top of  
a building,*

*Ch-ch-Ch-ch-Ch*

Chechnya is  
only so far away, and it's  
happening today, with blind eyes  
that can't surmise the realities that  
words bind to bodies.

*CH-ch-CH-ch-CH*

*I can't get the words out, can't  
stand the realities, can't  
think of those bodies, of  
those people, without  
seeing myself  
falling,  
falling,  
falling.*

It's only so far away,  
when today, in my homestate  
queer people are told they are  
unfit fathers and mothers,  
legislated and discriminated  
and defined solely by stigma  
*sit down with that nonsense*  
but realize  
it's only so far away  
from saying, "this queer person  
is unfit as a brother and  
as a human so  
"Kill him. Or I will do it for you."

*CH-ch-CH-ch*

*The sound of trains coming, the  
sound of bullets on their way to  
bodies, the sound of falling, of fearing  
realities, of stuttering my eyes open to  
look emergency in the face.*

*ch-ch-ch-ch ...*

*the sound of silence coming,  
filling a life that was once full:  
dancefloors and friends and  
queer camaraderie. Thrown from  
a roof, laid to un/rest, bare  
on a dancefloor, a songbird  
silenced of its song.*

*ch-ch-ch ...*

\*\*\*\*\*

I click my tongue three times, a train whistles  
in the distance,  
it is becoming. I look  
over the balcony, friends on my left  
and on my right.  
Between cigarettes and stress, we share  
an avowal  
q. u. e. e. r.

I look up to the stars, a hung sky, and wonder  
why would anyone throw  
this my their our  
community over buildings,  
balconies,  
lock it in cells,  
think that this  
queer love could be  
unclean?

Emergency feels  
    overwhelming, a  
        never emplotted  
            constant change  
            pangs of grief,  
        and anxiety, and  
wondering if now is too late, but, no,  
it is becoming.

Do not mistake the man in Chechnya  
telling the mother  
    “Kill him or I will do it for you”  
as seas away, when today someone here  
    asked about me  
    “Is that kid still a faggot?”  
I am not yet thrown, but when hate  
    is emboldened, and lives  
        like mine questioned,  
            devalued,  
                    stigmatized,  
it is only a matter of time until  
    that baby locked in your arms  
    is deemed unclean.

|           |         |     |
|-----------|---------|-----|
| Emergency | lives   | now |
| So what   | will we | do? |

## REFERENCES

---

Atwood, M. (1985) *The Handmaid's Tale*. Toronto, ON: McLellan and Stewart.

Burgess, A. (1962). *A Clockwork Orange*. London, UK: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Bradbury, R. (1953). *Fahrenheit 451*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.

Culler, J. (2015) *The theory of the lyric*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.

Dumanis, M. & Marvin, C. (2006). *Legitimate dangers: American poets of the new century*.  
Louisville, KY: Sarabonde Books.

Foster, H. (2015). *Bad new days: Art, criticism, and emergency*. New York, NY: Verso Books.

Halberstam, J. (2011). *The queer art of failure*. Durham, NC: Duke U.P.

Hegel, G. (1975). *Aesthetics: Lectures on fine art*. Trans. T.M. Knox. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.

Huxley, A. (1932). *Brave New World*. London, UK: Chatto and Windus.

Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Orwell, G. (1949). *1984*. London, UK: Secker & Warburg.

## NOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> Orwell, 1949

<sup>2</sup> Huxley, 1932

<sup>3</sup> Burgess, 1932

<sup>4</sup> Bradbury, 1953

<sup>5</sup> Atwood, 1985