Tongo Eisen-Martin
Heaven Is All Goodbyes
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"Something about the worst society to write a poem in": On Tongo Eisen-Martin's *Heaven Is All Goodbyes* and Hardt/Negri's *Assembly*

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri open the "Preface" of *Assembly*, a follow-up to their collaboratively written *Empire* trilogy—*Empire* (2000), *Multitude* (2004), and *Commonwealth* (2009)—by quoting a poet, Aimé Césaire: "Here poetry equals insurrection." I often go to Hardt and Negri to help me think through my relationship to the odd bedfellows of politics and literature, so Césaire's inclusion so early in their text helps to remind me that any discussion of the new "leaderless" social movements, as Hardt and Negri describe them, is a space for engaging poetry and poetics, too.

In a passage on these new social movements about a quarter of the way through *Assembly*, Hardt and Negri contend that today's movements "affirm a beating heart of plural ontology. A pluralism of subjectivities, multiple models of temporality, and a wide variety of modes of struggle, which emerge from different traditions and express different objectives, together form a powerful swarm held together by cooperative logics." (69) The aim of these pluralisms, they continue, "is to create a model of constituent democracy in which differences are able to interact and together create new institutions: against global capital, against the dictatorship of finance, against the biopowers that destroy the earth, against racial hierarchies, and for access to and self-management of the common." (69)

If this is, indeed, the age of new plural ontologies, as Hardt and Negri claim (and we could certainly argue the verity of this point with them at some future date), then it is hard to imagine a more apt and more engaging literature of this new plural moment than Tongo Eisen-Martin's magnificent new collection, *Heaven Is All Goodbyes*. Rarely have I read a recent poetry book that simultaneously hearkens back to those 20th century works at the apex of politics and poetry—think Audre Lorde and Dennis Brutus, to mention just one arm of that tradition—while feeling so "right this second," so a factor in this historical moment that finds many of us filled with both hope—#BlackLivesMatter, the Sanders campaign and recent DSA electoral victories, the #NoDAPL and #MuslimBan protests—and deep trepidation (i.e., #45, a.k.a., @realdonaldtrump).

Heaven Is All Goodbyes is grounded in a "pluralism of subjectivities": a grandmother, a bluesman, fathers and uncles and sons, bus riders, prisoners, slaves, communists, and many more. In the opening poem, "Faceless," Eisen-Martin describes a social and economic dialectic that too many have only encountered on the patron side: "[t]he start of mass destruction/Begins and ends/In restaurant bathrooms/That some people use/And other people clean." (9) Later, in "Look at this ghost that thinks it can fly," he introduces a narrator who needs to "start deciding whether/I'm alive or differently alive." (37) His "pluralism of subjectivities" are regularly working class and precariously employed, like the speaker in "Ceiling Traffic" who says that "working class windows is all my cigarette knows" (72). The narrator in "The Oldest Then The Youngest" similarly avows that "no one can name you better than the oppressed." (132)

The book delves extensively into what Hardt and Negri term "multiple modes of temporality" in stanzas that address the long 1990s: "'You just going to pin the 90s on me?'/— all thirty years of them —" (11), as well as just a single year in that decade as in "The Simplicity of Talent," where "a phone rings in 1988/and an epoch begins after a mother hangs up." (27) The epoch, in many ways, refers to the ongoing deindustrialization

of America that comes to the fore in many poems in this collection. In "Wave At The People Walking Upside Down," one speaker (denoted in italics) can "*hear the engines of deindustrialization*" inside "*the tin can on my left shoulder*" (23) while another speaker, in normal font, speaks of "The cold world/Of deindustrialization…" In "Selling What Slaves Made," Eisen-Martin writes, "I'm down on my luck/Making snow angels/On the abandoned factory loading dock." (48) Like Gwendolyn Brooks did in an earlier era in her poem "boy breaking glass," the author reminds us that the landscapes of neoliberal globalizations can be creative spaces, too.

Yet Eisen-Martin's book is, thankfully, far from the typical 19th- and 20th-century working-class literatures of elegy and regret. As Hardt and Negri point out, our contemporary social movements engage "a wide variety of modes of struggle, which emerge from different traditions and express different objectives…" (69). In *Heaven Is All Goodbyes*, we find singular acts of resistance, such as "The communist [who] has plenty of time/To finish his cigarette/and lie to his boss," but we also encounter more collective modes of struggle. In one such instance, Eisen-Martin writes about "The cop in the picket line" who "is a hard working rookie," then subverts the image in the remainder of the stanza when he adds, "The sign in my hand is getting more and more laughs./It says, 'the picket line got cops in it'." (21) Here, as elsewhere in the book, simple images—tattoos, bus rides, graffiti, kick drums, "where the couch came from" (66), etc.—become spaces where struggles "express different objectives" than those of earlier generations of working-class writing.

Yet it's within Hardt and Negri's notion of "creat[ing] a model of constituent democracy… against global capital, against the dictatorship of finance" that the poems in *Heaven Is All Goodbyes* are perhaps at their most pressing. In "may we all refuse to die at the same time," the narrator announces that "I'm writing poems for the rest of my life again," informs readers that "Electric chairs are not complicated: Have a drink. Go to work," then writes that

The best way to pay me
Is in my left hand
While my right hand is juggling
A cigarette
A steering wheel
And a negotiation with the ruling class. (34)

For me, one of the books most compelling poems—though in truth, it's almost impossible to choose one from the countless remarkable verses contained here—is "Channels to fall asleep to," a poem about the searing effects of "the dictatorship of finance" on children and childhood. The poem opens with a single line followed by a brief stanza:

While shoebox to shoebox travels my childhood

Professionals roll garbage cans around a conference room
Half the size of a holding tank
Half the hope of a holding tank
Full of third world retail flattery
"nothing wrong with the blind leading the blind,"
we think they just said (105)

This appraisal of public, professional, and police-state spaces is soon followed by Eisen-Martin's searing critique of public schools: "when a hostage has a hostage, that is u.s. education." He presents us with a child who is "Not even ten years old/And most of you are on my shoulders," followed by his assessment of precarious life:

casually be poor
teach yourself
how to get out of this room
and we'll leave you enough blood
to turn off the lights on your way out

casually be poor…
they are all cops when you are poor (106)

Finally, *Heaven Is All Goodbyes* is equally vehement in its critique of biopowers, racial hierarchies, and "the lack of access to and self-management of the commons." Throughout the book, we read of "the day jail quotas get filled/the day that the planet plays flat" (17), speakers who "Get out of the car against desperate white supremacy" (29) and who "saw a white man sketching the meat hooks into my angled carcass." (124) And we hear the collective and the common speaking—"I am not an I./I am the black commons" (16)—of a future that may—or, more likely in contemporary America—may never arrive: "A masterpiece is coming/(It just has to beat a million bullets to the spot)". (55)

"Here poetry equals insurrection." Césaire's phrase is an equally appropriate epigraph for *Heaven Is All Goodbyes*, too. In Tongo Eisen-Martin's second collection, we hear a dialogue between the "pluralism of subjectivities" and a more collective commons. His book reminds us, today, of poetry's potential role as more than an ornament in our movements. Don't we all occasionally need reminding, as Eisen-Martin prompts us in the volume's final poem, that "World history has a proletariat when the lights come back on—"? The brilliant poems in *Heaven Is All Goodbyes* provide just a little bit of those future lights' electricity, too.