

“SONG OF OUR BODYLANDS”: BORZUTZKY’S ROTTEN CARCASS ECONOMY,
TRAUMATIC COMMUNAL LANDSCAPES, AND THE DIASPORIC TESTIMONY OF “IN
THE MURMURS OF THE ROTTEN CARCASS ECONOMY” AND “THE PERFORMANCE
OF BECOMING HUMAN”

By Jacqueline Farley

A Thesis Submitted to The Honors College
In Partial Fulfillment of the Bachelors degree with Honors in

English

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

MAY 2020

Approved by:

Dr. Susan Briante

Department of English

STATEMENT BY AUTHOR

This thesis has been submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for a degree at The University of Arizona and is deposited in the University Library to be made available by borrowers under rules of the Library.

Signed: _____

Abstract

Communal sound and melody are of unique significance within the poetic works of the Chilean-American poet Daniel Borzutzky, as can be seen through evident examples within his full-length poetry collections *In the Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Economy* and the National Book Award-winning *The Performance of Becoming Human*. These works demonstrate a canonical relationship through Borzutzky's ongoing dedication to describing the experiences of marginalized bodies in the ever-present construction of the "rotten carcass economy," a system within which physical and economic violence is enacted by "authoritative bodies" onto other bodies, thus producing a trauma which serves as capital and further perpetuates an ongoing circulation and staging of violence. This violence is further described through the witness of communal melody by Borzutzky's speaker within *In the Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Economy*, as can be seen most prominently within the poem "Writing." This poem establishes the speaker's purpose within the collection through the melodic engagement of the speaker by a chorus of "murmuring ghosts" and bodies. This engagement evolves as one continues through *The Performance of Becoming Human*, as Borzutzky demonstrates a consciousness and incorporation of his readers within the action of such poems as "Dream Song #17," "The Broken Testimony," and "In the Blazing Cities of Your Rotten Carcass Mouth." It can be further concluded from these examples that Borzutzky seeks not only to engage readers in an empathetic experience with the trauma felt by bodies, but also encourage an audience to confront systems of violence through writing, continued civic discourse, and grassroots-level activism.

Keywords: communal melody, murmuring, bodies, authoritative bodies, rotten carcass economy, physical violence, economic violence, trauma, translation, empathetic engagement, immersion, testimony, wound culture, border culture, civic discourse, sociopolitical activism.

Introduction

“Dream Song #17” from *The Performance of Becoming Human* by Chilean-American poet, translator, and activist Daniel Borzutzky is notable for the way in which it channels and imparts upon its audience the experience of trauma resulting from violence. Within the poem, Borzutzky takes on the perspective of an individual hung from a tree by a mob and thrown into a river that runs through a forest. Borzutzky follows the speaker’s anonymous body in their journey to “the edge of the village / where someone pray[s] for [their] soul” (13-14) and writes:

It’s like this in a lullaby

For the end of the world:

The options for the end

are endless

But this is not really a lullaby

for the end of the world

It’s about the beginning

what happens when we start to rot

in the daylight

The way the light shines on

the ants and worms and parasites

loving our bodies. (15-26)

Borzutzky’s “lullaby for the end of the world” reframes death as a new and separate sort of beginning. Borzutzky explains that this lullaby is not definite, but rather indicative of

possibilities beyond death; Borzutzky's lullaby is where "options for the end / are endless" (17-18) despite the condition of the speaker being forced by an unspecified "they" to choose between the options of being hung or "bur[ried] in the foamy mud" (6). It is where there is light even in the aftermath of violence, where the body is made tender by decay, and where Borzutzky shows the dead body in a state of transcendent and continuously experienced love, both by parasites as well as other bodies.

Aside from their murderers and the villagers that receive the speaker, Borzutzky demonstrates an awareness of individuals within and surrounding this lullaby. Most noticeably within the poem, the speaker refers to children, who "must sing sweetly, softly" and "fill their songs with love" "to avoid the hole" (31-34). One understands this hole within the context of the poem as perhaps related to death or suffering in death, likening these to the image of an abyss. Borzutzky's speaker puts forward that this abyss can be somehow avoided through the provocation of song, or perhaps rather a general outward expression of love; Borzutzky insists through the image of these singing children that love can be used as an active measure against death through violence, further supporting his perspective that the "lullaby for the end of the world" marks not only the end of life, but the beginning of a love experienced after life.

However, Borzutzky's speaker is seen calling out to their audience/reader in a way that is especially worthy of attention. In the echo of this lullaby, the speaker asks the question: "Do you know what it's like / when a ghost licks your intestines" (29-30). Despite its brief emergence within the poem, the address of a "you" reveals an even more complex interpretation which can be tied to the presence of song within this poem. Whereas a first reading may indicate the communal implications of "what happens when we start to rot" (22) and "the ants and worms and parasites / loving our bodies" (25-26) as merely referring to the speaker and the other people

involved within the context of the poem, it can be said first that the indication of a “you” extends the view of Borzutzky’s speaker to encompass persons who exist beyond the poem itself; Borzutzky, and by extension his speaker, is aware that they are being heard, and consequently reaches out to include this audience within the poem. Furthermore, Borzutzky’s use of “you” as a specifier in “your intestines” in addition to the implications of “our bodies” rotting together draws an association between the bodies of his audience and that of his speaker, thus directly engaging readers in an empathetic resonance with the subject of the poem; Borzutzky shockingly puts forward that the trauma experienced by the poem’s speaker in turn also involves the bodies of his audience.

This engagement with bodies and traumatic experiences through communal melody is not isolated merely to “Dream Song #17.” Frequent references to communal singing can be observed even within Borzutzky’s preceding work, *In the Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Economy*. Song and singing is notably used within poems such as “Writing” to highlight the nature of suffering experienced by these bodies through the speaker and further press a need for the realization of this suffering through testimony. As such, this establishes a basis for further engagement with an audience within *The Performance of Becoming Human*, with prominent moments of communal melody in poems such as “The Broken Testimony” and “In the Blazing Cities of Your Rotten Carcass Mouth.” Ultimately, Borzutzky’s use of communal melody in both *In the Murmurs of the Rotten Caracss Economy* and *The Performance of Becoming Human* serves to empathetically promote the experiences of traumatized bodies caught within neoliberal systems of violence as well as impart the significance of testimony and advocacy for these bodies; Borzutzky uses moments of communal singing within his work to interpersonally connect readers to the

experience of traumatized bodies as a means of revitalizing a new wave of sociocultural political activism.

The manner in which violence and trauma are confronted by communal song within *In the Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Economy* and *The Performance of Becoming Human* prompts a deeper investigation into relevant influences and mechanics in Borzutzky's work. Second to Borzutzky's attention to bodies within his poetry, the most prominent of these variables includes the "rotten carcass economy," an antagonistic entity that stands out as significant within both the cannon of his collected poems as well as Borzutzky's ethos as a poet; Borzutzky's rotten carcass economy creates a context within which communal song by bodies is triggered and observed. As such, an exploration of Borzutzky's perspective of the systems and landscapes which host violence and trauma is essential to first understanding the relationships between Borzutzky, his speaker, bodies, and the rotten carcass economy, then the role of communal song within these relationships. Once these have been established, an in-depth literary analysis of communal melody within both *In the Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Economy* and *The Performance of Becoming Human* can be fully conducted, keeping in consideration Borzutzky's attention to bodily trauma caused by violence within the system of the rotten carcass economy as well as the effects of this attention upon an audience.

Through this analysis, one understands that the communal singing present *In the Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Economy* assists in providing context for the violence seen in *The Performance of Becoming Human*, as can be seen through the example of "Writing"; the communal melody of bodies within this poem is often shown within the rotten carcass economy as a means of demonstrating the physical and economic violence experienced by bodies. Meanwhile, *The Performance of Becoming Human* continues on in this demonstration through a

communal melody that is more deliberate and interpersonal, as within poems such as “Dream Song #17,” “The Broken Testimony,” and others, the implication of a communal “you” within moments of song indicates an attempt by Borzutzky to connect to his audience through the experiences of his speaker. In addition to moments within *The Performance of Becoming Human* which urge an audience to in turn respond to this experience, such as the speaker’s encouragement within the poem of the same name to describe “the darkness that surrounds us” (59), Borzutzky’s use of communal song within his poetry contributes to an apparent initiative to embolden the voices of witnesses, thus cultivating a climate for increased civic discourse and activism concerning the condition of bodies held in place by capitalism.

Dissecting Borzutzky

In order to understand the intent of his poems, of the reoccurring device of communal melody, and the attitudes taken within his work, it is valuable to investigate the perspective of Borzutzky himself, beginning with his identity and purpose as a poet. Borzutzky explicitly makes these factors known in his aesthetic statement in *Angels of the Americlypse: An Anthology of New Latin@ Writing*, closely associating himself with his subject. Here, he makes a heavy proclamation: “I am a falso-Chilean living in Chicago, a Latin American city who has re-imported its extreme neoliberalism from Chile, the testing ground for the privatization of shock treatments first dreamed up by the economists at the University of Chicago, which are now being re-enacted, Chilean style, in Chicago (witness the recent Chilean and Chicagoan school strikes, with privatization at their cores, as proof of their shared vulgarity)” (38). This bold and politically-charged style of language by Borzutzky jarring and sudden within such a piece as an aesthetic statement; Borzutzky speaks in specifics to an audience without warning,

demonstrating an expectation that his readers know or should know the context within which he cites these specifics. This is a notable characteristic of both his work as well as his commentary within interviews surrounding him. In this way, Borzutzky appears at all times to be engaged in a sociopolitical commentary of U.S. and Chilean neoliberalism, discussing complex constructions such as the “rotten carcass economy,” its bodies, and others from a perspective of assumed universal familiarity. This style and the layers of such statements both confounds and attracts potential interest to his writings and interviews.

Several elements are seen at work in the boldness of this claim to identity. First, Borzutzky’s reference to the “testing ground for the privatization of shock treatments,” is perhaps an allusion to Naomi Kline’s *Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, in which Kline summarizes the concept of economic “shock treatment” while elaborating on the relationship between Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet and the late American economist Milton Friedman, who both taught many of Pinochet’s own economists at the University of Chicago in addition to serving Pinochet directly as an advisor. Pinochet’s political takeover and reign over Chile from 1973 to 1990 is remembered by Kline in terms of its evident economic brutality; Kline recounts Pinochet’s “extreme capitalist makeover” was influenced largely by Friedman, who “advised Pinochet to impose a rapid-fire transformation of the economy – tax cuts, free trade, privatized services, cuts to social spending and deregulation” and “predicted that the speed, suddenness and scopes of the economic shifts would provoke psychological reactions in the public” (8). One of the products of these adjustments to the economy, Kline notes, included the privatization of Chilean schools (8), thus cutting off access to education for students of lower socioeconomic statuses. This explanation also provides context for Borzutzky’s previously cited statement regarding Chilean and Chicago schools; Borzutzky expresses anger with the

privatization of schools within the United States because he identifies this with the economic reforms of Pinochet's reign in Chile.

Borzutzky reveals that he is indeed familiar with not only this economic upheaval in Chile during the seventies and eighties, but further incensed by the catastrophic political corruption and physical violence committed against Chilean citizens on behalf of the state during the period of Pinochet's regime. Borzutzky writes that Pinochet "ruled with terror and violence, kidnapping, torturing, killing and disappearing those who spoke out in protest" of his policies, bombing the city of La Moneda during his coup d'etat, dropping the bodies of citizens deemed as political enemies from airplanes over coastal and mountain regions, and imprisoning hundreds of Chileans aboard military ships ("Translator's Introduction" *Song for His Disappeared*). Among these mentioned prisoners, Borzutzky demonstrates an attention for one in particular: the renowned Chilean poet Raúl Zurita, who was arrested in September 1973 for protesting Pinochet on the morning of his coup and is widely celebrated for his activism and poetic contributions in response to the brutalities of his dictatorship.

In his introductions of both Zurita's *The Country of Planks* and *Song for His Disappeared Love/Canto a Su Amor*, volumes of Zurita's poetry which he himself translated from Spanish to English, Borzutzky contextualizes this history within Zurita's writing, summarizing his work as:

... the overdue admission that the bodies of Chileans were dropped into the sea and the mountains; the screech heard on television; and the gouging out of the eyes of the prisoners. In other words, Zurita's writing is formed at the conjunction of government and media, war and its unspeakable acts of violence, and the brutality and anonymity of death. (*The Country of Planks*, 8)

Borzutzky highlights Zurita as a long-anticipated witness to the horrors of the Pinochet regime, thus revealing an admiration for his work. Borzutzky recognizes not only Zurita's recognition of these atrocities, but his position of capturing them as a poet, his given inclination to bring attention to "the brutality and anonymity of death" experienced by Chilean citizens during a violent period of their political history.

More so in his introduction of Zurita's *The Country of Planks*, Borzutzky quotes Emily Apter's *In the Transition Zone: A New Comparative Literature* with a noted interest in showing the empathetic implications of translation "as an act of love, and as an act of disruption" (8). Apter describes translation as "a means of denaturalizing citizens, taking them out of the comfort zone of national space, daily ritual and pregiven domestic arrangements" (qtd. in Borzutzky 8), or in other words shifting human experiences so that they may be understood outside the barriers established by identities constructed by language; the act of translation, of accurately relocating ideas from one language to another, requires one to momentarily remove themselves from their identities in order to take on those of their chosen subject. Borzutzky extends one's understanding of what constitutes as language and connects Apter's idea to his observations of Zurita: "I see [Zurita's] poetry as an attempt to translate the screech, to translate the language of those whose eyes were gorged out into something that renders their disappearance of presence" (8). Borzutzky indicates the violence experienced by the victims of Pinochet's regime as a language of suffering and pain, thereby understanding Zurita's initiative to "translate the screech" as an incredibly noble and equally painful practice. Keeping in mind Apter's cited commentary, there is additional weight to Zurita's poetic translation of victims as well as Borzutzky's literal translation of Zurita; Zurita is seen as relocating himself in order to realize the nature of violent suffering through poetry as translation, while Borzutzky can be understood

as relocating himself from one language to another in order realize Zurita's insights regarding this suffering.

In many ways, Borzutzky's admiration of Zurita's empathetic practice of translation can be seen within the subnarratives present throughout his own work. For instance, in "Dream Song #17," the children are described as "fill[ing] their songs with love" (34), translating the language of the speaker's suffered body into that of song "to avoid the hole" (31, 33) so that it will not be lost to the "anonymity of death," as Borzutzky says of Zurita's work, but so that it will be loved and understood after death. Meanwhile, the poem "Writing," which begins *In the Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Economy*, describes an insomniac speaker who is simultaneously compelled and tormented by a chorus of "murmuring ghosts" and bodies (23) who urge for them to know their stories, to translate their suffering from this language of murmuring to the language of poetry.

Aside from his involvement in discussion surrounding Zurita's poetics and the socioeconomic political history of Chile, Borzutzky demonstrates an interpersonal concern within his cultural connection to Chile and Chicago; Borzutzky is a Chicago-based poet born to Chilean immigrants, and the contents of his poetic statement indicate a deep connection to events and constructs between the United States and Chile. Borzutzky's emphasis on a "false" cultural identity that exists within Chicago stands out especially in his previously cited statement, followed by his recognition of neoliberal violence as a "re-imported" and "re-enacted" good. Borzutzky appears to insist that these domains of Chile and Chicago, which together contribute to his expressed cultural identity, possess a circulatory relationship with one another involving the development of this violence; Borzutzky indicates that "extreme neoliberalism" is sourced in Chile by "the economists at the University of Chicago" and are further utilized "Chilean style"

within Chicago, citing a specific and charged series of events contextualized by a violent political history as evidence.

This notion of neoliberalism, violence, and resulting trauma through the spheres of Chile and Chicago are clearly put forward as a defined cycle. This is the rotten carcass economy as defined by Borzutzky himself: “bodies and a sense of corpses and bodies mutilated and spread throughout the U.S., Europe, and South America” (qtd. in Staff). To Borzutzky, this rotten carcass economy that exists between Chicago and Chile, the cycle which he further suggests exists between the U.S and other continents of the world, is the central mechanism through which those who experience the effects of capitalism are processed, and that furthermore this system is evidently fueled by the capital produced in the repeated violation of bodies through authorized violence.

In the blog piece “In the Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Inferno,” Borzutzky claims to “write poems in order to expose what a neoliberal inferno is like, what a racist, capitalist segregated, privatized death state, rotten carcass economy looks like.” From this, one understands the following of Borzutzky and his poetry: Borzutzky’s motivations for writing are expository; Borzutzky’s primary associations with this concept of the rotten carcass economy revolve around cooperate greed, power, corruption, social intolerance, and violence as well as “segregated” boundaries; and Borzutzky intensely visualizes this rotten carcass economy as a destructive entity, i.e. “neoliberal inferno.” Borzutzky further expresses an attention to individuals that operate within and around this rotten carcass economy, emphasizing how these figures conform or are expelled from it as well as the death that he believes inevitably results from this system; Borzutzky pinpoints his interest in those “who [the rotten carcass economy] eats, who it shits out...what it does to the brain and the body of the people it hates and loves”

(“In the Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Inferno”). It is also worthwhile to note the animate nature in which Borzutzky describes this rotten carcass economy; Borzutzky projects the rotten carcass economy not only as a system of violence, but as some sort of living, monstrous organism in the cyclical act of consuming and excreting bodies.

As mentioned, Borzutzky describes this rotten carcass economy not as being a system encapsulated by one singular country or government, but existing within multiple locations of various sizes. Upon being asked to expand upon the geography of *The Performance of Becoming Human* in an interview for *BOMB Magazine*, Borzutzky explains that he writes across borders, states, and countries, citing explicit settings such as the deserts of Chile and Arizona, Chicago, and the US-Mexico border as well as the larger domains of Chili, Arizona, Indiana, Illinois, Cuba, and Mexico themselves (McSweeney). Borzutzky’s sense of these spaces appears intertwined with an awareness of bodily violence motivated by monetary systems, further describing this violence as something physically close to him. To illustrate this, Borzutzky paints an image of Montrose Avenue in Chicago for *BOMB* interviewer and poet Joyelle McSweeney, where “there are often police pulling over and arresting young men” and “a giant mountain forms a kind of refuse dump for children discarded by the economies of the city.” This response from Borzutzky emphasizes the casual prominence of the violence of which he writes, and it is to be understood that this violence exists everywhere to Borzutzky, pervading even the most banal landscapes of his everyday life.

Johannes Göransson reflects on Borzutzky’s perspective of and proximity to violence, noting how Borzutzky’s speaker within his poems “is nauseatingly incapable of achieving any critical distance” (21) from the violence of his own work; Borzutzky’s speaker is held so closely to physical and economic violence that their only option for response is that of emotion. As such,

Göransson sees Borzutzky's speaker as a figure so overtaken by the violence inflicted upon bodies by the rotten carcass economy that they struggle themselves to conceptionally grasp at the depth of its resulting trauma despite their firsthand witnessing of it. It is this lack of grasping within Borzutzky's work that contributes to what Göransson describes as "an exploded poem: a poem that cannot contain, cannot master the growing heap of corpses" (21).

Border as Wound, Wound as Stage

Furthermore, Göransson comments on Borzutzky's "urge to physicalize, to literalize art itself as violence" (21) as a defining trait of his poems, claiming its resemblance to sentiments expressed in Mark Seltzer's "Wound Culture: Trauma and the Pathological Public Sphere" concerning the traumatized body as public spectacle (21). Seltzer himself recapitulates this "wound culture" as "the convening of the public around scenes of violence... the public fascination with torn and opened bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound" (3). This is the stage within which communal melody exists within Borzutzky's poetry, the point of spectacle within which bodies are seen and heard.

Seltzer's indication of "bodies" being progressively seen as "persons" through their exposure to violence prompts consideration of Borzutzky's decision to describe the individuals within his poems as "bodies" rather than "people." Initially, a reader understands that Borzutzky would label the figures within his works as "bodies" as means of emphasizing the dehumanization impressed upon them through the rotten carcass economy; the use of dehumanizing language thus reveals the dehumanizing nature of the system. However, the underlying truth of this observation must be further carried forward: These figures are not just "bodies," but indeed "persons" in which a reader is meant to somehow identify with beyond the

veil of dehumanization applied to them. Moreover, an empathetic reader is prompted to recognize this veil – in Borzutzky’s case, the influence of the rotten carcass economy – and take an initiative in targeting it themselves.

Seltzer’s attention to the “open” and “torn” condition of bodies as persons also connects to the discerned tendencies of Borzutzky’s speaker. The bodies littered throughout Borzutzky’s work exhibit varying degrees of “openness” in their physical and economic condition of being wounded. For instance, in the poem “Decomposition as Explanation,” Borzutzky’s speaker observes a scene in which children who have been evicted from their homes are forced to eat hazardous materials from the garbage, such as glass, eggshells, nails, wood, cable bills, and their own clothes (2). This scene is not only an open spectacle within the view of Borzutzky’s speaker, but a moment in which these children demonstrate a physical and economic wounding; these children are not only physically removed from their homes and forced to consume hazardous materials in order to survive, but the context of their homelessness is to be understood as a wound inflicted by a merciless rotten carcass economy. Likewise, the speaker turns their attention in the poem “What are the Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Economy?” to the internal spectacle of “The things that live inside of us: How many parasites are there? They suck out our livers, our kidneys, our lungs, our hearts and blood in order to get the most value from our bodies in the rotten carcass economy” (3). Again, the images presented by the speaker are vivid, corporal, and shown as open spectacle. One can identify this wounding as dually physical and economic, as the speaker infers openness and dissection in their investigation of “parasites” and the “suck[ing] out” of organs within the communal body whose value is determined, according to the speaker, by the rotten carcass economy.

One also notes the collective nature of these scenes, in which Borzutzky's speaker both interjects themselves into these moments of openness through the position of the witness, but also allows for other bodies, including his audience, to possess this vantage point. In this way, the gaze upon the art of the traumatized body itself as violence can be understood as inclusive of individuals beyond Borzutzky and his speaker; Borzutzky instigates an interest in violence and thus creates a channel through the perspective of his speaker in which other bodies, including those within his audience, are collaboratively allowed to witness the phenomenon of trauma, the truth of the wounds produced by the rotten carcass economy. Thus, it can be seen that while the subject of open bodies and persons is the spectacle itself, Borzutzky's speaker is the writer of the performance who holds the doors of the theater open for an audience to come in, upon occasion even pulling them in off the street, throwing them into seats or, as will be later discussed, onto the stage as a player.

To connect to the collectivity present in Borzutzky's work as well as to add to the list of works invoked by his speaker, Chicana literary theorist Gloria Anzaldúa describes a figural archetype and corresponding landscape in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* that appears to closely resemble those described by Borzutzky, in particular the figure of the immigrant body. Additionally, in the vein of Seltzer's "wound culture," Anzaldúa also views the phenomenon of the U.S.-Mexican border as *una herida abierta* (25), or "an open wound" "where the Third World [Mexico] grates against the first [the United States] and bleeds" (25). The result of this bleeding between these worlds is what Anzaldúa calls "border culture," or the integration of U.S. and Mexican cultures within a "third country" or "borderland" that exists within the literal and figurative boundaries of these territories (25).

Of course, unlike the U.S.-Mexican border, there is a considerable space between Borzutzky's Chicago and Chile; in other words, the United States and Chile do not share physical space or culture in the same manner that the U.S.-Mexican border is discussed in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, and thus a congruency between the created wound space within which Borzutzky directs attention to bodies and Anzaldúa's borderland cannot be observed. However, Claire Fox writes of the borderland as a metaphor that exists beyond the distinct lines of borders themselves, explaining that within critical discussions of borders, such as those evoked by Anzaldúa, reference to this space is merely meant to cement "hybrid or liminal subjectivities, such as those which would be experienced by persons who negotiate among multiple cultural, linguistic, racial, or sexual systems throughout their lives" (61). In this way, the concept of the borderland refers to, more than physical space, the metaphysical overlapping of cultures; the borderland exists anywhere within which one culture is made to negotiate with the systems of another, a processes that is not assigned to space, but rather within the realms of these subjectivities. Thus, Fox states that the border is "to be found in any metropolis – wherever poor, displaced, ethnic, immigrant, or sexual minority populations collide with the 'hegemonic' population" (61). Spacial ideas of the border can therefore be seen as universal concepts, existing between territories within close proximity to each other, such as the United States and Mexico, as well as those whose systems intersect or cross even at a distance, as can be observed by the relationship stressed by Borzutzky between Chile and Chicago. Within Borzutzky's case in particular, the borderland, where diasporic bodies contrast with authoritative bodies, exists within the boundaries of the rotten carcass economy, which pervades Chicago, Chile, and other landscapes depicted by Borzutzky's poetry.

From the metaphor of *la herida abierta*, Anzaldúa further introduces the communal profile of *los atravesados* (25) or “the traversed,” whom she claims to live in the borderlands, namely being, in the case of her argument, the overlapping physical and metaphysical territory between the sociocultural domains of the United States and Mexico. She writes:

A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the “normal.” (25)

First, and perhaps most important in understanding border culture in relation to wound culture, is the distinction between the natures of border and borderland. The nature of a border in and of itself is to distinguish, to separate spaces and peoples, “us from *them*” (Anzaldúa 25). In contrast, a borderland is “vague” and “undetermined,” and thus also demonstrating a degree of “openness”; a borderland can be seen as the overflow of spaces, and its nature as well as its inhabitants demonstrate a rejection of categories, a rejection of enclosure on either side of a definite border.

As inhabitants of the borderland and the wound, *los atravesados* bear a noticeable resemblance to the bodies of the rotten carcass economy. The first similarity can be distinguished through the positioning of *los atravesados* within border culture in comparison to that of Borzutzky’s bodies within the wound culture fostered by his work; Anzaldúa’s *los atravesados* as well as the bodies that Borzutzky’s speaker fixates upon are both central to the gaze of their respective works. Their similarities continue through the context in which they are described as

other, as Anzaldúa describes this group as biracial, queer, socially nonconforming, and “half dead,” or rather in a state of “cross[ing]” or “pass[ing] over,” who live in an unspecific or “vague” space between boundaries. In this way, *los atravesados* can be seen not only as physical immigrants with a corporal mobility between sociocultural territories, but as a sort of transcendent sojourner, their mobility between spaces paralleling their movement between states of mortality and immortality. Meanwhile, the bodies which Bortzutzky describes also notably share in these qualities: “Dream Song #17” is told from the perspective of a dead speaker after the point of their death to describe what happens to their body; “Writing” describes traumatized bodies as “murmuring ghosts” who torment the speaker with their stories of trauma as well as bodies who “come and go between the concrete of the dormitory floor and the mud of the next world” “murmur[ing] from one voice to another” (66); and the speaker sits with a singing man in a “dying shack” (13) within “In the Blazing Cities of your Rotten Carcass Mouth” where the echos of broken bodies that were once “waiting for the boat on the river” are now “trapped in the wall” (33) with the speaker, further being described as “Demolished, relentless, alone” (35).

The most poignant of similarities between *los atravesados* and the traumatized wound-dwelling bodies described by Borzutzky, however, is the inevitability of violence inflicted against them in their inherent existence between boundaries. In the case of Borzutzky, it has been explained that within the rotten carcass economy, violence against bodies is assured by the promise of trauma, and that this trauma as profit goes on to fuel further violences within this system; the cycle of violence and resulting trauma is an inevitability in the condition of being encased by the rotten carcass economy. In the same way, Anzaldúa makes it clear that the result of claiming one’s inhabitation within the borderland inevitably leads to violence as well:

Gringos in the U.S. Southwest consider the inhabitants of the borderlands [*los atravesados*] transgressors, aliens – whether they possess documents or not, whether they're Chicanos, Indians or Blacks. Do not enter, trespassers will be raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot. The only “legitimate” inhabitants are those in power, the whites and those who align themselves with whites. (25-26)

Between Anzaldúa and Borzutzky, two observed alignments are highlighted: that between the “transgress[ing], alien” *los atravesados* and immigrant bodies as well as that between “gringos” or “whites” of the U.S. Southwest and authoritative bodies within the rotten carcass economy. Both types of bodies experience violence as the result of navigating within the space of these more powerful entities; border bodies and wounded bodies exist amongst and within each other.

Considering all these factors, it would appear given the perimeters established by Anzaldúa and Seltzer that the realms of border culture and wound culture within Borzutzky's work are one in the same, or in the very least participating in the shared practice of establishing an arena for the observation of individuals who live in an indeterminant state of openness. One understands the borderland and consequent border culture as the result of a boundary raised between one culture and another; one understands the wounded landscape in which Borzutzky's speaker exists as the result of a cultural border established by the rotten carcass economy, erected as a means of maintaining a status quo between bodies and systematic power. The central gaze of both border and wound cultures thus appears to be set upon its inhabitants, the marginalized figures who exist in the focal ground between boundaries and are repeatedly subjected to violence. In the case of Anzaldúa, this is evidently *los atravesados*, while to Borzutzky, this refers to bodies. As such, Anzaldúa's border culture and Seltzer's wound culture appear to exist in tandem within Borzutzky's work; the territory within which Borzutzky's speaker directs

wound culture would seem to inherently share territory with Anzaldúa's border culture and its inhabitants.

Ila Sheren adds the term "border dweller" to the conversation, a term that can help further distinguish Borzutzky's speaker within this shared dynamic between wound and border culture. Sheren describes this border dweller as possessing the "mental state of a permanent outsider" (62), or rather an individual that offers a unique insight through their art concerning the border subject; Sheren writes that "Rather than dividing the world into discrete periods and cultures, the border dweller visualizes the boundaries within these established categories. As a result, he or she can visualize new connections among previously disparate subjects" (63). Seeing how Borzutzky's speaker is the lens through which the variables of bodies, the rotten carcass economy, wound and border cultures are viewed, it is not out of the question to apply these observances of "visualiz[ing]" boundaries and connections amongst their subject to this speaker; Borzutzky's grants his speaker a status within his work as a witness to the rotten carcass economy, and it is through him that he dispenses his observances and facilitates their delivery to an audience.

Entertaining these reflections by Seltzer, Anzaldúa, Fox, and Sheren in relation to Borzutzky's work, another expounded understanding of his speaker and their purpose within his poems emerges; Borzutzky's speaker is stationed on the verge of a living cultural border which they understand as the rotten carcass economy, watching in on the traversed figures caught in the overlap between cultures, between systems. From this perspective, Borzutzky's speaker reveals the horror of what happens to these bodies, and by extension persons, in the borderland, the wound-space: They are beaten decapitated, raped, along a universal boundary between territories, systems, life and death. They identify this phenomenon as a continued tradition between origins,

between Chicago and Chile, between the United States and Latin America, between impoverished or oppressed countries and powerful capitalist ones, and that the profit of trauma only serves to feed physical and economic violence. Nevertheless, in their fixation upon the wound of the border subject, Borzutzky's speaker inherently initiates a secondary cycle through their gaze, incorporating bodies from outside the sphere to look in as well, allowing bodies a stage to sing out against the rotten carcass economy.

Voices In the Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Economy

Given either of these proposed ways within which Borzutzky's speaker critically functions within his work in collaboration with an audience, Borzutzky's engagement of his speaker and his audience with the bodies that occupy the wound space or border space can be illustrated vividly through examples from the text of *In the Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Economy* and *The Performance of Becoming Human*.

In the first section titled "Writing" within *In the Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Economy*, Borzutzky writes that "One should not be afraid to spend their entire life writing the same book. / That is what writing is" (86-87). This phrase very appropriately describes Borzutzky's philosophy when it comes to his poetry, as reflected by his ceaseless attention to the grotesque mutilation, physical battery, sexual assault, economic disparagement, geographical displacement, and ongoing merciless brutality inflicted upon immigrant bodies by agents of what he first names in the poem "The Book of Non-Writing" within *The Book of Interfering Bodies* as the "FALSE CARCASS ECONOMY" (1; qtd. in Staff), a term which further evolves into the "rotten carcass economy" within *In the Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Economy*.

As previously discussed, Borzutzky is obsessed with the bodies of this rotten carcass economy. He is relentless in his exploration and dedication to the violent trials experienced by them, the most regularly identified figures within his poems being women, children, fathers, sons, immigrants, refugees, and prisoners. Ultimately, however, Borzutzky makes it a point that within the world of the rotten carcass economy, these individuals are merely “bodies” that are to be capitalized upon, the word “bodies” itself being perhaps the most frequently used throughout the entirety of his published poetic work; Borzutzky emphasizes that his focus exists on a grand scale, incorporating a mass of individuals which he is often seen separating into separate entities or groups that relate to one another through violence.

This relentlessness by Borzutzky has yielded impressive results during the length of his career thus far, with his bibliography extending over five full-length poetry collections to date, including the 2016 National Book Award-winning *The Performance of Becoming Human*. While each of these works stand successfully on their own, nearly all of Borzutzky’s collections are dedicated to describing the physical and economic violences committed against marginalized bodies by the rotten carcass economy on a global scale: Borzutzky explores the identity of a bureaucratic terrorist in *The Book of Interfering Bodies*; *In Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Economy* documents the violence of capitalism and corporate greed imposed upon bodies through the perspective of an insomniac; *The Performance of Becoming Human* continues in the showcasing of violence; and his most recent collection, *Lake Michigan*, Borzutzky explores the brutalities of a dystopian Chicago that has been recommissioned as a privatized prison camp containing various individuals held captive by a capitalist state.

As Borzutzky continues his thoughts within “Writing,” his obsession with bodies, their different kinds as well as the landscapes in which they exist, becomes more evident and overwhelming:

Every book is different but in the end it’s always the same: a word, an image, the broken memory of a broken body waiting for the present to become the past again, for the present to not be the present, for the heavy blows to cease, for someone to lie to us and tell us that we will go somewhere other than where we are, stuck, here, on this drowning floor, on these dirty concrete blocks, amid the stench, amid the broken bodies, the authoritative bodies, the inhuman bodies, the animal bodies, the abolishing bodies, the burdensome bodies, the quantifying bodies, the hollow bodies, the probing bodies, the doctoring bodies, the soldering bodies, the howling bodies who do not know what world they have been taken to. (88)

Amid this ceaseless anaphora, a clear trauma emerges from the assailed images of “broken” and “howling bodies” weighted to the physical violence of the present moment; one can grasp from this excerpt that these mentioned bodies are being held against their will, denied an escape through the passage of time, and thus continuously subjected to the “heavy blows” of some greater, unspecified exterior force. Borzutzky likens this struggle against violence experienced by these bodies within the present moment to being “stuck” in a sort of industrial wasteland, a world that he builds through details such as “drowning floor,” “these dirty concrete blocks,” and the “stench” of masses of bodies. Furthermore, the distress experienced by these bodies appears to be connected to a physical as well as temporal displacement: “the broken memory of a broken body” fruitlessly waiting to escape the present, an arena of physical suffering, for some familiar place within the past; the speaker’s awareness of “someone l[y]ing to us and tell[ing] us that we

will go somewhere other than where we are”; and the cries of “howling bodies who do not know what world they have been taken to” contribute to the understanding that a central concern for Borzutzky within his work is related to physical space as well as one’s relation to that space.

As the continued sequence of bodies would imply, these “broken” and “howling” bodies are not singularly held within this described violent experience. Borzutzky applies descriptors to these listed bodies that are indicative of their categorization by quality or class. From these descriptors, one understands that select groups of bodies within this excerpt possess an active influence over other groups, as signified by the adjectives “authoritative,” “abolishing,” “quantifying,” “probing,” “doctoring,” and “soldering.” In observation of these descriptors, it is important to consider the implications of the word “authoritative,” as it indicates a heightened affluence over other bodies within the sequence. Meanwhile, the continuous and forceful connotation of adjectives such as “abolishing” and “probing” are also worthy of notice. Other bodies mentioned within the sequence are distinguished by descriptors as well, however, these bodies are marked by a sort of passive, subhuman quality in direct contrast with these previously discussed active bodies. This can be noted by ascribed adjectives of “inhuman,” “animal,” “burdensome,” and “hollow,” in addition to “broken” and “howling.” These more passive bodies are the primary recipients of violence throughout Borzutzky’s work, with more active bodies often being the initiators of this violence.

Reading further into *In the Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Economy* and *The Performance of Becoming Human*, the specific archetypes of authoritative and broken bodies continuously rise as players within the rotten carcass economy that Borzutzky describes. Within the context of his work, authoritative bodies operate as agents of the rotten carcass economy; Borzutzky paints authoritative bodies in the likeness of bureaucrats, politicians, bankers, police

officers, soldiers and other figures of power. Given their connection to the rotten carcass economy, these authoritative bodies are often shown within Borzutzky's poems perpetrating acts of physical and economic violence against broken bodies, whom Borzutzky noticeably codes as those held under the influence of capitalism; for example, the poem "This Gurgling Thing Called Love" from *In the Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Economy* describes a scene in which authoritative bodies pay the speaker, belonging to a group of other bodies, to physically beat each other in various different ways before retrieving the money back from the speaker by force. An initial reading of scenarios such as this one appears to indicate that there is some value in the trauma of these bodies, and that this trauma somehow further benefits Borzutzky's rotten carcass economy, prompting a continuous cycle of authoritative bodies enacting violence against other bodies throughout *In the Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Economy* as well as *The Performance of Becoming Human*.

Moreover, special attention should also be paid to the sonic descriptions and associations with bodies within these works, as traumatized bodies are often associated with such actions as "howling," but most prominently "murmuring" within *In the Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Economy*. Again, returning to "Writings," Borzutzky references Mexican writer Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*, his speaker claiming that the original title of the novel was to be "*Los Murmullos (The Murmurs)*" (21) and voicing that "Both in English and in Spanish, the word 'Murmurs' may very well be the most perfect word in the language" (22). The speaker further cites that Rulfo's novel is "a story about rules, about murmuring ghosts who get stuck in purgatory because of the corrupt behavior of authoritative bodies" (23). The described nature of these sonic figures being "stuck in purgatory" is worthy of accentuation, especially in consideration of "the corrupt behavior of authoritative bodies"; Borzutzky's analogy appears to indicate a grand cycle within

which a point of stagnation exists to hold this group of “murmuring ghosts,” a point which exists due to authoritative bodies and the violences that they enact.

Borzutzky further presses that these “murmuring ghosts” haunt the “obliterated neighborhoods” of Rulfo’s fictional village of Comala, the streets of Chicago, and within the speaker’s own mind. In one moment of the poem, after being continuously consumed by the images and murmuring of bodies and their ghosts, the speaker imagines the suicide of an elderly woman after the foreclosure of her home. The act of foreclosure is a pressing mode of violence recognized by Borzutzky throughout this particular collection, blatantly explaining that “[*In the Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Economy*] is a book that sees little distinction between different types of violence. A murder and a foreclosure are just about the same in this book” (“What is the Rotten Carcass Economy?” 5). The speaker writes that in her death, the woman “joins with the murmurers of the rotten carcass economy to form a chorus who participate in this drama which may or may not be about how I will never be able to sleep” (98). Again, one should note that the speaker refers to the incorporation of the woman into this group of “murmurers” as a “chorus” in addition to the implication of the rotten carcass economy as a container within which this chorus is formed.

Moreover, a parallel can be made between the positioning of these “murmurers” within the rotten carcass economy and the “murmuring ghosts” held within purgatory, the speaker themselves even going as far as to later say that “the choral murmurers are in purgatory” (101). In this way, Borzutzky explicitly compares the stationing of sonic individuals within the rotten carcass economy to the recursive nature of purgatory, within which tormented individuals are held in their passing through domains of an afterlife; Borzutzky insists through the presence of this murmuring chorus that not only are bodies encased by the rotten carcass economy, but that

the phenomenon of the rotten carcass economy is also somehow recursive, revolving in a way around and back to these bodies and their murmuring song.

Even more paramount to Borzutzky's observed drive within his work is his speaker's expressed state of being "never able to sleep" due to the murmuring melody of this chorus, of being constantly haunted by the songs and stories of these bodies; the speaker reflects in "Writing" that the narratives and images of disappeared and tortured bodies "have been at the root of every single word that I write" (20), that the speaker is "surrounded by people who murmur with no voice" (49) and "people who die with no voice" (50). They explain that they are compelled throughout "Writing" to write about these bodies, both by the compulsion to reveal images such as "the decaying man about to be covered up; the decaying body desperately fighting to reclaim his voice" (60), as well as by the chorus's attempts to communicate with them while the speaker "doesn't sleep" (103).

One understands that communal melody is an essential vehicle of communication between bodies and the speaker, as the communal melody present within the poem overpowers the speaker in tandem with the images of traumatized bodies which he describes. One also understands that the speaker's writing is prompted by these visual and melodic encounters with traumatized bodies, and in the case of the "choral murmurers" in particular, who murmur to the speaker as they attempt to sleep (97), this is an observed pressure placed on the speaker through the initiation of communal song in "Writing"; the choral murmurers appear to use communal song as a means of not only relaying their experiences, but pressing the speaker to tell their stories, to reveal the truth of their suffering and prevent them from being "covered up."

As such, communal melody by bodies in "Writing" can be seen as conducting itself within two separate ways. First, allusions to communal song convey the nature within which

bodies suffer within the rotten carcass economy, revealing that the collective existence of bodies within this system is not unlike being held within a place of stagnation and ongoing suffering, a sort of purgatory. Second, communal singers intercept the life of the speaker, invading even the private sphere of his thoughts in his attempts to sleep as a means of compelling them to realize their suffering through writing. Given especially this disregard of personal space, it seems fitting that *The Performance of Becoming Human* would continue on in this tradition of interception, even going as far as using communal melody to breach the line between poem and audience in order to impart the experiences of bodies and involve a reader in the ongoing cycle of testimony.

The Melodic Immersion and Testimony of *Performance*

Despite its implications of corporal association to the speaker of the poem, Borzutzky's tactic of involving an audience within "Dream Song #17" restrains its grip upon a reader. This is to say that Borzutzky still implicates the bodies of an audience in the sensations experienced by the speaker of "Dream Song #17," however, it is clear that readers are still allowed some distance from violence; a reader shares in the inevitable experience of decomposition experienced by the speaker, although the specific, violent mode of death by hanging is described within the context of the poem as applying solely to the speaker themselves. In contrast, communal song presented through "The Broken Testimony" is not nearly as merciful, as it explicitly removes a reader from the safety of an audience space and recasts them within the role of participant within the poem, thus exposing them to violence and consequent trauma.

"The Broken Testimony" begins with the speaker of the poem, assumedly the same from "Writing," in a scene with an addressee resembling an individual from the murmuring chorus. This addressee is further depicted as an individual who seeks to have their story told by the

speaker; the speaker describes the “you” in the poem as “writing on [the speaker’s] back” (8) “inscrib[ing] hard justice into [the speaker’s] blank flesh” (11) and critiquing the work of the speaker, “annoyed to the beat by [the speaker’s] insistence on beginning sentences with ‘but’” (23). Given this established dynamic, one might argue that the poem merely exists within itself, within the singular relationship described between the speaker and the addressee. In such an argument, there would be no acknowledged reader by the speaker, and thus there would be no desire or awareness by the speaker to involve a reader in the action of the poem. However, the presence of “you” within the poem still evokes an intent of resonance between the poem and the reader; whether or not the speaker themselves acknowledges the addressee explicitly as an audience member, it can be said that Borzutzky as a poet understands the device of “you” as a means of forcing a reader to relocate themselves into the role of the addressee, to experience their condition as a body held within the cycle of the rotten carcass economy.

The height of this addressee’s condition is reached when communal melody also emerges within the poem and comes to a crescendo, arching within a parallel between the described peril of the scene and the equal reaction to this peril by afflicted figures through song:

... it is neither fair nor unfair that each of our bodies is sinking in the tar to the beat of a traditional song in which the speaker is ravaged as much by love as by its absence

Dead dog barking in the bushes to the beat of this beautiful song

Dead girl screaming in the shrubs to the beat of this beautiful song

Dead writing screaming from the page to the beat of this beautiful song

And you look up at me from the screaming page and I see your face falling from your sunken body

You are jammed into the street in a tar pit on a flaming August day

This is on Montrose Avenue on the North Side of Chicago

Your mutilated body is jammed into a tar pit in the middle of this busy street now empty
except for a few scavengers searching for their lost bodies

The helicopters overhead (64-72)

The first observance within these lines is the simultaneous occurrence between trauma and song, as Borzutzky describes bodies “sinking in the tar to the beat of a traditional song” (64) while other characters “[bark]” and “[scream]” “to the beat of this beautiful song” (65-67). In these occurrences, trauma is translated through communal melody not only as a unanimous response to violence, but as the only language through which this trauma can be understood; bodies equate the language of trauma to the beat of a song “in which the speaker is ravaged by love as much as it is by absence” (64). This described “ravag[ing]” by “love” as much as “absence” further complicates the dynamic between communal melody and trauma, as if one coordinates “love” with melody and “absence” with trauma, one would understand melody as affecting the speaker of the described song to the same degree as trauma; in this way, love and melody, absence and trauma, are seen as comparable languages that share a translation with one another and equvalate to the same effect upon the participants within this song.

It should also be acknowledged that Borzutzky establishes in these lines that the addressee exists within the stage of his borderland or wound space, again citing Montrose Avenue in Chicago, an acknowledged point of interest within the scheme of the rotten carcass economy, as the setting of violence within the poem. Furthermore, the presence of “helicopters overhead” also appear to indicate the looming presence of an officialized entity, an authoritative

body or agent of the rotten carcass economy over the speaker and the addressee in this moment of connection in the aftermath of violence. This violence includes the addressee's "mutilated body... jammed into a tar pit in the middle of this busy street" (71), which the speaker views in addition to the addressee's "face falling from [their] sunken body" from "the screaming page" above them (68). Again, it is important to remember that due to the presence of "you" within these lines, Borzutzky also places a reader into the experience of trauma through the body of the addressee, relocating them to his created stage and in direct proximity to violence.

While in this scene the speaker and the addressee are situated in different metaphysical plains, with the speaker existing above the addressee outside of the page and the addressee existing within the writing on this page, a physical connection present between these two individuals creates a unification between realms, a point within which their separate worlds bleed together. This connection also appears directed by melody or "the beat," as Borzutzky's speaker continues:

To the beat I stretch out over your tarred-up body

The tar on my clothes forms an inseparable bond between us

You, tarred into the pavement, on your back in the tar, looking up at me

Me, tarred into your body, looking down, to the beat, permanently in your eyes (74-77)

The physical and emotional connection established between the speaker and the addressee, and thus the reader, within these lines is inimitable. The speaker, guided to interact with the body of the addressee by rhythm, describes an "inseparable bond" by "the tar on [the speaker's] clothes," (75). They undergo a metaphysical immersion into the experience of the addressee, further expressing the evident intimacy or sexuality associated with this process within the poem; the speaker expresses that they are "tarred into [the addressee's body], looking down" (77) while the

addressee remains “tarred into the pavement, on [their] back, looking up” at the speaker (76).

Reciprocally, one reads this scenario between the speaker and the addressee as also an experience shared between the speaker and a reader, as the body of the addressee is read by an audience as a conduit for readers to take on as their own, sharing in the relationship between the speaker and the addressee as their own.

Further exploring the relationship between the speaker and the addressee, melody or “the beat” continues to persist as a means of highlighting the nature of their connection as well as the speaker’s purpose within this connection. Borzutzky follows this beat until the last lines of the poem, writing:

My face {to the beat} relational to your face {to the beat} relational to the tar that holds
us together relational to the tar that binds you to the earth

Our silent faces stuck together

Or:

The broken testimony of the broken beat in the broken rhythm of the crumbling excess of
my broken mouth and my broken face in the crumbling cadaver of this night (82-85)

Again, melody reinforces the connection between the speaker and the addressee, which works together with the image of tar towards achieving the unified pronoun of “us” and the possession of “our silent faces stuck together” (82). A secondary connection between the speaker and the earth through the body of the addressee can also be observed, as the tar that holds the speaker’s and the addressee’s bodies together is described as “relational” to that which binds the addressee to physical space. However, as melodic beats are placed primarily between “my face” and “your face” in line 82, it can be inferred that the variable of melody is more relational to the connection exhibited between the speaker and the addressee rather than the speaker and the physical space;

the body of the addressee is the central figure in this triad by virtue of being held directly against the wound scape of the poem, and thus a distinction by beats is seemingly made by Borzutzky to establish the primary focus of the speaker.

In summary, “The Broken Testimony,” melody and song are seen first as expressing a communal response or translation of trauma, then as a means of leading and initiating connection between the speaker and bodies, of imparting bodily experience through physical and emotional contact. This contact, which is initially introduced at the beginning of the poem through a dynamic similar to that seen between the speaker and bodies in “Writing,” further reflects a more intimate connotation through the guidance of melody, thus also allowing an intimate connection to exist between the speaker and a reader through the position of the addressee.

Meanwhile, in the poem “In the Burning Cities of Your Rotten Carcass Mouth,” communal melody also assists in facilitating connection between the speaker, other characters within the poem, as well as an audience. However, through moments of communal melody and nudges by the speaker, and presumably Borzutzky himself, to empathetically meditate upon and address violent scenes through oral modes of declaration as well as the vehicle of writing and discourse, these pieces urge audience members to participate in an immersion outside the realm of Borzutzky’s poetry: The practice of sociopolitical testimony and activism.

The perspective established within “In the Blazing Cities of Your Rotten Carcass Mouth” is similar to that demonstrated in “Dream Song #17,” where the speaker of the poem is identified as a recipient body exposed to the physical violence of the rotten carcass economy. In the case of “In the Blazing Cities of Your Rotten Carcass Mouth,” the main action of the poem is delivered by the figure of a boy, a recipient of economic and physical violence, who begins the poem with the initiation of testimony through song. However, this boy is not in fact the speaker of the poem,

but is rather encapsulated by the narrative perspective of a third person point of view. This detail is made more interesting by the observance that within the poem, the pronoun “I” is not attributed to the speaker themselves, but to the subject of the boy, and is further complicated by seemingly indeterminate boundaries of dialogue coming from him. In this way, the poem itself becomes the song through which the boy translates his traumatic experiences, while the narrator stands to showcase this song to an audience as it evolves into a testimony that consumes the narrative action of the poem.

“In the Blazing Cities of Your Rotten Carcass Mouth” begins with a scene of economic violence similar to that depicted within “Decomposition as Explanation,” as Borzutzky describes “children... eating the bushes outside of their former houses that had been crushed by the Bank of America” (1) Among these children, a singular “boy in a bush singing an improvised song about a bulldozer that obliterates the bureaucratic centers of the earth” (2) is singled out by the poem’s narrator. As if distinguishing him as a soloist hidden amongst a Greek chorus, Borzutzky writes of the boy:

Do you remember the cheese, he sang to his friend.

Te acuerdas de la piña?

Do you remember the ferries, he sang.

Te acuerdas de los patos?

Do you remember school bells and cowards and the boys who would come to our yards to eat the scraps of food we threw to them before the city started to blaze?

Bienvendios a CVS. Si cuenta con tu Extra Care Card please escanea it now. (3-8)

It is important to note that within these lines, the narration of the primary third-person speaker is blended with the verse of the boy without the distinction of quotation marks. Even so, from the

indication of the third-person “he” being attributed to the boy by the narrator of the poem as well as the boy’s addresses of “you” in English and “te” and “tu” in Spanish being used to refer to his friend, one understands the domains of the poem clearly enough; an audience can see a boy singing to a friend through the eyes of a distant, observing narrator, with little to no confusion regarding who is who. One also understands that he appears to participate in a cultural identity uniquely represented by him within the context of the poem, rebounding between English and Spanish languages with someone who presumably understands these as well, who shares in a cultural ambiguity within the cusp of a bilingual identity.

However, this melody extends beyond the narrative beat that acknowledges the base of this bilingual identity, instead seemingly extending out further into the poem. As the boy’s song progresses into verses that refer to himself as “me,” “I,” and “my” as well as indicating himself as part of an “us,” these previously distinct lines between figures within the poem become more questionable, as these pronouns are more commonly acknowledged as indicating the speaker of a poem. As such, it must be remembered that the boy is not the primary speaker within the poem, but rather the primary orator of the song being initiated within the poem; if the narrator was indicating that the boy is using these pronouns to refer to himself and other figures, such as his friend, within the context of his own phrases, or if perhaps the boy’s song were to conclude at some point within the poem, it would traditionally make sense that these moments would be encased by quotation marks to indicate them as belonging to his own speech.

Nevertheless, there is not an indication in the proceeding lines that the boy stops in his song nor that these pronouns apply to anyone aside from himself and his friend; even as he transitions to rely more on English within the poem, stepping away from this self-defining bilingual identity, there are no quotation marks to suggest an end to his melodic prelude, and

nothing that would suggest that such personal pronouns would apply to a variable outside the bubble of his song. Thus, there does not appear to be the indication that the pronouns “I,” “me,” or “us” would belong to the narrator or primary speaker of the poem. Instead, the boy appears to continue in his address of his friend through the eyes of the narrator, a perspective that seems to embrace a free and ambiguous announcement of personal pronouns which are syntactically tied to the boy through his speech, yet remaining notably unfenced by quotation marks until quoted in such a way: “There really wasn’t money anymore or at least there wasn’t money for us” (9), “The man with the camera kissed me and took photographs of the blood that dripped from my fingers” (10), and “Then I found a dying shack and I met a dying man with a chain...” (13).

It can be said that this ambiguous framing of the pronoun “I” within such excerpts of the poem is evocative of themes concerning empathy and connection. In creating an ambiguous “I” that relates to the boy as the orator of song while also sharing an association with the primary speaker of the poem, Borzutzky can be seen as experimenting with the synchronicity or congruency of these roles; Borzutzky’s narrator can be noted as exploring the emotional trauma of the boy in his song through the exposed or open access point that is the pronominal reference to himself. Furthermore, the absence of quotation marks provokes consideration of what structures contain testimony within the poem, as the boy’s song can be seen as being held as an integral part of the narrator’s narration, thus cementing his testimony as the unified core of the poem.

More pressingly regarding the exploration of emotional trauma through song, however, are the events that the boy describes as happening to him within it. To summarize, the boy makes claim to being kissed and photographed by a CIA agent and of escaping to a “dying shack” (13) where a chained man and his dog sing, chant, moan, and “[bark] love” (24) together. In these

moments of sonic expression, the boy also recalls the man explaining to him personal details about his life, “complain[ing] [the man] had lost his pension” (13) and that he had “gone from office to office to see what the Good Lord had to offer” (19). After this initial encounter with the singing man and his dog, the boy falls asleep only to “[wake] up in chains” alone with “no one to tell [his] story to” (25). Given the proximity between the communicational styles of melody and the speaker’s concern for telling his story, it would appear that the boy understands that song and story share some sort of modal relationship with one another; the boy seems to be aware of the fact that the chained man uses song projected at others as a means of attesting the trials of his life, which further appears to encourage him to consider affirming his own traumatic experience through story.

The boy’s consideration of story as well as his apparent desire to express his own testimony of his experiences prompts the initiation of two separate “Imagination challenges” within the poem. These challenges share a close resemblance to the form of short creative writing exercise prompts, which incorporate an appropriate second-person pronoun “you” in their delivery. The scenarios of these prompts are noteworthy for their specific and graphic descriptions of violence, with the second and last of these prompts described within the poem being perhaps the most leading in terms of further encouraging the development of traumatic testimony:

Here’s an alternative ending.

Imagination Challenge #2:

It’s nighttime. You’re decomposing in a cage or a cell. Your father is reading the testimonies of the tortured villagers to you. He is in the middle of a particularly poignant

passage about how the military tied up the narrator and made him watch as his children were lit on fire. He has to listen to the screams of his blazing children but he cannot listen to their screams so he himself starts screaming and then the soldiers shove a gag in his mouth so that he will stop screaming, but he doesn't stop screaming even with the gag in his mouth.

But these are not screams, actually. They are unclassifiable noises that can only be understood as a collaboration between his dying body, the obliterated earth, and the bodies of those already dead.

Write a free-verse poem about the experience. Write it in the second person.

Publish it some place good. (54-59)

Within the context of the poem at the point that this challenge is described, the boy has himself grown into a man, with his own son who also bears witness to acts of violence by the rotten carcass economy, such as an incinerator being stationed outside his work building, where “they incinerated my desk and a photograph of [his son] that I loved” (40). This “they” refers to “the incinerating bodies,” who appear associated with the rotten carcass economy, as within the poem they claim to be “serving the city and that soon all the city would blaze” (42). Thus, given this context, one can more easily see the boy placing himself within the experience detailed within this “imagination challenge,” he himself now being a father who must translate the language of violence and trauma to his son who is innocent enough to ask him “what, daddy, is an incinerator?” (39)

Secondarily within the initiative of putting this prompt into the perspective of sociopolitical testimony, this imagination challenge is inferred as having the potential of being an “alternative ending” (54); Borzutzky appears to suggest that in the event that this prompt is

completed, that the testimony of the boy is realized as a “free-verse poem... in the second person (58), a poem that would continue in Borzutzky’s thoroughly discussed tactic of involving an audience in the experience of its speaker, it would have the effect of creating an alternative ending within which perhaps the violences of the rotten carcass economy may be reduced or eradicated. Furthermore, there is emphasis in the final line of the poem inferring that one should publish the poem “someplace good” (59), further pressing the significance of the testimony of poetry being acknowledged, heard, and spread by others in order to achieve this “alternative ending.”

Similar sentiments can be seen at work in “The Performance of Becoming Human,” which also appears to insist the importance of testimony and criticism concerning systems such as the rotten carcass economy. In a moment when Borzutzky’s witnessing speaker within “The Performance of Becoming Human” appears to resonate with the boy’s sentiments of not having anyone around to “tell his stor[y] to,” further putting forward the consequence that one “can die from too many stories” (43); the speaker here suggests that the weight and volume of testimony that one carries is relational to a detrimental effect upon their body, implying that to have too many traumatic moments of testimony within an individual at one time has a lethal consequence. Furthermore, the speaker call out from within the poem to ask “Who will put the stories back together and who will restore the bodies?” (34), implying that the gathering of testimony and stories will somehow restore the condition of bodies ravaged by the violences of the rotten carcass economy. The speaker of “The Performance of Becoming Human” also appears to suggest that an opposite reaction is necessary in combatting this dangerous effect upon the body, claiming that “The stories they are there but we need a bit more wit,” (34), or simply that humor

or humorous elements such as satire within these testimonies are needed to cope with trauma and somehow negate its effects.

Most overtly in their attempt to persuade an addressee to engage in public testimony and activism against the system of the rotten carcass economy, the speaker of “The Performance of Becoming Human” simply and directly asks their audience: “What do you make of this darkness that surrounds us?” (59), “What does it say? What does it say? What do you want it to say?” (63). The immediate question being asked by the speaker that concerns an audience’s interpretations of “darkness” simultaneously challenges a reader to seek or identify this darkness within a space that “surrounds” both themselves and the speaker. This is evidently Borzutzky’s attempt to direct the attention of his audience duly to the rotten carcass economy, as made clear through the connotations within such poems as “Writing,” which carry the argument that the rotten carcass economy is a mechanism which exists around the trauma and violence of bodies. Moreso, the speaker urges their audience to translate the “murmuring shit” (62) that exists within this darkness of the rotten carcass economy, prompting them to define it in their own word themselves.

It can be soundly put forward from these examples that Borzutzky’s initiatives behind such poems “In the Blazing Cities of Your Rotten Carcass Mouth” and “The Performance of Becoming Human” are to urge an audience to engage in a translation of trauma into testimony, as supported by present exhibitions of song as a mode of storytelling. As a poet, Borzutzky reinforces the testimonial capacities of poetry through the example of his own poetry, and can be further observed as acknowledging the presence of writers or potential writers observing his writing in the way that he encourages his audience to participate within the action, interests, and connections within these poems. In this way, Borzutzky’s poems, those which houses song and

communal melodies that demonstrate or evolve into the testimony of bodies in their experience within the rotten carcass economy, in and of themselves become an example, a call and encouragement of writers by Borzutzky to acknowledge corrupt systems as well as further their own testimonies from experiences with this systems. One can conclude that the intended result of this encouragement by Borzutzky is a triggered momentum within members of his audience, and thus the creation of socio-politically conscious testimonies that will influence the real world outside of these works.

Conclusion

In a moment of surprising clarity and optimism with Mary Jo Brooks and the Public Broadcast Station concerning the release of *The Performance of Becoming Human*, Borzutzky is quoted as saying that rather than relying on political systems to create monumental change, there is instead “great hope to be found in individuals at the grassroots level who are trying to improve the worlds in which they live.” Here, Borzutzky appears to place an earnest weight in the work of such activists as well as embrace civic discourse as essential to craft in practice; Borzutzky suggests that “good poetry” “document[s] the various darkneses” within the world and “create[s] historical memory... by bringing attention to people who are marginalized and discriminated against and violated and destroyed” (Brooks), emphasizing the significance of documentation and testimony as a means of solidifying experiences, of assuring that those who have suffered will not be erased from the public consciousness.

In his own work, Borzutzky’s poetry follows in the tradition of Zurita in realizing the suffering of marginalized bodies through translation. He attempts to reveal the mechanism within which this cycle of suffering occurs, gives it a name, describes its calibrations, and keeps record

of who inflicts violence onto whom, where and how, in a form that appropriately reflects the chaos and confusion of the trauma that is left behind. Of course, this is tradition that has been inherited by Borzutzky from Zurita, the tradition of “translating the screech” or rather the “murmuring chorus,” is one that can only continue on through the extensive ritual of passage, of bestowing the role of the witness to those who will continue on in the practice of empathy and testimony. Thus, through the example set by the positioning of his speaker and the chorus of bodies within *In the Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Economy* as well as his initiatives to relocate his audience into the action of *The Performance of Becoming Human* through windows of communal melody, Borzutzky is illustrating his role as a poet and inviting his audience to continue in this tradition; Borzutzky’s utilization of communal song is a means of conversion, of not only prompting readers to put themselves within the place of the bodies of the rotten carcass economy, but to use this energy to emerge from his poems with new perspectives and new motivations to also take up the assumed responsibilities of his speaker.

Song in and of itself is a connective practice. As a cultural product, song unites individuals within a community around a harmonious emotion or feeling. In this way, it makes sense that Borzutzky would call back to song and melody so often within *In the Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Economy* and *The Performance of Becoming Human*. In “Writing,” song is the variable which transforms the “murmuring ghosts” into a chorus. They sing to Borzutzky’s speaker in order to facilitate feeling, to impart the depths of their experience so that the speaker will realize their truth and translate their song into words, to mark the reality of the violence they have suffered. Meanwhile, as can be seen in such poems as “The Broken Testimony,” and “Dream Song #17,” communal melody is a channel through which an audience is pulled in, thus becoming part of this chorus and experiencing trauma firsthand. Furthermore, “The Performance

of Becoming Human” and “In the Burning Cities of Your Rotten Carcass Mouth” encourages the experiences gained by readers from Borzutzky’s work to be taken with them when they eventually emerge from the page and be further developed outside of his poems, where the traditions of love as translation, of translation through song, and of song as testimony, may be further acknowledged and inspire change.

Works Cited

- Anzaldúa, Gloria E. "The Homeland, Aztlán." *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Fourth ed., Aunt Lute Books, 1987, pp. 23–35.
- Borzutzky, Daniel. "Aesthetic Statement." *Angels of the Americlypse: An Anthology of New Latin@ Writing*. Counterpath Press, 2014, pp. 37–41.
- Borzutzky, Daniel. "Decomposition as Explanation." *In the Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Economy*. Nightboat Books, 2015, pp. 30–34.
- Borzutzky, Daniel. "Dream Song #17." *The Performance of Becoming Human*. Brooklyn Arts Press, 2016, pp. 30–31.
- Borzutzky, Daniel. "In the Blazing Cities of Your Rotten Carcass Mouth." *The Performance of Becoming Human*. Brooklyn Arts Press, 2016, pp. 20–25.
- Borzutzky, Daniel. "In the Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Inferno." *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation, 8 Dec. 2014, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2014/12/in-the-murmurs-of-the-rotten-carcass-inferno-.1>
- Borzutzky, Daniel. "The Book of Non-Writing." *The Book of Interfering Bodies*. Nightboat Books, 2011, pp. 66–67.
- Borzutzky, Daniel. "The Broken Testimony." *The Performance of Becoming Human*. Brooklyn Arts Press, 2016, pp. 64–70.
- Borzutzky, Daniel. "The Performance of Becoming Human." *The Performance of Becoming Human*. Brooklyn Arts Press, 2016, pp. 14–19.
- Borzutzky, Daniel. "This Gurgling Thing Called Love." *In the Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Economy*. Nightboat Books, 2015, pp. 117–122.

- Borzutzky, Daniel. "What are the Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Economy?" *In the Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Economy*. Nightboat Books, 2015, pp. 21–25.
- Borzutzky, Daniel. "Writing." *In the Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Economy*. Nightboat Books, 2015, pp. 3–18.
- Brooks, Mary Jo. "Can a Poem Make the World a Better Place by Documenting the Darkesses around Us?" *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, 20 Dec. 2016, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/poetry/borzutzky>.
- Fox, Claire F. "The Portable Border: Site-Specificity, Art, and the U. S.-Mexico Frontier." *Social Text*, no. 41, 1994, pp. 61–82. JSTOR, doi:10.2307/466832.
- Göransson, Johannes. "Borzutzky." *Angels of the Americlypse: An Anthology of New Latin@ Writing*. Counterpath Press, 2014, pp. 21–22.
- Kline, Naomi. "Blank Is Beautiful: Three Decades of Erasing and Remaking the World" *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Picador, 2007, pp. 3–25.
- McSweeney, Joyelle. "Daniel Borzutzky." *BOMB Magazine*, BOMB Magazine, 15 July 2017, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/daniel-borzutzky-1/>.
- Seltzer, Mark. "Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere." *The MIT Press*, vol. 80, 1997, pp. 3–26. JSTOR, doi:10.2307/778805.
- Sheren, Ila N. "The Portable Border." *Portable Borders : Performance Art and Politics on the U.S. Frontera since 1984*, University of Texas Press, 2015, pp. 59–89. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uaz/detail.action?docID=3443770>.
- Staff, Harriet. "Andy Fitch Talks Shop with Daniel Borzutzky at The Conversant by Harriet Staff." *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation, 7 Aug. 2015,

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2015/08/andy-fitch-talks-shop-with-daniel-borzutsky-at-the-conversant>.

Zurita, Raúl, and Daniel Borzutzky. "Translator's Introduction." *The Country of Planks*, Action Books, 2015, pp. 7–11.

Zurita, Raúl, and Daniel Borzutzky. "Translator's Introduction." *Song for His Disappeared Love/Canto a Su Amor*, Action Books, 2010.