

Preface

I was putting the finishing touches on *Killing Poetry* as I learned of my stepfather's imminent passing. Pastor Foster T. Mijares III will not be around in the physical form to witness his stepson publish a book. On some level, I feel like a bit of a failure for not having completed the manuscript in time for him to hold and read it. In my family, he was the one who asked most often about my work. "Hey, J," he'd say. "How's teaching? How's the book coming along?" From there, we would talk church, family, politics, and sports, usually in that order. He would always end our conversations by saying, "I know you're busy, and I didn't want to keep you long. I just wanted to check in on you to let you know I'm thinking about you." I always tried to assure him that, although I am busy, I always welcomed and needed our conversations.

I spent half a year working on what should have taken me less than a month because every period was a painful reminder that my stepfather would not be able to read this book in its final form. That knowledge is incredibly difficult for me because I had made a political commitment to write in ways that would allow my parents, who never went to college, to engage with my work. When I told him of this, he said, "It's all right. God got me. I want you to keep doing what you do. You ain't got to apologize to me. I'm proud of you no matter what." My stepfather was a patient man. At various points in his life, he was a pastor, a volunteer youth football coach, and a truck driver. He was a man strong enough to take care of those who were not his own. I often joked with him about his restraint in dealing with teenage me. When he and my mother

married, I was a fourteen-year-old angry black boy who thought he knew everything, and it was my stepfather's love, patience, and guidance that helped me to search for and understand healthier black masculine possibilities.

When my mother called me to tell me of my stepfather's lymphoma, I was sitting in my apartment in gentrified Oakland, California. The Oakland that MC Hammer had once quipped was "too legit to quit" was now no longer a bastion of blackness, no longer the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense Oakland, but a white hipsters' playground with fancy wineries and obscure boutiques. At the same time, I was reading about how the state had murdered yet another black person. The looming death of my stepfather, the death of a black city, and the state-sanctioned death of black bodies all over the nation left me quite preoccupied with, well, death. In my stepfather's case, death took its time to claim what it was coming for. It was tough to see him grow frail and unable. Yet, in the end, while it was incredibly painful to watch a man who had once been strong enough to move trucks, football teams, and congregations become too weak to get out of bed, it was beautiful to witness how sweet and kind he had become. He frequently called or texted me just to say "I love you." And this is how I began to think about death as less like an ending and more like the possibility of something else, of something more.

In its simplest terms, *Killing Poetry* is a search for something else and something beyond. It is a search for a more livable world in which black folks, in all of our complex contradictions and beautiful brilliances, can just be. This concept is not new in any way. I am not the first person to embark on this black voyage, nor will I be the last, but the quest is the only prayer my heart knows at this moment. And as an artist, an activist, and an academic, to borrow from Dwight Conquergood's (1985, 41), "three *a*'s of performance studies," I've found that it is the only thing I am able to write about. "Like poetry, anthropology is a quest for education in the original sense of the term," writes the anthropologist Tim Ingold (2014, 388); they are both a "practice of *exposure*." From black poets such as Danez Smith (2014), who "left earth in search

of darker planets” in his “Dear White America,” to queer, women, and trans poets who are also in search of other (Other?) planets, the slam and spoken word artists I studied—and studied with—consistently focus on humanness and culture in an attempt to create and find a better, more loving, and more livable world.

When I was a college freshman, I would not have been successful in most creative writing programs. But Da Poetry Lounge in Hollywood, California, took me in and trained me, and now I am a well-recognized contemporary spoken word poet who has taught classes and workshops in creative writing programs all over the world. At the very least, the slam and spoken word poetry communities I write about in *Killing Poetry* have created more open and accepting creative writing spaces and programs. They have fostered environments in which participants search for something beyond. Like many of the poets I interviewed for this book, these communities, though sometimes problematic, saved my life. In exploring this tension between the problematic and the possible, I hope to add to a conversation that will help such communities become more dynamic, more radical, and more beyond.

My creative writing style follows the performance studies tradition and is grounded in political and ethical commitments to produce work for and with the communities I study and study with. But, honestly, I’ve never wanted to be an academic writer. I want to be a creative, generous, and caring writer who tells stories about love. So, above all, *Killing Poetry* is a product of and about love. I sincerely hope that the love I have for poets and our communities shines through and beyond these pages. Given that I refuse to believe in the finality of death, I am also hoping that maybe my stepfather, somewhere in the great beyond, will read this book and say, as he used to say so often from the pulpit, “Lawd, have mercy. That’s good.”

Killing Poetry

