

Horizons Without Borders: Wendy Trevino's *Cruel Fiction* and the Utopian Poetry of the Commune

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Abstract

*Contemporary anti-capitalist and anti-racist politics are beginning to organise around the violence of borders. This comes in reaction to the re-enforcement of nation-states which has taken hold after the economic crisis of 2008. In this piece I analyze the collection of poems, *Cruel Fiction*, by the American poet Wendy Trevino, to show how the new struggles are taking up poetry as one of their weapons and in doing so build on a utopian tradition of revolutionary struggle. I focus my reading around Trevino's invocation of communal forms such as plural 'We's' and her use of historic revolutionary moments, and how this all together shapes the inherent utopian horizon in her poetry. The reading of *Cruel Fiction* will take form in a three-step structure investigating the way Trevino, in her poems, moves from the singular 'I' over the plural 'We', finally ending with the political subject of the 'Commune'. I summarise my reading by pointing to how *Cruel Fiction* is uniquely connected to the real political struggle going on in the present against borders and other capitalist formations, and how she forms this connection between poetry and political struggle in the figure of the commune. The commune comes to be the figure of a place of open reproduction of identity freed from the capitalist reproduction of oppression.*

Keywords: Utopian activism; Poetry; Borders; Nation-state; US-Mexico border; Communism

A border, like race, is a cruel fiction
Maintained by constant policing, violence
Always threatening a new map.¹

Despite the promise of an open world blowing in with the advent of globalisation, the recurrence and strengthening of national borders has made a significant imprint on the world during the last decade. We don't have to look further than to the constant imagery of Donald Trump stressing the importance of a physical wall between the US and Mexico, or to Hungary where the Viktor Orbán-led government violently enforced the border to prevent migrants

¹ Wendy Trevino, *Cruel Fiction* (CA: Commune Editions), 90.

passing through at the height of the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015,² or to the daily attempts of young men to illegally cross the Strait of Gibraltar into Europe by hanging on to trucks and buses,³ risking their lives over and over again. Even in fairly politically liberal countries like Denmark, the government continues to spend money on a police-controlled border.⁴ These are just some examples and all from Western countries; the bordered world is by no means a Western problem only, but rather a global problem that keeps taking human lives.

The new border regimes, a characteristic of the new conservative wave running through the West, have become a focus point for current anti-capitalist and anti-racist struggles. These struggles, which themselves are coming out of and merging with protest movements such as Occupy and Black Lives Matter, have varying demands and directions, but there seems to be a common denominator in the protest against the consequences of these new nationalisms; they protest against the protection of a capitalist system which keeps reproducing through racism, sexism and police violence.

The new protests have not only formed an activist political front, but have also created a strong literary tradition. An example of one of these activist/literary communities can be found in the Bay Area on the American west coast. A significant contribution to this wave of politically engaged poetry is the 2018 collection of poems *Cruel Fiction* by the American poet Wendy Trevino. With this collection she forms a poetic, political resistance to the capitalist foundations of the US's border politics in relation to its Southern border, highlights the stigmatisation of Mexican identity and tries to form a new language for a new, communist horizon. Trevino's resistance is based upon exposing and discussing both the border and race as fiction, as well as drawing attention to the general structures of violent police control in the contemporary US. She takes her inspiration from growing up in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas and experiencing the effects that American border control has on the creation of stigmatised identities. Thus, one of the main themes of *Cruel Fiction* is the recurrent refiguring and rediscovering of a 'We'. This 'We', constructed and meditated over throughout *Cruel Fiction*, is used to find ways of discussing a community outside of the politically designated, ethnic community enforced by state authorities.

In an interview with *The New Inquiry* Trevino gives an account of the core political goal of her poetry:

The radical tradition I turn to goes even further. It is not interested in "negotiating," but seeks to abolish existing relations of power completely. This tradition demands that we fight back to literally change who the "we" is by changing the conditions under which "we" are reproduced.⁵

Trevino aims for her poems to be a radical response to the failed dream of globalisation and capitalism; to the people in power keeping the machine of borders alive, and leaving its corpses on the dump yard of the free movement of capital. Trevino paints a war-like situation for people of color. Marginalised people are always confronted by the fact that the border controls their identity—it controls and threatens their status as political subjects on a daily basis.

This piece shows how *Cruel Fiction* offers a radical poetic rejection of a bordered world influenced by the political struggle against borders. I will further show how Trevino's voice is

² Nick Thorpe and Malise Ruthven, 'On Today's Refugee Road', *The New York Review of Books*, 24 November 2016, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/11/24/on-todays-refugee-road/>.

³ Reece Jones, *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move*, (New York: Verso, 2017), 1–2.

⁴ 'Denmark Wants New Extension of Border Control', *The Local*, 9 March 2018, <https://www.thelocal.dk/20180309/denmark-wants-new-extension-of-border-control>.

⁵ Wendy Trevino and Chris Chen, 'Mexican Is Not a Race', *The New Inquiry*, 6 April 2017, <https://thenewinquiry.com/mexican-is-not-a-race>.

the result of a poetic voice formed by an inherent utopian position unique to contemporary revolutionary struggle for new communist horizons—a voice formed by an idea of the *commune*. The struggle for the commune doesn't necessarily see this horizon as a goal, but in the way the political thinker Jodi Dean phrases it: 'a horizon which "shapes our setting"'.⁶

Cruel Fiction is written in the light of Trevino's experience of a society formed by racial, sexual and economic injustice, but most importantly it wants to offer ways out: ways of thinking against this society and re-conquering a sense of community—a 'We'—and, in this way, opening up the horizon for thinking social change not through negotiation but radical transformation. This is a utopian demand.

The questions that instruct this piece, then, are: how does Trevino in *Cruel Fiction* offer a utopian activist critique of borders? What role does the construction of a 'We' play in creating a revolutionary poetry as a response to the current border regime?

In this analysis I will draw on a combination of utopian thinking and political and literary theory. I will structure my analysis in two main parts: one concerning the political and historical background of the US border and the current activist protest against it. The second part will be an analysis of *Cruel Fiction*, taking into consideration the questions stated above.

New Borders, New Violence, New Protests

Contemporary American politics are very complex, and it is not my errand to give a full account of these. I choose to focus on the development of border politics and the radicalisation of border control because these areas seem to be very telling of a broader development of handing over rights to the police force, and in the end granting the police power to control human lives with greater force.

With this following short contextualisation, I will try to map out the social, political and activist context Trevino writes in relation to. I take time to map out this context, because I think an understanding of these matters is needed to show how Trevino's poetry can be a place of resistance. In doing so, I follow the literary theorist and poet Juliana Spahr when she writes: 'My conviction is that in order to understand the relationship between literature and politics, one has to attend to specific examples and the nuances of history that shape these specific examples'.⁷ Therefore, I'll try to be as specific as possible in order to better understand how Trevino uses the relationship between politics and literature.

New Borders

The geographer Reece Jones describes in his book *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move* that forty thousand people died crossing a border between 2005 and 2014.⁸ These deaths are happening just because of movement—maybe often (in the eyes of state laws), illegal movement. These deaths, as Jones writes, result from nation state leaders wanting to control the flow of resources in a world where control is constantly being contested by human movement.⁹

In addition, the political theorist Wendy Brown specifies that the structure of contemporary bordering is not only motivated by a need to shield the state from a political enemy or protect it during a war, but by a fear of losing control of the—waning—world order; the Westphalian world. 'Rather', Brown writes, 'than iterations of nation-state sovereignty, the

⁶ Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (New York: Verso, 2012), 2–3.

⁷ Juliana Spahr, *Du Bois's Telegram: Literary Resistance and State Containment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 5.

⁸ Jones, *Violent Borders*, 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

new nation-state walls are part of an ad hoc global landscape of flows and barriers both inside nation-states and in the surrounding post-national constellations, flows and barriers that divide richer from poorer parts of the globe'.¹⁰

Both Jones' and Brown's descriptions of the new bordering highlights how the constant need for renegotiating, reforming and renewing borders today is due to the uncertainty and frailness of borders and, indeed of the idea of a border in itself. Brown and Jones argue that the idea of a border is in its core a political, constructed fiction. Jones, in the context of a historical overview, points to the fact that 'the state' is a phenomenon only emerging during the last five thousand years out of a need for control.¹¹ Brown shows the fictitiousness of the border, and elaborates that this fiction is potent, having lasted in its modern form in Europe since the Westphalian peace of 1648.¹² The constant restructuring and reordering of border control is a key way of understanding modern state control and violence. States are trying to uphold their sovereign status in a changing world, as Brown puts it. Another, similar way of looking at this constant threatening of a new map is through the lens of constant war as elaborated in the work of political philosophers Maurizio Lazzarato and Éric Alliez. In their analysis of the contemporary political conjuncture in *Wars and Capital*, they write:

On the side of power, neoliberalism promotes an authoritarian and policed post-democracy managed by market technicians to stoke the flames of its predatory economic policies, while the new right (or "hard right") declares war on foreigners, immigrants, Muslims, and the underclasses in the name of the "de-demonized" extreme right. [. . .] The era of limitless deterritorialization under Thatcher and Reagan is now followed by the racist, nationalist, sexist, and xenophobic reterritorialization of Trump, who has already become the leader of the new fascisms. The American Dream has been transformed into the nightmare of an insomniac planet.¹³

Lazzarato and Alliez argue that war should be seen as one of the key players in the development of capitalism through history, and that in contemporary society the war has moved to the field of race, gender and ethnicity in order to control populations and therefore capital. Whether you take the point of view of Jones, Brown or Lazzarato and Alliez, the structuring concepts of contemporary society seem to be race, borders and violence. All these concepts are products and tools used by the nation state to control resources, including human lives, and in the end to accumulate and control capital.

The new borders are only 'new' because the power of borders is constantly in need of reinforcement. The border is formed around a core political constructed fiction that leaders of any nation state need to re-tell over and over again. The border seems to be a tale of control through economic resources sold as a promise to protect citizens against a dangerous intruder.

This leads me further towards the focus of this piece: *Cruel Fiction* and its dealing with the US's southern border. Trump has made himself the visual narrator of US border politics by not shying away from wanting to stigmatise and verbalise who these intruders are. As I will show, much of US border politics has remained unchanged over the last 25 years, but Trump's willingness to take these, often inhumane, measures, as a badge of honor, is different from former presidents. Trevino writes with the US's Southern border as her backdrop, and therefore, as stated earlier, I want to describe some of the characteristics of the new border regime.

¹⁰ Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), 24.

¹¹ Jones, *Violent Borders*, 5.

¹² Brown, *Walled States*, 22.

¹³ Éric Alliez and Maurizio Lazzarato, *Wars and Capital*, trans. Ames Hodges, (South Pasadena: semiotext(e), 2016), 12.

New Violence

The epitome and public face of the new border regime is the border patrol unit Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). ICE's current structure was constructed after 9/11 by the Bush-led government as a result of counter-terrorism politics. The former customs and immigration units led by the Justice Department and Treasury Department were rearranged under the Department of Homeland Security, effectively granting border and customs agents legal rights to act with a new authority. The new authority was met with new goals for the agencies: a 100% removal of removable aliens.¹⁴ The detainment of young kids in camps is the well-known consequence of the powers of ICE, but just one of them.¹⁵ Another example is the ICE agents' recurring destruction of water posts set up by activists in the vast desert areas that migrants and refugees have to cross to enter the US—thereby directly endangering migrants coming to the border.¹⁶ Yet another example is the agency's authority to question suspects about their citizenship, hence 'turning all of society into a check point'.¹⁷ All this has led to an increase in migration deaths at the US-Mexico border in 2017 (though some of the deaths were due to harsh weather conditions).¹⁸ The ICE-led border patrolling is the result of many years of US border policies. However, border politics has been more visible under Trump. ICE is just the face of the structural violence and stigmatisation that have been at the core of US politics since the early 90's, when the first border enforcements were made in order to push migrants to use dangerous crossings through water streams or long desert walks.¹⁹

Border control's violence is complex and played out on many levels—it acts both directly and indirectly, as Jones puts it.²⁰ For example, it works by leading migrants through dangerous trails, putting them in no-man's land where they get reduced to their 'bare life',²¹ as the anthropologist Jason De León attests in his field studies of missing people in the Sonora Desert:

Roxanne Doty has pointed out that the US-Mexico border forms an exemplary space of exception where those seeking to enter the country without permission are often reduced to *bare life*—individuals whose deaths are of little consequence—by border policies that do not recognize the rights of unauthorized migrants. At the same time, these policies expose noncitizens to a state-crafted geopolitical terrain designed to deter their movement through suffering and death. The perception that the lives of border crossers are insignificant is reflected in both their treatment by federal immigration enforcement agencies and in the pervasive anti-immigrant discourse [. . .] Contributing to this dehumanization is the fact that

¹⁴ Katie McDonough, 'A Short, Brutal History of ICE', *Splinter*, 2 February 2018, <https://splinternews.com/a-short-brutal-history-of-ice-1822641556>.

¹⁵ Sean McElwee, 'It's Time to Abolish ICE', *The Nation*, 9 March 2018, <https://www.thenation.com/article/its-time-to-abolish-ice>.

¹⁶ Denise Holley, 'Community Members Confront Border Patrol on Abuses', *No More Deaths • No Más Muertes* (blog), 16 February 2018, <http://forms.nomoredeaths.org/community-members-confront-border-patrol-on-abuses>.

¹⁷ Greg Afinogenev, 'Ice Age', *n+1*, 22 February 2018, <https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/ice-age/>.

¹⁸ Agence France-Presse, 'US-Mexico Border Migrant Deaths Rose in 2017 Even as Crossings Fell, UN Says', *The Guardian*, 6 February 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/feb/06/us-mexico-border-migrant-deaths-rose-2017>.

¹⁹ Jason De León, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 30-2.

²⁰ Jones, *Violent Borders*, 8-11.

²¹ De León takes the term 'bare life' from Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben who has coined it and made it popular throughout his works on the modern state power's management of life, collected under the title the *Homo Sacer*-project (See especially *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* [1995]).

the Sonoran Desert is remote, sparsely populated, and largely out of the American public's view.²²

De León tries, in this quote, to theorise why people simply go missing in the Sonora Desert and only become important to society as skeletons. He speculates that the US Government has the legal right not to aid humans if they are not citizens. The consequences of not being a US citizen and therefore a so called 'alien' become very real when authorities are allowed to look the other way, both legally and by public opinion. De León builds his analysis of the Sonoran Desert as a space of exception through Giorgio Agamben's work on the state of exception as the key to understanding the modern state structure. Agamben's analysis is built from a reading of the concentration camp as the state of exception *par excellence*, where humans have their rights removed and are reduced to *bare life*, and where it is therefore possible to kill them without ramifications.²³ Reducing humans to their *bare life* puts the decision of life or death in the hand of power and therefore the handling of *bare life* becomes the 'The fundamental biopolitical structure of modernity'.²⁴

Using Agamben's conceptual framework, De León wants to show how the current border politics pushes migrants into areas where life and death are in the hands of nature, and any death is just a result of reckless behavior from the migrant. This form of violence seems unfathomable and, in some ways, it is. To get an understanding of this violence it is necessary to map out perceived need for border control.

Brown seeks to map out some of the characteristics of modern state violence. I find it compelling to include her argument in relation to some of the broader structures behind the current closing of state borders. Brown writes:

I argue that key characteristics of sovereignty are migrating from the nation-state to the unrelieved domination of capital and God-sanctioned political violence. Neither capital nor God-sanctioned violence bows to another power; both are indifferent to and/or tacticalize domestic as well as international law; both spurn or supervene juridical norms; both recuperate the promise of sovereignty: *E pluribus unum* [Out of many, one].²⁵

Brown argues that the closing of borders and the following increase in violent border laws is caused by a larger system than just the nation-state. She uses the phrase 'God-sanctioned political violence' to describe the political shift in the conception of nation-state power. With this phrase, she argues that it is a vital characteristic of modern state power to legitimise itself as something that just *is*,²⁶ like the theological explanation of God's existence. In line with Lazzarato and Alliez, Brown sees a connection between the domination of capital flow and the current state of border violence: international and national laws are ignored in the state's search to take control over capital with violence. The promise of a globalised world of capital also challenges the nation-state; forcing the state to close around itself—to bring back an idea of national unity, to take back control.

If one applies this to the developments in US border politics since the introduction of Prevention Through Deterrence (PTD), one finds that the main shift in strategy, following De León, was to make power visible at the border instead of apprehending suspected illegal immigrants after they crossed the border.²⁷ The change, enforced by Border Patrol agent Silvestre Reyes, happened because local citizens of the Rio Grande area filed lawsuits against

²² De León, *Land of Open Graves*, 28.

²³ Giorgio Agamben, *The Omnibus Homo Sacer* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 140–43.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 116.

²⁵ Brown, *Walled States*, 23.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁷ De León, *Land of Open Graves*, 30.

the border control for unfair racial profiling.²⁸ The lawsuits presented an opportunity to rework the border control strategies, enforcing the safe border passages with a strong presence of patrol units in order to force migrants to take more dangerous routes. This was made a national policy in 1994 after border agencies discovered the benefits of the strategy: keeping migrants out of city centers (business areas), offering a way to work around using direct force and making nature—and the migrants themselves—responsible for possible casualties. Finally, this makes the eventual direct force invisible to the general public by putting up detention centers in the remote locations where the migrants are being led to.²⁹ As De León then points out, after 1994 it seems that migrant fatalities were actually made an integral part of US border politics and not just an unfortunate consequence, as it was often put publicly by border agencies—legal documents suggest that one key metric in measuring the success of border security is migrant deaths.³⁰ The development of US border politics in the early '90s laid the foundation for the current functioning of ICE. De León writes:

Little did [Silvestre Reyes] know that this approach would soon evolve into a large-scale policy that would strategically use the natural environment and subsequently become the foundation for border security in a post-9/11 world.³¹

Under Trump, ICE has been granted further rights in removing 'alien bodies', but this is all based on the 2001 restructuring that made ICE a part of Homeland Security. What is now visible is that agents no longer fear being sued for unfair racial profiling under Trump. Now the system has been made complete: detainees are taken to remote areas (be it Texas or Guantanamo Bay); ICE agents will ask people to prove their citizenship; and the natural world still keeps taking lives on behalf of border laws. The deterrence is complete, creating stigmatised and abused individuals in the name of protecting the economic wellbeing of the US.

New Protests

ICE is the face of violence. Trevino is writing in part from the experience of her childhood in the areas surrounding the Rio Grande Valley, with its predominantly Mexican-American population. Trevino writes her response to the violence of border patrols and the compliance of, in her mind, elitist ethnic groups who stigmatised working class Mexican families. She then moved on and became an active part of the Occupy Oakland Movement where those engaged in direct activist struggle against racist and capitalist politics came together on the American West Coast. She tries, as I will show, to find a language to resist the force of deterrence imposed by the identity politics of border power. The new border regime—and the larger political and economic suppression of racialised and marginalised people it is indebted to—has been made the new target of political activists and scholars. The current protests against 'the border' and global migration politics finds its most recent roots in the global protests that occurred in 2011 in Tunisia, Egypt, the US, France and Spain among others. These are protest movements which, despite their variance, sprung from a distrust in the crisis-ridden old order, whether it was their country's economic structure or old religious dictatorships. They sought to find a new language for protest and social change.³² Today, activists are getting together to aid migrants and protest the constant output of new border politics. These protests have morphed into the American Black Lives Matter movement and anti-police, state and austerity protests taking place with

²⁸ Ibid., 30.

²⁹ Ibid., 30-33.

³⁰ Ibid., 34.

³¹ Ibid., 31.

³² Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, *Crisis to Insurrection: Notes on the Ongoing Collapse* (Minor Compositions, 2015), 76-8, <http://www.minorcompositions.info/?p=678>.

the *gilets jaunes* in France. But the search for a new revolutionary language, especially in forming a communist language, continues.

Contesting Cruel Fictions: Finding New Communal Grounds

One way this search for a new language is seen is in the emergence of political and activist poetry, dedicated to discussing, demonstrating, and protesting against the consequences of the bordered world, and most importantly constructing revolutionary narratives by creating poetry rich with references to current and historic radical struggles, political theory and the work of communist and anarchist writers and thinkers. In a review of *Cruel Fiction*, Steven Zultanski fittingly writes:

A recurring concern of leftist contemporary poetry is how to express the affective and historical experience of collective formations. How to capture those flashes of togetherness with strangers which ground political struggle: the crowdedness of a march, the tediousness of a meeting, the frenzy of being dispersed by the police, the solidarity of singing along to a pop song.³³

Zultanski connects *Cruel Fiction* and its political nature to a larger current of contemporary leftist poetry characterised by using and working with language in order to maintain a sense of community in a political environment putting pressure on anti-nation-state protesters, where one of the latest examples is the Ferguson riots where police were heavily militarised. These poets, Trevino among them, are, to return to Dean's conception of a horizon, trying to capture feelings of community to change the social fabric of contemporary society, but with the reservation, as Zultanski also mentions, that *poetry is not enough*. Utopian dreaming must be coupled with political organising to make a difference. The figure for this organising could be named the *commune*. I will return to this figure at the end of this piece, for now just letting it be present as a shadow following the poems of *Cruel Fiction*.

So, I move on to the poems. Trevino's poems are dedicated to abolishing the cruel fictions of contemporary society: borders, race and capitalism. Just writing about it doesn't seem to be enough—the poetry must incite or inspire direct action, making way for the *commune*. But how can poetry be used as a tool to destabilise this violent reality? In order to get a clearer idea of how Trevino uses her poetry in an activist sense, I want to look more closely at the different conceptions of communal ideas throughout *Cruel Fiction* and how she uses personal and plural pronouns to create relational forms and narratives throughout the poems.

Detained Subject: The potentiality of 'I'

What is a community? An answer for that broad question can be found in Trevino's long poem 'From Santa Rita 128-131'. The poem begins with a disclaimer, stating:

[A LIST OF THINGS REMEMBERED AS I REMEMBERED THEM & IN NO WAY TO BE TAKEN AS A COMPLETE ACCOUNT OF WHAT HAPPENED THERE THEN OR WHAT IS HAPPENING THERE NOW].³⁴

In 'From Santa Rita 128-131' Trevino describes the 54 hours she was detained in the Santa Rita Jail in Oakland for participating in the Occupy Oakland activities of 2011. Even though she is not detained as an illegal immigrant, the poem seeks to give and communicate the

³³ Steven Zultanski, 'Wendy Trevino's New Collection of Poems Insists That Culture – and Perhaps Especially Poetry – Is Not Enough', *Frieze*, 20 September 2018, <https://frieze.com/article/wendy-trevinos-new-collection-poems-insists-culture-and-perhaps-especially-poetry-not-enough>.

³⁴ Trevino, *Cruel Fiction*, 13.

subjective feelings and sounds of being detained without knowing the end to it—and maybe even why you’re detained in the first place. With the disclaimer, Trevino underlines that this is *her* experience and she is not speaking on behalf of others; a point that underlines the continuous nature of detainment. It is not a closed event that can be reported in its fullness, it is ongoing and subjective, just like violence in general. The insistence of making it a subjective narrative, however, doesn’t cancel out any feeling of solidarity, quite the opposite. The poem is formed as single lines stating an experience, an emotion, a smell, an encounter with police or co-inmate. With Trevino’s constant invocation of an ‘I’ framing the narrator in relation to their surroundings, the poem moves onto very detailed descriptions of these surroundings:

I was detained approximately 54 hours, 47 of which I spent in jail.

I spent 47 hours under bright fluorescent lights.

I spent no more than 15 hours in a tank near a door with a small rectangle of glass through which 21 women & then 27 women could see barbed wire & light then dark outside.

I was fed 6 times – 5 “sack lunches” which included 2 slices of stale bread, 2 slices of slimy bologna, 2 crème cookies soaked in bologna juice, 1 “packet of salad dressing” (mayo), 1 packet of mustard, 1 packet of a “calcium mix” & 1 orange; & 1 “hot meal,” which included maybe turkey & definitely beans, a side of cooked carrots, some sauce, a salad, a cube of cornbread & a cube of cake.³⁵

Or in another part of the poem where the ‘I’ starts to build relations to fellow inmates and to recount its encounters with law enforcement:

I heard 2 women were put in solitary confinement.

I heard 1 woman was put in solitary confinement for scratching a word into the wall of a tank.

I saw “Occupy” scratched into the wall of a tank.

I heard 1 woman was placed in solitary confinement for banging on the door of a tank to get a pig’s attention.

I saw at least 2 women kick the door of a tank at least 5 times in row.³⁶

These precise, downplayed listings continue throughout the poem. By using this statement-form to show the experience of being detained instead of a hyperbole-induced recounting of the experience, Trevino steers away from blurring the message: The ‘I’, the subject, is important, but only insofar as it is the starting point for organising a community. The movement from ‘I’ to solidarity is also expressed in the poem, when reaching the end:

“Why am I being detained?” was chanted at least 10 times.

“Phone call!” was chanted at least 20 times.

“From Oakland to Greece, no pads no peace!” was chanted at least 10 times.³⁷

The poem, then, moves from the ‘I’’s experience of the light and food to its coming together with the other people by chanting phrases. What Trevino outlines in the poem is that the ‘I’ creates relations to other subjects. Not by creating a similar identity, other than being imprisoned maybe, but simply by connecting subjects through experience. What sort of community is this, then? I would argue that it is a community of singularities, as Agamben puts it in *The Coming Community*. This community is not defined by a certain identity—communist,

³⁵ Ibid., 13.

³⁶ Ibid., 15.

³⁷ Ibid., 18.

footballer, etc.—it is their lack of identity that makes them a communal form.³⁸ Agamben calls this community a community of ‘Whatever Singularity’, meaning a community of singularities, subjects, with no common denominator. For Agamben, this form of community poses the greatest threat to state power because state control functions through classifying individuals. Agamben takes his inspiration from the massacre of Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 1989, where the Chinese government killed young protesters that had been protesting for the release of their student leaders: a protest which, later on, mutated into a larger protest movement. The important thing for Agamben is the fact that the movement didn’t have concrete demands and they became a threat to the government in their uncontrollable identity. According to Agamben, this is what led to the violent response to the protest, and it is also the weak point in the state machinery from which real change can come:

Whatever singularity, which wants to appropriate belonging itself, its own being-in-language, and thus rejects all identity and every condition of belonging, is the principal enemy of the State. Wherever these singularities peacefully demonstrate their being in common there will be a Tiananmen, and, sooner or later, the tanks will appear.³⁹

By constantly creating new communities without traceable identities, the state power is forced to use violence in order to label the protest and contain it.

The demands being put forth in Trevino’s poems have very different contents—from a phone call, to a call for solidarity to the protests in Greece—but they force the guards to acknowledge the existence of the people being held in jail. The demands, their joint language, become a potential for community. The political context shines through the first poems, eager to reach out over the pages; the ‘I’ doesn’t merely create relations to the other subjects in the prison, but takes the reader in as well, making us as a part of the chanting and the forming of solidarity.

With this beginning to *Cruel Fiction* Trevino takes the readers into the machinery of connecting to other people in different situations—the basis for a new community. It is with this first base note that the utopian horizon in *Cruel Fiction* appears.

Utopia finds its form, since Thomas More’s inception of the word and the novel, in the reflection of politics in fiction and, on the other side, as a fictional and imaginative element in politics. Utopian literature is political because it is either world building or world denying (or both), and utopian politics are not complete without a speculative or imaginary horizon. Either way, utopia offers a resistance to the given world order, and in our world order, the border regime—constituted of a potent fiction—is an intrinsic part. What characterises the core of utopia? For one answer I’ll look to the French utopian scholar Miguel Abensour, who writes:

Utopia poses a question. Not simply in the sense of a problem to be resolved and at the same time eliminated, the way many tried to do with “the Jewish question”, but in the sense that, within the economy of the human condition, utopia, the aim of social alterity – of all social otherness – is ceaselessly being reborn, coming back to life despite all the blows rained down upon it, as if human resistance had taken up its residence within it.⁴⁰

Utopia perseveres and shows its face in the moment of danger; lives in the voices that want to create a community around being in resistance to a power wanting to violently control people for their ethnicity, their religion, their social status. Further, following sociologist Ruth Levitas,

³⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 86.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁴⁰ Miguel Abensour and Raymond N. MacKenzie, *Utopia from Thomas More to Walter Benjamin* (Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2017), 10.

utopia is a method taking form around an ‘imaginary reconstitution of society’ dedicated to describing and conceptualising a desire for freedom in politics and culture.⁴¹

Utopia, in my use of the word, is a placeholder for all wishes of radical otherness and not a goal to be reached. But the lack of an goal in this sense doesn’t merely mean working towards a radical openness, without an idea of a new society—it rather means that this new society wouldn’t and shouldn’t be the end of all times, or God’s kingdom on earth. Trevino senses the danger of the current society and seems to respond with two utopian demands: breaking the capitalist structuring of human lives and forming a new concept of communion, a new ‘We’, for the future. The first poem of *Cruel Fiction*, however, doesn’t begin with a ‘We’—it begins with an ‘I’ listening, sensing, and, in the end, constructing an opportunity in the room of detainment. Herein lies the lesson of utopia Abensour speaks about: utopia finds significance in crisis and becomes the vocabulary of the revolutionaries and the suppressed people.

With this in mind, it becomes clear how utopia exists within the communication between generations of oppressed people. In ‘Santa Rita 128-131’, the inmates pass on messages, whether the name of Occupy is scratched on tanks, or the ‘I’ registers blood:

I saw at least 5 drops of fresh blood on the floor in the hall.

I saw at least 7 spots of dried blood on the wall of a tank.⁴²

The poetic ‘I’ is surrounded by messages and voices and proceeds to gather these impressions with the intention to come together and protest their uncertain detainment. These lines also speak to the violent fact of detainment—whether due to protesting or migration. The blood takes the place of words and, in doing so, communicates the violence the US law enforcement uses and passes the message of violence on to the next generation within the microcosm of prison. This tradition, the history of the suppressed, is a valuable tool in action against state violence, which Walter Benjamin already understood:

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the “state of emergency” in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that accords with this insight. Then we will clearly see that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against fascism.⁴³

For Benjamin, a state of emergency where all laws have been abandoned by the state in order to use violence against its own population, presents a revolutionary moment for bringing about a real state of emergency: the moment for the oppressed to make sure the laws of the oppressors don’t return. The state of emergency Trevino writes from presents itself as the militarising of police against protestors, or the militarisation and radicalisation of border politics. For her, the movement to bring about the real state of emergency happens in the prisons and the communities created by dispersion and detainment: the communities created by violence turned into revolutionary opportunities.

The ‘We’ of the commune begins to show itself—but not without birthing pains and detours. Moving along in *Cruel Fiction* a ‘We’ becomes visible.

Enter ‘We’: A Utopian Demand

⁴¹ Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstruction of Society* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), xv.

⁴² Trevino, *Cruel Fiction*, 17.

⁴³ Walter Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History’, in *Selected Writings, 4: 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 392.

What is at stake in the mission to re-conquer a ‘We’? Daring to put the ‘We’ forward is the first step in formulating a collective ambition. An ambition Jodi Dean reflects further over:

Reducing invocations of "we" and "us" to sociological statements requiring a concrete, delineable, empirical referent, it erases the division necessary for politics as if interest and will were only and automatically attributes of a fixed social position. We-skepticism displaces the performative component of the second-person plural as it treats collectivity with suspicion and privileges a fantasy of individual singularity and autonomy. I write "we" hoping to enhance a partisan sense of collectivity. My break with conventions of writing that reinforce individualism by admonishing attempts to think and speak as part of a larger collective subject is deliberate.⁴⁴

Dean sees the value in beginning the movement towards collective action by expressing a will to create communal forms. The ‘We’ becomes important for the people inflicted by the deterrence of current border politics, people fallen victim to violent control with resources. The words by Dean create a fitting background when we move to the next poem in *Cruel Fiction* named ‘A border, like race, is cruel fiction’:

A border, like race, is a cruel fiction
 Maintained by constant policing, violence
 Always threatening a new map. It takes
 Time, lots of people’s time, to organize
 The world this way. & violence. It takes more
 Violence. Violence no one can confuse for
 Anything but violence. So much violence
 Changes relationships, births a people
 They can reason with. These people are not
 Us. They underestimate the violence.
 It’s been a while. We are who we are
 To Them, even when we don’t know who we
 Are to each other & culture is a
 Record of us figuring that out⁴⁵

With the first lines of this sonnet, Trevino captures the interconnectedness between a struggle against racism and against a bordered world—that is, a fiction built on constant policing. Trevino’s voice in the sonnet stays within the same range of matter-of-factness as ‘Santa Rita 128-131’, meaning there is no hyperbolic or excessive affectual voice, merely a description of the voice’s point of view. There’s also no negotiating this point of view, which speaks to the point that there’s no mistaking that the constant reproduction of borders and racism is violent. The last part of the sonnet turns toward how this violence births a people, or a certain understanding of an appointed collective—a collective formed to be controlled. The sonnet oscillates between the general remarks about violence and its concrete reproduction of certain communities. This oscillation offers a way of contesting the fiction of borders: showing the fiction in action, as it were.

With this motion, in a sense, Trevino offers a utopian critique of the hegemonic fictions of borders and race. The motion takes on a utopian form, I would argue, as it seeks to ‘disturb readers’, as Abensour has it.⁴⁶ Abensour sees one of utopia’s characteristics to be a way of taking a critical distance to the given facts of society, even other utopias, and in so doing forcing the readers to a place of radical otherness.

⁴⁴ Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, 12.

⁴⁵ Trevino, *Cruel Fiction*, 90.

⁴⁶ Abensour and MacKenzie, *Utopia*, 14.

But, this initial utopian disturbing of myths and fictions of borders and race stays within the realm of the written word. What Trevino is trying to do is to destroy the structures that reproduce the ‘birthed We’, the people constructed by detainment and stigmatisation. The sonnet expresses a critical attitude towards a literary resistance in itself. Culture, as the poetic voice puts it, is a record of a struggle over who has the right to ascribe a collective identity to a group of people: Mexican, African-American, Korean, whatever it may be. Culture in Trevino’s words is the collective whole of representation and self-representation: it is the place in which homogenous ethnic groups create an identity, but also the place in which these identities can be criticised. Trevino has elaborated on the importance of reconquering, and being aware of, the construction of ‘We’s’ in an interview with *The New Inquiry*:

I think it’s important to understand that racial identity is an imposition first and foremost, a “we” defined not by us—who might have less in common than not—in order to make “us” legible to colonizers, slavers, capitalists, the state—who “we” are racialized in relation to. I think about how the transatlantic slave trade abducted people of different ethnicities, people who spoke different languages, people with different religions and traditions, and imposed on them—those who survived—a single identity.⁴⁷

What Trevino tries to open up with her poetry is the complex ordering of subjectivity that goes on in relation between power authorities such as ICE and the community of those upon whom the ‘We’ is imposed, who also embrace it. She continues to argue that this is not only an external phenomenon, but that the historical reproduction of certain narratives of Mexican identity also upholds discriminating ‘we’s’. Trevino does this through a critique of historic figures in Mexican literature and politics, Gloria Anzaldúa and José Vasconcelos, because they, in her mind, campaigned for a discriminating form of identity building within the Mexican community:

Of course, this isn’t the end of the story. This “we” is also negotiated by us, too. In thinking this way, it’s very hard for me not to feel uncomfortable about Vasconcelos and Anzaldúa’s embrace of a “we” based on a shared multiracial identity as emancipatory for those of Mexican heritage—as if racialization, enculturation and (to be real in the case of Anzaldúa) acculturation are all the same thing. And yeah, the subsequent obfuscation of those negotiations I’m talking about is a huge problem, if our aim is the eradication of racism.⁴⁸

For Trevino, the quest to find a ‘multi-ethnic’ ideal Mexican, exemplified in the work of Anzaldúa and Vasconcelos, ends out pushing indigenous and black people from Mexican communities. This way of thinking racial complacency is running the errand of the state power that keeps reproducing suppressing structures, Trevino concludes.

The sonnet, then, tries to eradicate racism from within as well, as a way of eradicating the US state racism, by showing the complexity of how certain conceptions of a ‘We’ are forced through by ‘Violence’. Mexicans, Brazilians and Iranians all become one under the ‘We’ of the illegal alien; nuances of the Mexican ‘We’ are being eradicated. Homogeneous is necessary for those in power to remain in control. This construction of homogeneity is intensified under the gaze of ICE and is still increasing. The task at hand, it would seem, is to produce, or reproduce counter ‘We’s’.

But what are those ‘counter-we’s’ in Trevino’s poetry? In ‘Santa Rita’, the ‘I’s’ started forming alliances with other inmates through a shared sense of detainment, which relates to Agamben’s *Coming Community*—a community of singular identities finds and reproduces community in resistance to an outside power. In ‘Borders’ the urgency of negotiating a ‘We’

⁴⁷ Trevino and Chen, ‘Mexican Is Not a Race’.

⁴⁸ Trevino and Chen, ‘Mexican Is Not a Race’.

within a community is put forward as a necessary task to destroy the racist violence that works by upholding homogenous group identities.

The ‘We’ that Trevino is posing here seems then to be a fleeting and open one, a ‘We’ that opposes the maps created by the state powers: a ‘We’ in radical opposition to the given order. This is a utopian ‘We’. The idea of utopia is, however, as I’ve hinted, often a vague wish for collectivity and a wish for another future. The utopia I find in *Cruel Fiction* is also formed by a more imaginative utopia, but more importantly it is written from a place where ‘culture is not enough’, and a place that wants more—it wants real change. Trevino’s utopianism can be described in the same way utopian theorist David M. Bell poses his wish for a current utopianism. Bell sees the only opportunity for utopianism that deals with its inherent future oriented wish-thinking. He finds common ground with the Italian autonomist Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi in a reading of his book *After the Future*, and sees the need for a collective politics deeply occupied with transfiguring the present. Bell continues:

Here, [Berardi] suggests a prefigurative politics that operates within and against rather than beyond (at least initially) – that which exists. It is precisely this form of politics that is brought to bear on the world through riots, demands, squats, proclamations, occupations, demonstrations, autonomist unionism and numerous modes of solidarity that frequently pass unnoticed. It demands that Black Lives Matter. It announces its presence in the present without apology. It creates – however temporarily – social relations that prefigure the world it wants to realize, as best it can, given current conditions.⁴⁹

Bell, in this quote, builds an understanding of what the relationship between utopia and politics is: a demand to work against the given order, a demand to not escape the real struggle at hand. Also, it is a demand that takes many forms in reality given the circumstances the people struggling for freedom work under—from Black Lives Matter to Unionist work. In Trevino’s writing her demand—inspired by struggles against violent law enforcement in the Occupy Movement and in her first-hand experience with the racist border politics—is to eradicate racism and capitalism and continue to build communities. Trevino also reflects on what this ‘We’ is in the poem ‘The We of a Position’, where she writes:

Because what I am trying to say is that we should really think about who our friends are. What I am trying to describe is what is described in Tiqqun’s *Call* as “the we of a position.” A “we” that includes people we do & don’t like. A “we” that includes people we haven’t met yet & people we will never meet. A “we” that sees the hierarchy of the fields & calls bullshit without being dismissive of its bullshit effects. A “we” that is aware of other fields.⁵⁰

In this poem Trevino builds an understanding of a ‘We’ through her reading of political theory and through her discussions of online platforms. She builds a collective of thoughts, ideas and people. Here, Trevino argues for an open ‘We’, a ‘We’ where people can disagree, and maybe never meet. It is a ‘We’ not bound by border or geographical proximity, or even an affective proximity, as she continues: ‘[. . .] I think it’s a mistake to think people have to be on intimate terms with each other prior to collectivizing / in order to collectivize’.⁵¹

With this radical open ‘We’ the only thing that matters is its demand to exist and, in its existence, to continually break down the powers of state, borders and racism. It is a ‘we’ continually changing, seeking to find a space to build new collectivities. The demand posed by Trevino’s ‘We’ is also a utopian demand, as I hope I’ve been able to show. But maybe the utopian demand of the ‘We’ can be described once more by Bell:

⁴⁹ David M. Bell, *Rethinking Utopia: Place, Power, Affect* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 61-2.

⁵⁰ Trevino, *Cruel Fiction*, 36.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

[. . .] my argument is that the task for utopians is to look at a map of the world and identify where the utopias are; think through what makes them utopian; and think through how to intensify them so that they expand both qualitatively and quantitatively. Utopianism, then, simultaneously works within, against and beyond this (and any) present. [. . .] we should immanently (re)produce somewhere - the no-good place - within, against and beyond our present. Heaven might be a place where nothing ever happens, but heaven is not a place on earth. Utopia can be.⁵²

For Bell, the utopian task is to (re)produce places of hope and freedom against structures of oppression. It should not be to think of an imaginative future, but to let the possibility of another future be the inherent guiding principle in any political organisation seeking to change the present.

Trevino's 'We' also has the purpose of working against the present by being the name for—the first step towards—creating a real political community: it is the name for the *commune*.

From the Commune

The *commune* seems to be the place where Trevino's poetry finds a fixed point against the present racial power struggles. The commune is the political form of the 'We', one could say. This becomes evident in the final sonnet of *Cruel Fiction*, 'The Magón Brothers Founded', which goes:

The Magón brothers founded the Eden-
Dale commune with family & friends in Los
Angeles, surrounded by silent film
Studios in Silver Lake. There has to
Be room for that. That & everything else
That was un-American at that time
In the broadest, anti-capitalist
Sense. A friend once said race is what is done
To us; ethnicity is what we do
To ourselves. Growing up in the Valley
That didn't feel true, but that doesn't mean
It isn't. Even in 1915
Trains travelling through Brownsville segregated
Black people from white. Mexican or not.⁵³

In this sonnet Trevino invokes the purpose of the commune as a place to counter the reproduction of capital and therefore also the reproduction of racial structures. She references the Edendale Commune as an example—founded by the anarcho-syndicalist Ricardo Flores Magón with his wife and brothers in 1914, in which they build a small independent community—of resistance against the powers of capitalism. She then, by the end of the sonnet, writes the year 1915, which is the founding year of the 'The Plan of San Diego': a radical plan signed by unknown Mexican anarchists to violently end racial and capitalist suppression in Southern Texas and other Southern American states. Trevino expands on her interest in these radical traditions in her interview with *The New Inquiry*:

I see the radical tradition, in which Ricardo Flores Magón and the "Plan of San Diego" play such significant parts, as a much more promising blueprint for struggle than the celebrations of hybridity offered by Vasconcelos and Anzaldúa.⁵⁴

⁵² Bell, *Rethinking Utopia*, 63.

⁵³ Trevino, *Cruel Fiction*, 104.

⁵⁴ Trevino and Chen, 'Mexican Is Not a Race'.

So, what Trevino tries to do in the poem resembles the utopian demand posed by Bell; Trevino locates ideas in the history of communal anti-racial and anti-capitalist struggles—Edendale Commune, ‘The Plan of San Diego’, or more recently her experience from the Occupy Movement—and expands on these areas, in order to expand their influence on struggles moving forward. With these poetic tactics of invoking revolutionary names she keeps them alive, and, I would argue, finds the value of literature in a political struggle; she’s not suggesting that her poem changes anything, but it is a valuable part of keeping names and ideas alive in the ongoing struggle.

Trevino seeks out spaces for a reproduction of identity and politics outside the realm of capitalism and finds inspiration in the past to inspire the current struggle against the violence afflicted on stigmatised people by police and ICE. This space is the commune, a space formed by people with a common demand for change. With the commune as a guiding principle she shows her affiliation with new leftist politics.

The commune as an idea is relevant now more than ever. The communist writer Joshua Clover, one of the editors of *Cruel Fiction*, develops this idea and writes in his analysis of contemporary riots in his book *Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprisings*:

Things fall apart, core and periphery cannot hold. We turn around and round in the night and are consumed by fire. Perhaps the Long Crisis of capital may reverse; it is a dangerous wager on either side. Within the persistence of crisis, however, the reproduction of capital through the circuit of production and circulation—wage and market—appears increasingly not as possibility for, but limit to, proletarian reproduction. A dead and burning circuit. Here riot returns late and appears early, both too much and too little. The commune is nothing but the name for the attempt to overcome this limit, a peculiar catastrophe still to come.⁵⁵

Clover argues here that the political formation offered to the global populations that are being excluded from any form of political agency, and the people being excluded due to their resistance to the given order, is the commune. Trevino sees this as well; the commune becomes the place to reproduce communities with a ‘We’ not constructed on the basis of a homogenous idea. The crisis of the nation-state and global capitalism takes the form of increasing violence against its populations; the only way to counter this is the reinvention of how to form communities around a common struggle to make the utopian demand for another way of life.

Summary

I have tried to trace the political structure in *Cruel Fiction*—from the initial ‘I’ over to the ‘We’, and ending in the commune—to show how Trevino in her poetry collection gives a unique take on how to make politically engaged art. It is in the three-step structure I find the utopian demand inherent to Trevino’s political poetry and her attempt to form a tight bond between politics and poetry in *Cruel Fiction*. The collection of poems is written against, as answer to, a clear enemy which is the nation-state’s current struggle for control over capital that takes the form of violent border control and control of any form of insurgency against the state’s violence. When this is the enemy, *Cruel Fiction* emerges as a very relevant place to discuss the present.

Cruel fictions of the walls, riot gear, gas masks and detainment are everywhere globally, and they seem like potent fictions. But in the midst of gas and walls a ‘We’ emerges and starts the process of forming a community.

⁵⁵ Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprisings* (New York: Verso, 2016), 191–92.

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