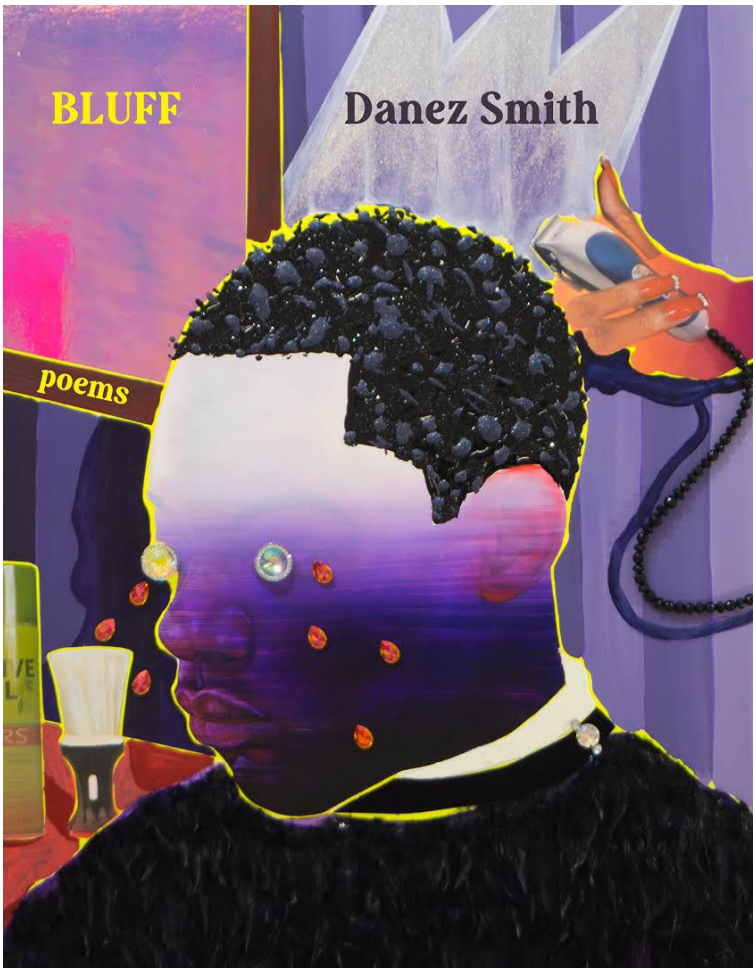

Book Review: Bluff

Danez Smith, Chatto & Winus, 2024, 160 pp, ISBN: 9781784745738, £14.99 (paperback)

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In a 2024 interview with Danez Smith, poetry podcaster David Naimon observes that 'bluff' evokes an elevated spot, an overhanging space. From there, the Black queer poet, slam performer and activist inspects their past work, and the transformations that occurred between the publication of *[insert]Boy* (2014), *Don't Call Us Dead* (2017), and *Homie* (2020) and the production of Smith's last collection of poetry, *Bluff* (2024). The poet's elevated position and overview invert the choking scene of deadly submission forced upon George Floyd by a white police officer on 25 May 2020 in Minneapolis, Smith's present hometown – and with it a history of US antiblack fascism and racist subjection of the Black body in the USA – in a poetic, self-reflecting act of liberation and movement. In this act, voice is resituated in the Black body, which is in turn resituated to the space of the city, of the neighbourhood, of the store, the streets and the parks. The political and poetic priority of *Bluff*'s creative gesture is in the choice of the collection's ideal reader: *Bluff* must speak the same language as community members such as Larcenia Floyd, George Floyd's mother, who stands for all Black mothers/women and their resistance in fascist, misogynist and antiblack USA (Naimon, 2024). *Bluff*'s project of self-exploration, voicing trauma, self and collective liberation, takes place in a temporality which embraces present, past and future, where time amplifies the empowering scope of the dialogues that the poet has with themselves, their communities, and their readers. "Minneapolis, Saint Paul" (pp. 49-56) is one hinging point of *Bluff*'s structure, rooting Smith's poetry – and its discontents – in community, upheaval and abolitionist insurrection against police, the state, whiteness, and coloniality. In this project, which is also one of exposure and undoing of internalized Americanness, the bluff or cliff where the poet stands expropriates the geography of the colonizer, exposing the genealogy of its violent toponymy: "was it dayton's bluff meaning his cock on the table was his name on the hill or was it dayton's bluff meaning a people had to be disappeared off the cliff for his legacy to rise or was it dayton's bluff meaning the land was never his" ("Dayton's Bluff," p. 33). Crucially, the bluff signals a position of liminality and contradiction, central elements of Smith's poetry in the collection.

Smith's 2024 compositions blow up the "I" into its multiple and often contradictory components, moving from explorations of sexuality, Black masculinity, HIV-positive condition, self-reconstruction and "he-ness" developed in *[insert]Boy*, *Don't Call Us Dead* and *Homie*, to a "they-ness" and commitment to community, which in *Bluff* is philosophically inspired by the Black Art Movement, Rastafarianism and Indigenous epistemologies. Abolishing the normative textual font ("I") rooted in colonial individualistic axiologies implies

the systematic use of a lower-case "i," an action performed right at the beginning of the collection, with the illustrated poem "on knowledge" (pp. 7-15), where the thoughts and words break out of a black square fenced-in by "I-s". This is a way to underscore, study and embrace individual impasses as an aesthetic and existential rather than moral gesture, to situate them in a choral and collective history, which is mapped across the collection. What is the violence that inhabits the poet and that they reclaim, in a revolutionary gesture ("but how long in the apocalypse could you go before have to kill some white dude," p. 93)? How can the poet "kill the state within [themselves]" ("principles," pp. 59-63, p. 62)? How can they imagine community? What does the poet make of the fact that neighbours, a beloved mother or a friend, may become cops and vigilantes in their oppressed communities, to patrol the territory or "Money" from both internal and external threats ("Minneapolis, Saint Paul," pp.49-56; "maybe my mother is a cop" in the digitalized section "METRO_deleted poems")? But also, what is the status of that "i" that had once diminished a girlfriend to engage with "brutal fraternity" ("The Slap," pp. 72-73, p. 73)? How is masculinity inscribed in such gesture? *Bluff*'s is an aesthetic of complexity, materiality and multiplicity, which takes note of contradiction and the questionings it inspires, beyond the identity injunctions of a disciplinary and abstract social morality. To qualify contradiction in gendered terms, the components of Smith's "i" are both male and female, an "indigenous two-spiritedness" (Naimon, 2024), which is shaped by the poet's inscription in a matrilinear genealogy. Key to the collection is the figure of a grandmother who endures the year-long relation with a violent husband/grandfather, a man whose story the poet seeks to grasp, keep at a distance, appropriate and represent ("1955," p. 31; "The Joke," p. 75). The figure of a hated and beloved father is explored in the same way ("i miss that negro," p. 76). The they-ness of the poet takes all its meaning when their everyday actions to relieve familiar trauma imply that the poet trans-genders but also transitions across generations and time: "i washed [grandpa's] back/& got him calm. he wanted his mama. i was/his mother for a bath. i tilted my boy's head back" ("[cancer's reveal was him in the tub]" in the digitalized section).

Embedded in the gesture of making contradictions visible is the possibility of transformation of the poet's self, and of the selves of other characters appearing in the collection, of the community, and of readers. The centrality of such a possibility is contained in the poetic form of the sonnet, whose *volta* Danez Smith uses as a formal device and a metaphor to represent individual and collective change as a form of self-understanding ("volta," p. 28; "volta", in the digitalized section). In their interview with Naimon, the poet underlines that change and transformation through time allow a person to look at their past actions and contradictions in a truthful manner, with transformation being for Smith the most powerful form of testimony – an idea inspired by the poet's religious upbringing in Black Christian communities. Hence, against the mould of hegemonic and fascistic Americanness and capitalist false consciousness, the act of writing poetry – often painful, ambiguous and frustrating ("anti poetica," p. 3 and p. 58 ; "it doesn't feel like a time to write," pp. 18-20; "Minneapolis, Saint Paul," *ibid.,* p. 52) – takes on meaning through gestures of testimony, and through Smith's plea to their communities, that they read and critically respond to the poet's experiments in representing peoples and places (Naimon, 2024; "My Beautiful End of the World," pp. 88-92, p.91). The possibility of poetry is akin to the urgency of naming hurtful experience and writing the self out of it, yet it can only exist away from solitude: where poetic form is a means to "[reorder]/the wound's language," it is the presence of the other, of a friend, which can actually nurture such an act ("ars poetica at the end of the writer's block," in the digitalized section). The polyphonic result of this collective creative ethos is embedded in the numerous intertextual references to poets, artists and theorists that Smith invokes through the collection, either contemporaneous (Phillip B. Williams, Jane Huffman, Jonah Mixon-Webster, Angel Nafis, Jamila Woods, Ross Gay, Tarell Alvin MCraney, Marlin M. Jenkins, Hank Willis Thomas, June Jordan) or authors from the Black queer tradition, among whom Assotto Saint holds a central place.

Bluff's questioning of community, collective and individual identity – and the strictures of the notion of identity itself – is deeply rooted in Saint's queer poetic and intellectual creation during the AIDS/HIV pan-

demic of the 1980s and early 1990s, and his callout of the double oppression of Black queer men, as Blacks in US society and as queers within their own communities and territories. The rough interrogation that *Bluff* makes on the sense of community and of the "we" is particularly influenced by this preoccupation ("i'm not bold, i'm fucking traumatized," pp. 69-71). Smith's dialogue with Saint also reflects the long history of Black queer literary publishing, depublishing (Cran, 2024), and the embattled visibility of Black literary queer voices, which barely survived the pandemic because of the unwillingness or unawareness of copyright holders, often relatives and families, to allow for publication of documents deemed unbecoming, or to save written works for them to be published ("my deepest & most ashamed apologies to Assotto Saint," in the digitalized section "METRO_deleted poems"). Once again, Smith's poetry operates across time to bring back to the surface and to the readers a constellation of Black queer struggles, desires, joy, artistic and poetic creations, which marginalization risks subtracting from intergenerational transmission and fruition – as in "love poem (Vandross)," dedicated to Black soul and R&B singer Luther Vandross, and imagining his queer loves, asking him about them, celebrating them in erotic acts of love (in the digitalized section).

Through this poetic voicing of self, of time, desire, community, and testimony always in the making, territory emerges as a structuring element for *Bluff*'s texts, which Naimon calls "poems of place:" cities and towns where Smith has grown up and lived – primarily Minneapolis-Saint Paul – parks, rivers, landscape and cityscape elements. Movement of words and bodies on the surface of the text bear intertextual inspiration from the scholarship of Black American scholar Christina Sharpe, in particular regarding the inscription of the transatlantic slave trade in Black art production, representation, memory and trauma ("ars America (in the hold)," p. 4): this is how Minneapolis becomes Smith's "murderer, [...] mother ship, moose heart, [...] mercy" ("I-35 W North // Downtown Exits," p. 48).

The pages of the collection are made into maps, a decolonial cartography meant to orient the self out of the colonizer's/state's fascist topography – as in "rondo" (pp. 35-41), where a long thick black line cuts several pages in half, to represent the I-94 interstate, which in 1955 was built across Rondo, a historical centre of Minneapolis' Black community. Words scatter and are entrapped on the two sides of the line, as residents are on the two sides of the interstate, at first divided and dispersed, and at last reunited in long sentences, massively cutting through the violent and authoritarian infrastructure. A similar mobility of words and sentences appears in "sonnet" (pp. 104-117), developed across 14 pages, each occupied by a four-square grid. Each square develops a thematic thread: untrustworthy political leaders, fascistic urban ghettoization, mass techno-surveillance, and the seductions of power. Each one of the four threads is interwoven with the others: mapping the concatenation of words and themes makes one compositional logic emerge, without forbidding alternate combinations to produce meaning, in an act of sabotage against the scheme of oppression that the "sonnet" unveils. The conclusive image of 'water' (p. 116) breaks the grid by way of an enlarged font and diagonal orientation, producing a suggestive and highly political reference to the impossibility of containment in the imagined and pragmatic geography of *Bluff*. In the form of an essay, "My Beautiful End of the World" (pp. 88-92) reflects on the relation of the Black body to the body of the city and to non-urban spaces, through the long history of red-lining and urban segregation, assessing the deprivation of access to green and natural spaces while asking how the body/territory can be cured in times of ecological disaster.

The digitalized section of *Bluff* – accessible via the QR-code that appears on the same page as the poem "METRO" (p. 42) – adds a further dimension to the maps that the collection engages with. It is announced as such by Smith on the second page of the section: "These poems helped me see the book and find my way through it. I hope you enjoy the B-side!" Borrowing from the techniques of recordings and music – an art which is central to Smith's production – this add-on to the collection, whose pages are not numbered, assembles 22 additional compositions – absent from the index – the last of which, "Evaluation," conveys the permanent questioning that has guided Danez in their work:

> Young Danez, who are you writing for? Who is freed by your pessimistic mind? What use are you to the slave? Where are the Black women? Who is alive at the end of your imagination? Why isn't it you? What future do you add your premonition to? What do you refuse to reanimate? Who do you love? Who do your poems hold? Captive? Where is the poem like air & water & food? Who will you feed? Will you feed?

It is the Black boy, the key figure of Smith's liberation poetry across their four collections, that is oriented by these interrogations. The last poem of the collection, "craft" (pp. 137-138), provides a direction: the sonnet – and poetic form – is a "beautiful thing" which allows both verbalization and shielding from violence. Through it, the poet asks to "let [them] map you to oasis," addressing a "you" who embraces the self, the Black mother, the Black boy, and the poet's communities. In this oasis, the "you" can find "where the weapons are" (p. 138). From the clear sight on top the bluff, and against the bluff of "hope and despair" in face of individual and collective founding contradictions (Naimon, 2024), Smith reclaims the weaponization of language (Kapri, 2020) as part of the decolonial project that can orient a "we" in-the-making alongside Black abolitionist and liberation struggle, which *Bluff* advocates against deadly US antiblackness, fascism, and imperialism. The constant homage to Palestine's resistance against colonial erasure is a clear testimony to the global reach that Smith's poetic and critical project reclaims ("poem," p. 64; "Israel memes," in the digitalized section).

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The review was written during the summer of 2025. For this reason, the spiral of bloody repression and courageous resistance that Minneapolis and Saint Paul have been experiencing from December 2025 is not mentioned in these pages.