

**VIOLENCE IN DANEZ SMITH's *DON'T CALL US DEAD* : A KANTIAN  
ETHICAL ANALYSIS**

**THESIS**

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**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LITERATURE  
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES  
UNIVERSITAS ISLAM NEGERI MAULANA MALIK IBRAHIM  
MALANG  
2025**

# **VIOLENCE IN DANEZ SMITH's *DON'T CALL US DEAD* : A KANTIAN ETHICAL ANALYSIS**

## **THESIS**

Presented to

Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of *Sarjana Sastra* (S.S.)

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MALANG  
2025**

#### STATEMENT OF AUTHORSHIP

I state that the thesis entitled *Violence in Danez Smith's Don't Call Us Dead : A Kantian Ethical Analysis* is my original work. I do not include any materials previously written or published by another person, except those cited as references and written in the bibliography. Hereby, if there is any objection or claim, I am the only person who is responsible for that.

Malang, July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2025

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This to certify that Maulida Risqa Kamila's thesis entitled *Violence in Denez Smith's Don't Call Us Dead : A Kantian Ethical Analysis* has been approved for thesis examination at Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, as one of the requirements for the degree *Sarjana Sastra* (S.S).

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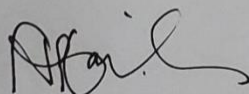


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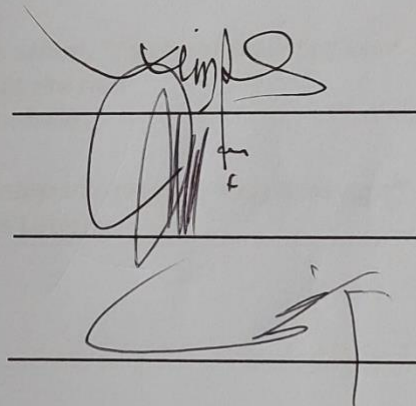
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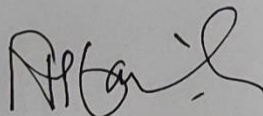
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## **MOTTO**

***“Nothing is luck, everything is God”***

***“Life isn’t about surviving the storm, it’s about learning how  
to dance in the rain”***

***-Taylor Swift-***

***“Forget boys, keep your eyes on the prize”***

***-Blair Waldorf-***

## **DEDICATION**

With gratitude, I dedicate this page to:

1. My parents, Mr. Suyono and Mrs. Farida Zulfa. Thank you for being the best parents in the world. Thank you for all your support, love, and prayers, which have meant so much in my life. If there is an another life, let me be your daughter again.
2. My brother Hasta Rizqi Sabela and my sister in law Chusnul Nur Aziza, who always support my choices in life. Thank you for being siblings who are always there for me.
3. My best friend, Afwana As'adiya. Thank you for accompanying me through all my ups and downs over the past 18 years. Your presence will always be meaningful in my life.
4. Dina Salsabila, Ananda Putri A, Fitria Nur H, Asyifa Bayu P.Z. You guys are proof that college friendships aren't as bad as people say. Thank you for always accompanying and supporting me in any situation.
5. My friends "PPP". Thank you for being such supportive friends and always being there for me since day one. You guys made my college life truly unforgettable. I am very lucky to have met you all.
6. My dear friends and family, whom I love dearly and cannot mention one by one. Thank you for all your support and prayers, which have enabled me to be where I am today.

7. My self, Lita. Thank you for surviving the storms you never thought you'd get through. Thank you for always put yourself first. Thank you for always smiling and full of love. Thank you for always doing everything for yourself. I know life doesn't always go as you want it to, but thank you for always accepting whatever happens with sincerely. Allah doesn't promise that your life will always be easy, but Allah promises twice "*Fa inna ma'al usri yusro innama'al usri yusro*" (QS.Al- Insyirah 94;5-6). After everything you've been through, you deserve all the happiness in this world. Keep spreading that smile and always be kind. I'm nothing but proud. You did it. Everyone loves you.

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All praise and gratitude to Allah SWT, for His mercy and grace so that I can complete this paper well. This journey would not have been possible without the support and prayers of many parties who mean a lot to me.

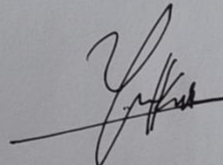
My deepest gratitude and respect goes to my beloved parents, which has been my reason for persevering until now. Thank you for being my parents. Thank you for always being a home filled with prayers, support, and love that have been so meaningful in my life.

Thank you to my thesis advisor, Mrs. Asni Furaida, M.A who has patiently helped me throughout the process of writing this thesis. Also thank you to all lecturers in the English Literature study program who have given and shared valuable knowledge and experiences during the lecture period.

May your kindness be rewarded by Allah SWT. Thank you for all your prayers and support. May this simple work be of benefit to all of us. May this step be the beginning of a greater and more meaningful journey. Thank you for being part of this journey.

Malang, July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2025

The Researcher



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## ABSTRACT

**Kamila, Maulida Risqa.** 2025. *Violence in Danez Smith's Don't Call Us Dead : A Kantian Ethical Analysis*. Thesis, Department of English Literature. Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang.

**Advisor:** Asni Furaida M.A

**Keywords:** *Ethic, violence, kantian ethics*

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This research discusses selected quotes from the poem *Don't Call Us Dead* that describes an unethical act that violates Immanuel Kant's ethical principles. This study aims to analyze the form of ethical violations contained in *Don't Call Us Dead* by Danez Smith using the principles of Kantian ethical theory. The main data in this research is the poetry book *Don't Call Us Deas* by Danez Smith which was released in 2019. The author chose three poems including "Summer Somewhere", "Dear White America" and "It won't Be a Bullet" because thematically these poems contain strong social criticism of structural discrimination, racial violence, and various injustices experienced by the black community in the United States. This research uses a literary criticism method with ethical criticism approach, and uses Immanuel Kant's ethical theory as the basis for analysis. The results show that in the poem *Don't Call us Dead* by Danez Smith, there are many representations of violations and injustice experienced by the black community that violate Kantian ethical principles including the principle of universality, the principle that humans must be used as goals not tools, and the principle of autonomy. This poem describes a lot of violence and injustice experienced by the black community and is considered to violate the principles of Kantian ethics such as senseless killings, racism, human rights violations, and injustice in the social system.

## ABSTRAK

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Penelitian ini membahas tentang kutipan dari puisi *Don't Call Us Dead* yang menggambarkan sebuah tindakan tidak etis yang melanggar prinsip-prinsip etika Immanuel Kant. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bentuk pelanggaran etika yang terdapat dalam puisi *Don't Call Us Dead* karya Danez Smith dengan menggunakan prinsip-prinsip teori etika Kantian. Data utama dalam penelitian ini adalah buku puisi *Don't Call Us Deas* karya Danez Smith yang dirilis pada tahun 2019. Penulis memilih 3 puisi diantaranya *Summer Somewhere*, *Dear White America* dan *It won't Be a Bullet* karena secara tematik puisi-puisi tersebut mengandung kritik sosial yang kuat terhadap diskriminasi struktural, kekerasan rasial, dan berbagai ketidakadilan yang dialami oleh komunitas kulit hitam di Amerika Serikat. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kritik sastra dengan pendekatan kritik etika, dan menggunakan teori etika Immanuel Kant sebagai dasar analisis. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa dalam puisi *Don't Call us Dead* karya Danez Smith, terdapat banyak representasi pelanggaran dan ketidakadilan yang dialami oleh komunitas kulit hitam yang melanggar prinsip-prinsip etika Kantian antara lain prinsip universalitas, prinsip bahwa manusia harus dijadikan tujuan bukan alat, dan prinsip otonomi. Puisi ini banyak menggambarkan kekerasan dan ketidakadilan yang dialami oleh komunitas kulit hitam dan dianggap melanggar prinsip-prinsip etika Kantian seperti pembunuhan yang tidak masuk akal, rasisme, pelanggaran hak asasi manusia, dan ketidakadilan dalam sistem sosial.

## المخلص

" كامبلا، موليدا ريسكا. 2025 التحليل الأخلاقي الكانتي في قصيدة "لا تدعونا أمواتاً" لدانيز سميث. أطروحة، قسم الأدب الإنجليزي. كلية العلوم الإنسانية، جامعة إسلام نيجري مولانا مالك إبراهيم مالانج

المشرف: أسني فريده ماجستير

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأخلاق، العنف، الشعر

يناقش هذا البحث مقتطفاً من قصيدة "لا تدعونا أمواتاً" التي تصف فعلاً لا أخلاقياً ينتهك المبادئ الأخلاقية لإيمانويل كانط. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل شكل الانتهاكات الأخلاقية الواردة في قصيدة "لا تدعونا أمواتاً" لدانيز سميث باستخدام مبادئ النظرية الأخلاقية الكانطية. البيانات الرئيسية في هذا البحث هي الكتاب الشعري "لا تنادينا بالموتى" لدانيز سميث الذي صدر في عام 2019. اختارت المؤلفة 3 قصائد من بينها "صيف في مكان ما"، و"عزيزتي أمريكا البيضاء"، و"لن تكون رصاصة" لأن القصائد تحتوي من الناحية الموضوعية على نقد اجتماعي قوي للتمييز الهيكلي والعنف العنصري ومختلف أشكال الظلم التي يعاني منها مجتمع السود في الولايات المتحدة. يستخدم هذا البحث منهج النقد الأدبي مع مقارنة اجتماعية، ويستخدم نظرية إيمانويل كانط الأخلاقية كأساس للتحليل. تظهر النتائج أن في قصيدة "لا تدعونا أمواتاً" لدانيز سميث، هناك العديد من التمثيلات للانتهاكات والظلم الذي يتعرض له مجتمع السود والتي تنتهك مبادئ الأخلاق الكانطية بما في ذلك مبدأ الكونية، ومبدأ أن الإنسان يجب أن يكون غاية لا وسيلة، ومبدأ الاستقلالية. وتصور هذه القصيدة الكثير من العنف والظلم الذي يعاني منه مجتمع السود، وتعتبر هذه القصيدة انتهاكاً لمبادئ الأخلاق الكانطية مثل القتل بلا معنى، والعنصرية، وانتهاكات حقوق الإنسان، والظلم في النظام الاجتماعي.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In this study, the researcher discusses Danez Smith's *Don't Call Us Dead*, which describes various forms of violence and injustice experienced by the black community in the United States. The researcher uses ethical criticism as an approach in this study based on Immanuel Kant's ethical theory. This study attempts to reveal violations of moral principles in the social reality depicted in these poems, particularly the universality principle, the human as goal principle, and the autonomy principle. Thus, this study does not judge literary works as ethical violations but rather looks at how these works function as moral reflections on social conditions that violate human values.

#### A. Background of the Study

Danez Smith's poem collection *Don't Call Us Dead* explores a variety of interesting themes, particularly identity, violence, racism, death, and hope. This American writer managed to steal a lot of attention with his new book that release in 2017 with the *tittle Don't Call Us Dead*. *Don't Call us Dead* is an emotionally charged work that combines anger, love, and grief with beautiful language. The main themes in this poem describe the injustice and loss of identity experienced by the Black communities who are treated as “*dead*” in terms of discrimination, social neglect, and violation. The poem also focuses on how social identity is always determined by outside

views, here Smith argues that the black community are living individuals and not inanimate objects that deserve to be ignored.

Danez Smith not only speaks about physical violence such as police killings of black people but also violation that dehumanizes human rights. In the concept of ethics, violation can be defined as an act that violates certain rules, laws, norms, or moral principles that should be upheld in society such as justice, freedom, and human dignity. Not only physical violence, discrimination, neglect of rights, and inhumane treatment are also forms of violation (Oxford University Press, 2023). Smith shows how black communities are seen as a threat and not as full subjects. The poem also highlights how white society responds neutrally or silently to racial violence which is considered morally problematic from an ethical perspective.

Some of the poems in this book managed to attract the author's attention to be the object of analysis in this research. First, there is "Dear White America". The reason why the researcher choose this poem is because this poem is written like an open letter that serves as a place to voice anger and disappointment towards white domination and the racist system that exists in the United States. The first line of the poem reads i've left Earth in search of darker planets. This line contains a metaphor that illustrates the poet's despair towards life on earth that fails to protect and appreciate black people (Smith, 2017).

The next poem is called "summer, somewhere". The reason why the researcher choose this poem is because Smith envisions an afterlife for black

people who are victims of police brutality, an afterlife that is peaceful, free from threats, and full of justice for humanity. The poem depicts a longing for a moral world, a place where every human being is treated fairly and with dignity. The imagery written in this poem is not only a form of escapism, but also a sharp criticism of the real world that has failed to fulfill the principles of morality (Smith, 2017).

The last poem chosen for this research is “it won’t be a bullet”. The researcher choose this poem is because this poem conveys how social and health systems are also the reason for the death of queer and black communities, not through bullets, but through stigma, medical discrimination, and ignoring the suffering of certain communities (Smith, 2017). In this context, the poem depicts a structural violence that is invisible, but still kills slowly.

In his poem *Don’t Call Us Dead*, Danez Smith successfully uses poetry as a medium to voice criticism against social structures that attack race and sexuality. This criticism is important to analyze using the Kantian ethical approach because it is able to address aspects of humanity that are ignored by social systems. Additionally, the Kantian ethical approach offers a perspective on the ethical and moral dimensions of the actions depicted in the poem. According to Nussbaum, literature does not merely tell a story but also serves as a form of “deep moral reflection” on the social conditions of humanity (Nussbaum, 2014). Through Immanuel Kant’s ethics where this theory emphasizes that every human being is an end in

itself and should be treated with dignity, not as a tool for other interests. In the Kantian perspective, treatment that devalues life is a violation of the universal moral law. Kant's ethics also emphasizes the importance of the moral obligation to treat fellow human beings fairly, regardless of race, sexual orientation, or social status (Kant, 2002).

In the context of Smith's poem, which raises issues of racism, police violence, and discrimination against black and queer communities, Smith successfully uses poem as a medium to convey his criticism. When an institution fails to protect, Smith emerges with his poem as a form of historical documentation of violence and resistance. Therefore, it is important to examine ethical violations that contravene the universal moral principles outlined by Kant. The injustices experienced by the marginalized communities depicted in this book certainly raise ethical criticism for violating human values and human rights and it can be controversial in terms of ethics. If we talk about ethics, it refers to values, good ways of living, or good rules of life and all the habits that are passed down from person to person or from generation to generation. These habits are manifested as patterns of behavior that are repeated over and over again so that they become a habit (Santoso, 2022).

In the other hand, according to Immanuel Kant, a major figure in literary criticism, who is best known for his contributions to ethical criticism in literature, Ethic is a set of moral principles that are universal and apply to all humans. If people have a good intentions, then something

good will be created. However, if they have bad intentions, bad things will be created even if the end result is a good (Yulanda, 2024). Immanuel Kant's philosophy of ethic is known as Kantian Ethics which describes ethics as something that is absolute by combining and reinforcing every actions (particular) with the universality (general) of human (Al Huda, 2024). Kantian ethics is based on the categorical imperative which is divided into three parts including universal which means that what is right for ourselves must be right for everyone, without exception. The second is The Human as a Goal Principle, it means that we should never take advantage of others for personal gain. In the principles of Kantian ethics, Kant emphasized that every human being must be treated as an End, not as a tool intended for other purposes. And the last is autonomy principle, it means that people should act based on their own moral consciousness, not because of external pressure or self-interest.

The researcher will present previous studies related to the analysis of ethical criticism. After conducting research, there are several research results on discussions related to the topic. Each of these studies has different subjects using different perspectives and theories in discussing the topic. Therefore, here the researcher will present previous research that has a relationship with the topic to be discussed in this study.

For the first previous study with the *tittle* "Because You Know This Story: Continuations of Anti-Lynching Literature in Aracelis Girmay's *The Black Maria* and Danez Smith's *Don't Call Us Dead*" by Rosalena Ruiz

(Ruiz, 2018) and “The Badge of Power: Police Brutality Towards the African-American Community in the United States of the XXI Century, Through the Poetry of Danez Smith in *Don’t Call Us Dead*” by Júlia Martínez Gallego’s (Gallego’s, 2019). Both of these studies have the same object as the researcher’s research, namely the poem *Don’t Call Us Dead* by Danez Smith. The next previous study called “Analysis of Moral Values in Novels *Dua Garis Biru*” by Ayu Lestari (lestari, 2025), “Analysis of Moral Values in Novels *Gerbang Dialog Danur* by Risa Saraswati”(Hermawan, 2023) and “Moral Values Analysis in *Nanti Kita Cerita Tentang Hari Ini* and Its Relevance to Junior High School Literature Learning” (Febriana, 2023). These previous studies use the same approach with the analysis that is ethical criticism.

The next previous study is from Luluk Zumrotin (2019) with the title “Novel *Tarian Dua Wajah* Karya S. Prasetyo Utomo : Kajian Filsafat Immanuel Kant” (Zumrotin, 2019), “Analisis Konsep Relasi Moral dan Kebebasan Individu Immanuel Kant dalam Perspektif Teori Etika Tanggung Jawab Emmanuel Levinas” (Sari, 2024), and “Analisis Etika Deontologis Immanuel Kant dalam Tiga Puisi karya W.S Rendra by Yahya Arsyad Hasibuan” (Hasibuan, 2025). This research discusses ethics and morality which has a correlation with Kantian ethics theory. And the last previous studies called “*Merely going round* : engaging with poetic thought through play in Wallace Steven’s poetry” (Belzil, 2014). The author uses Immanuel Kant’s theory to analyze the way of thinking,

responsibility, and the principle of creative autonomy used in the poetry writing process.

In this research, researcher will fill the gap by exploring how kantian ethic concepts from Immanuel Kant's perspective such as the categorical imperative, human dignity, and moral justice are reflected in the experiences of black communities depicted in Smith's poems. In addition, this research will highlight how the poem *Don't Call Us Dead* not only represents black lives, but also criticizes society's failure to apply universal moral principles to these communities.

In this study, the researcher chose an ethical analysis because the researcher wanted to see how this poems highlights the issues of reveal the forms of ethical violations that are not in accordance with Immanuel Kant's ethical principles.. The researcher uses Immanuel Kant's theory of ethics which emphasizes that every human being should be treated with dignity and as an end, not as a tool for the benefit of others.

## **B. Problem of the Study**

Based on the above background, this research aims to answer the problem raised by the researcher:

1. What violence do Black communities experience in Danez Smith's *Don't Call Us Dead* poem?
2. How does the violence violate Kantian ethical principles?

### **C. Significances of the Study**

This research is important because it can connect literature, ethics, and social issues, and provide a new perspective in understanding the poem *Don't Call Us Dead* as an ethical criticism of the injustice experienced by marginalized groups. This research will also reveal the forms of ethical violations that are not in accordance with Immanuel Kant's ethical principles.

### **D. Scope and Limitation**

This research focuses on analyzing the form of violation of Kantian ethics depicted in the poem *Don't Call Us Dead* by Danez Smith. This analysis aims to show how the form of injustice in this poem violates categorical imperative principles of Kantian ethics including the principle of humans as ends not means, the principle of universality, and the principle of moral autonomy.

This research is still limited to several poems chosen by the researcher including *Summer Somewhere*, *Dear White America*, and *It Wont Be a Bullet* that represent issues of racial injustice that are considered to violate Kantian ethics. This research will only use Immanuel Kant's ethical theory on the concepts of categorical imperative.

## **E. Definition of Key Terms**

To enhance understanding, the researcher provides the following definitions of key terms

1. Ethics : According to Immanuel Kant, Ethics is a set of moral principles that are universal and apply to all humans. Kant describe ethics as something that is absolute by combining and reinforcing every actions (particular) with the universality (general) of human (Kant, 2002).
2. Violence : According to N.J. Smelser, he argues that violence is an act of harming others that is not in line with one's thoughts or ideas (Khoiroh, 2014).
3. Kantian ethics : Kantian ethics is something that is absolute by combining and reinforcing every actions (particular) with the universality (general) of human (Kant, 2002).

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In this chapter, the researcher explains the main theory used, namely Kantian ethics based on the ethics of Immanuel Kant, as well as the critical ethical approach that can form the basis of the relationship between literary works and the social reality behind them. The researcher also explains violence, which is the main topic of this study.

#### **A. Ethical Criticism**

Ethical criticism is a way of reading, understanding, and evaluating literature that focuses on ethics and morality. It suggests that literature shows how ethics and morals have changed over time and that reading literature can help people understand right and wrong better, which makes them more thoughtful in their decisions. The goal of ethical literary criticism is to find the moral value in literature (Zhenzhao, 2023).

According to Nie Zhenzhao, Ethics is a broad term that includes both good and bad behaviors, while morality is a more specific term that only covers good behaviors. So, ethics is a neutral word that can sometimes be used like morality, but only in certain situations. For example, we might say someone acted ethically or morally if they saved a boy from drowning even though it put their own life at risk. However, we can't call someone immoral

if they refuse to save the boy from drowning because morality only refers to good actions (Zhenzhao, 2023)

Ethical criticism doesn't just judge a book as good or bad based on today's morals. Instead, it looks at the time when the book was written and considers the values people had back then. The goal is to find out how ethics played a role in creating the literature and how they influence the characters and events in the story. It helps us understand the actions and situations in the book from an ethical point of view and make fair judgments about them. This way, we can use literature to teach others and help them learn through the insights provided by literary criticism (Zhenzhao, 2023).

The use of ethical criticism with a Kantian concept of ethics allows researchers to view literary works not only from an aesthetic perspective, but also as ethical media that reflect social reality. Literary works that depict various forms of violence, discrimination, or dehumanization can be criticized using three main Kantian principles. Using Kantian ethical criticism, this study demonstrates that the violence experienced by the black community in the poem *Don't Call Us Dead* is not only a social phenomenon, but also a form of ethical violation. Kant's principles of humanity as an end, universality, and autonomy can be used as tools to analyze the extent to which the representation of violence in the poem depicts a violation.

Using the ethical criticism approach, Smith's poems can be understood through various depictions of real events that show violations of

Kant's ethical principles, such as discrimination, violence, and dehumanization that occurred among the black community, as described by Smith. Thus, the social situations and human behaviors described by Smith in his book of poetry contradict Kant's moral principles regarding respect for dignity and humanity.

### **B. Kantian Ethics**

Ethics is a theory of moral philosophy shows that an action can be considered right if the action is in line with the relevant principle of obligation, or an action can be considered right if it is based on good will. Good in the sense that the will is good in itself, and does not depend on others. Thus, ethics emphasizes the importance of the motivation and good will of the actor. The form of good will itself can be seen from the person willing to carry out obligations (Hernoeputri, 2024). In the context of Smith's poetry, Kant's categorical imperative principle becomes highly relevant. Smith demonstrates how society fails to treat individuals as ends in themselves, instead reducing them to objects of oppression based on race and sexual orientation. According to Kant, when a person is treated merely as a means to an end, their dignity as a human being is violated. This underscores the importance of an ethical approach to reading poetry that contains humanistic values, such as those found in Smith's work (Kant, 2002).

Ethical theory emphasizes universal moral obligations and principles. According to Kant, every human being should be treated as an individual with

dignity and not as a tool used to achieve certain goals. Kant thinks that humans should uphold human values both for themselves and others. If people have a good intentions, then something good will be created. However, if they have bad intentions, bad things will be created even if the end result is a good (Yulanda, 2024). Immanuel Kant's philosophy of ethic is known as Kantian Ethics which describes ethics as something that is absolute by combining and reinforcing every actions (particular) with the universality (general) of human (Kant, 2002). Kantian ethics is based on the categorical imperative which is divided into three parts including :

### **1. Principle of Universality**

In this principle, Kant said that "Act only according to principles that you can will into universal law." According to Kant, Before taking action, we must ensure that what we do can be applied by everyone without damaging the moral or social order. If an action only benefits oneself and cannot be applied generally, then it is considered immoral (Fikri, 2023). Kant's ethical principle emphasizes that morality should be universal. This means that what is right for ourselves must be right for everyone, without exception. An action will be said to violate ethics and morality if it cannot be made a general rule that applies to all people without producing contradictions or moral destruction such as the right to life not being recognized for all people, racism against certain groups, and human dignity not being universally respected. Human dignity is not universally respected. For example, "What if everyone always breaks their promises?" If that were to happen, then no one would believe in promises

anymore, and the concept of promises would become meaningless. Breaking a promise, then, is an immoral act (Al-Huda, 2024).

## **2. The Human as a Goal Principle**

According to Kant, he said that “Always treat others, or yourself, as a goal, not just a means.” This means that we should never take advantage of others for personal gain. In the principles of Kantian ethics, Kant emphasized that every human being must be treated as an end, not as a tool intended for other purposes. Kant argued that every human being has a dignity that does not depend on his or her utility or social position. Humans have dignity because they have rationality and the right to freedom, not because they serve something or someone. Every individual has dignity and value that must be respected. Example of an Immoral Action Despite Good Results: Giving to Show Off: If someone gives a lot of money just to get praise, the action is not considered moral even though the outcome will still help many people (Yulanda, 2024).

## **3. Autonomy Principle**

According to Kant, people should act based on their own moral consciousness, not because of external pressure or self-interest. “Individuals should act as if we are the makers of a universal moral law.” Kant argues in the principle of autonomy that every human being has the right and ability to organize his own life freely. Every human being has the right to determine their own future without interference from outside parties (state, individual, system) who can impose their will by violating one’s moral freedom. Actions that

trigger to destroy freedom and force the will of others will violate the principle of autonomy. For example, if someone helps each other because they feel it is a moral obligation (not because they want to get praise), then they are acting under the principle of autonomy (Yulanda, 2024).

In conclusion, Kant's ethics emphasizes that actions can be considered moral if they are based on principles that can be applied universally, humans are obliged to respect humans and make them an end rather than a means and are based on good intentions. In other words, every action should always be considered whether it is in accordance with moral principles that can be applied by everyone without exception (Hernoeputri, 2024).

### **C. Violence**

Violence is generally defined as actions that can cause physical, psychological, or social suffering to individuals or groups, whether intentional or not, which can result in injury, death, or psychological distress. Violence is not always visible to the naked eye, but can also take the form of social oppression, discrimination, and systemic injustice that can damage human dignity (Campbell, 2023).

According to Faruk (2022), literature has the power to reflect the violence that exists in social reality while also serving as a means to criticize the injustice that underlies it. Therefore, in this study, violence is not described as a single event, but as a system of oppression that violates universal moral and ethical values as described in Immanuel Kant's ethical theory as a moral

resistance to violence that not only hurts the body but also destroys human values.

In *Don't Call Us Dead*, Smith conveys the various forms of violence experienced by the black community in the United States, ranging from physical violence such as shootings and killings by the authorities, to psychological and structural violence that causes black people to live in fear and lose their dignity. Violence in this context is not only in the form of visible aggressive acts, but also includes oppressive social systems that deny equality and deprive individuals of their right to live freely and with dignity.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **RESEARCH METHOD**

In this chapter, the researcher explains the methods used in the study to analyze Danez Smith's poems in the book *Don't Call Us Dead* based on Immanuel Kant's ethical theory. This study uses ethical criticism as an approach to analyze ethical violations described in the poems. Thus, this chapter explains the data sources, data collection techniques, and data analysis steps used to answer the research questions systematically.

#### **A. Research Design**

In this research The researcher uses the Literary Criticism research method as a research method. Literary criticism is a method for evaluating, interpreting, and analyzing literary works to reveal their deeper meanings (Tyson, 2006). This research belongs to the class of literary criticism because this research uses the theory of moral philosophy and ethics as a tool for reading literary texts. This research also interprets the meaning and value contained in poem and aims to understand and show how literature can be a mirror and critique of social injustice that is happening In this context (Booth, 1988).

This literary criticism focuses on the moral or ethical dimensions of literary works. The literary criticism research method emphasizes the analysis of moral values expressed in a literary work such as how ethical and moral values are presented through poem. This method is suitable for use in researching

literary works such as these poem which contain many moral and ethical dilemmas.

This analysis use ethical criticism to analyze the violence. Ethical criticism doesn't just judge a book as good or bad based on today's morals. Instead, it looks at the time when the book was written and considers the values people had back then. The goal is to find out how ethics played a role in creating the literature and how they influence the characters and events in the story. It helps us understand the actions and situations in the book from an ethical point of view and make fair judgments about them. This way, we can use literature to teach others and help them learn through the insights provided by literary criticism (Zhenzhao, 2023).

The researcher uses the theory of ethical criticism by Immanuel Kant. This perspective encourages readers to reflect on how literary works influence their moral character and ethical beliefs (Mambrol,2017). Kant argues that every human being should be treated as an individual with dignity and not as a tool used to achieve certain goals. Kant thinks that humans should uphold human values both for themselves and others (Hernoeputri, 2024). This research will reveal the various kinds of ethical violations that are not in accordance with Kant's ethical principles depicted in this poem.

## **B. Data Source**

The data of this research are some of poem from *Don't Call Us Dead* book by Danez Smith which was realased on 2017. The book contains poems

that explore themes of violation, queerness, race, and the struggle for identity and justice in the glass of American social politics. The data analyzed in this study are the texts of the selected poems focusing on the embedded moral values as well as violations of Kantian ethics in the selected poems. In this study, the researcher chose three poems to be analyzed including *Dear White Americana*, *It Won't be a Bullet*, and *Summer Somewhere*. This poem was chosen based on its heavy engagement with the theme of ethical transgression and morality which makes it relevant for Kantian ethic analysis in line with the theme of this study.

### C. Data Collection

This study collected data using the documentation method, which is reading and analyzing literary texts in depth. The main data comes from three poems that have been selected from the poetry book *Don't Call Us Dead* (2017) by Danez Smith there are *summer somewhere*, *it won't be a bullet*, and *dear white America*. The data collection process is carried out through several stages including:

#### 1. Text Selection

Researchers selected several poems that have a strong connection with the themes and theories used in this study such as violence, injustice, identity, and moral dignity.

#### 2. Close Reading

Each poem was read repeatedly to identify sentences that reflect ethical violations and morality in Kantian ethical theory.

### 3. Documentation and Interpretation

After the data is collected, the author records the important parts of the poems and interprets them. This interpretation aims to find out the meaning contained in the poem in accordance with Kantian ethics.

### **D. Data Analysis**

The data analysis method used in writing this research is literary criticism analysis. The analysis is done by reading in depth the selected poems including *summer, somewhere, it won't be a bullet, and dear white America*, to identify ethical violations and moral values in this poems. Each poem was interpreted based on Kant's ethical principles, such as the categorical imperative, respect for human dignity, and the prohibition of treating humans as tools. The results of the process are used to show how Danez Smith's poems serve as a medium for social criticism and moral messaging.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDING AND DISCUSSION

#### A. Evidence that Black communities experience violence in Danez

##### Smith's *Don't Call Us Dead*

In the three selected poems, “Summer, Somewhere”, “Dear White America”, and “It Won't Be a Bullet” in the poem book *Don't Call Us Dead* by Danez Smith, there are several forms of ethical violations based on Immanuel Kant's ethical principles. The researcher found 11 excerpts from the poem “Summer, Somewhere”, 6 excerpts from the poem “Dear White America” and in the poem “It Won't be a Bullet”, the researcher found 3 excerpts of poem that describe violence that violates Kantian ethics.

##### 1. “Summer, Somewhere”

This poem is one of the most famous works in Danez Smith's book *Don't Call Us Dead*. It describes an imagined “paradise” for Black people who have been victims of violence in the United States. The word “summer” is interpreted as a space free from fear, discrimination, and death, where there are no more “laws” or “white people.” In this poem, Smith not only describes life after death, but also shows the moral reality of the real world.

*history is what it is. it knows what it did  
bad dog. bad blood. bad day to be a boy* (lines 7-8).

This quote is telling the reader that black boys are greatly disadvantaged because they live in a world that does not favor them. There is a bitter and sharp expression of how history cannot be erased and how the

system of oppression still exists today, so that history continues. It can be seen in the quotes.

“History is what it is.” This quote describes a resigned or cynical attitude toward history. Smith implies that history cannot be changed and that is how it is, where history is always full of oppression, violence, and injustice. This quote can also be interpreted in terms of American history regarding the brutality experienced by Black people. This situation created a dark history that continues to shape reality to this day. The next quote is “It knows what it did.” History is depicted as something conscious. This quote shows that all oppression that has occurred throughout history was not accidental, but rather something that was done consciously, systematically, and deliberately. This line illustrates that the history of violence against black men is not new.

"Bad dog. Bad blood. Bad day to be a boy" The phrase “bad dog” symbolizes violence or uncontrolled institutions, such as the police or white supremacy. In the history of racism in America, institutions used dogs to attack black protesters. Symbolically, the phrase “bad blood” represents the pain of a dark historical legacy that still lingers in the memory of the black community. The phrase “bad day to be a boy” depicts the powerlessness and danger of being a young black man in America.

*Turned ruby gowns. Here, there's no language  
for officer or law, no colour to call white (lines 11-12).*

This quote has a very sharp meaning. This quote seeks to convey how the deaths of Black people due to institutional violence have caused Black individuals to lose faith in the concepts of law and justice. In the alternative

world depicted by author Smith, in the world after death, there is no longer any law, no longer any police, and no longer any dominant skin color. Heaven is depicted as an implied place where Black people finally achieve freedom after death. This is a form of ethical and existential criticism where a legal system that fails to act fairly is not worthy of preservation. By eliminating the concepts of “white,” “law,” and “officer” this poem reflects the author's vision of a truly just world, a world with trustworthy and reliable law enforcement.

"turned ruby gowns" this quote depicting death where "ruby gowns" is a symbol of a body or clothes covered in blood which indicates physical violence or murder. “Ruby” can be interpreted as blood found on a “gown” which refers to a person’s clothing, where the blood is the result of violence. "Here, there’s no language for officer or law" The word “Here” in this poem refers to the world after death, where black people have freedom from the systemic violence that occurred in their previous lives. This quote shows that the system does not operate in a neutral and universal manner. Such a system treats some human beings as unworthy of legal protection. But now, they no longer encounter injustice because they are in heaven and free. “no colour to call white” This sentence refers to white people as the standard of power and truth. However, after death, they no longer fear any threats because in heaven, they are no longer with white people.

*If snow fell, it'd fall black. please, don't call us  
dead, call us alive someplace better (lines 13-14).*

This quote contains a plea full of hope and pain. This quote is a form of plea to no longer be considered dead both literally and socially. This quote

shows a symbolic violence such as the elimination of their identity, value, and existence as humans. The word “dead” here is not only a symbol of physical death, but also the death of black people who have died as a result of state violence (such as police violence).

“ please, don’t call us dead” This quote shows that black people also want to be seen and acknowledged, not ignored and marginalized as if they were dead. The next quote is called " Call us alive ". This quote is not only interpreted as being biologically alive, but also as being fully alive as a human being who is valued, who has dignity, rights, and a future. The quote “please, don't call us dead, call us alive somewhere better” is a declaration that signifies hope and resistance. Smith rejects death as the only identity attached to black people. He demands recognition of life, humanity, and dignity that continue to be ignored by an unjust government system. Additionally, this statement also signifies a plea from the Black community to be acknowledged and seen not only physically but also in terms of their existence. Black people do not want to be treated like the dead, who have no rights in life. They demand justice for their lives and dignity, which have been stripped away by the state system.

*sometimes it's they eyes who lead  
scanning for bonefleshed men in blue (lines 23-24).*

This sentence describes an act of racial profiling by the police ("men in blue"), who seek out black bodies (bonefleshed) as objects of brutal violence by America's police. The quote “sometimes it's the eyes who lead scanning for bonefleshed men in blue” shows that the psychological condition of the black community is poor due to facing various forms of oppression and

brutality from the government. The feeling of always being wary of the police is not without reason; this proves that black people do indeed experience all forms of injustice without reason and that the system has placed them in a position where they are always suspected.

“sometimes it’s the eyes who lead” symbolically describes their eyes, which are constantly alert, suspicious, and fearful. The next quote is “Eyes who lead” could mean that their eyes lead their lives, that their eyes can detect danger even before their brains have time to think. This describes the tension they feel because they are faced with dangerous situations every day. “Scanning for bonefleshed men in blue.” “Men in blue” is a metaphor referring to police officers in blue uniforms. The word “*scanning*” indicates a sense of alertness to the presence of danger. This sentence illustrates the reality of life for the black community, which is haunted by fear and must always be alert to the presence of the police, as if they were living in a war zone.

*we plucked brothers from branches  
peeled their naps from bark. (lines 39-40).*

The quote describes the act of picking someone from a tree branch. This quote describes how black people were forced to face the situation of having to remove the bodies of their own brothers who had been hanged from trees. According to the historical context of America, this phrase is very powerful because it refers to the practice of lynching. Lynching is a form of capital punishment without a clear legal process, carried out by a group of people in a brutal manner. Lynching was used to punish someone deemed to

have committed a crime without going through a formal court process. This occurred frequently against Black men from the 19th century to the mid-20th century (Abbott, 2025).

This quote is deeply meaningful because it directly refers to collective historical trauma. Lynching is not only about murder, but also a symbol of power, fear, and a cruel and unjust warning to the black community. Given what happened in history, this quote reinforces that the lives of the black community are deeply threatened and unjust.

*they buried you all business, no ceremony  
cameras, t-shirts, essays, protests (lines 51-52)*

This quote shows how the death of a black person is treated without honor, but rather becomes a "business". The death of the victim is exploited through media, t-shirts, essays, and actions without a proper ceremony of respect. This quote criticizes how the government system works and how the public responds to the deaths of black men, especially those caused by police violence. Although widely covered by the media, in the end the victims still do not receive the respect they deserve and do not get the justice they should have. This is part of a cycle of violence that continues to repeat itself. The quote "they buried you all business, no ceremony. cameras, t-shirts, essays, protests" describes the pain and criticism of how the world treats the deaths of black people due to systemic violence. Instead of being honored, their deaths are treated like administrative procedures and will pass.

"All business" describes a funeral conducted as if it were a normal or routine event, without emotion, as if human death were not a shocking

tragedy, but a mere formality. The next quotes is “No ceremony” signifies a lack of respect and humanity for the victims, as if their deaths were not worthy of being remembered or mourned with dignity. This reflects an inhumane attitude toward victims of racial violence.

*paradise is a world where everything  
is sanctuary & nothing is a gun (lines 87-88).*

This quote describes heaven as the only place where they can live safely. The quote “paradise is a world where everything is sanctuary & nothing is a gun” is both a hope and a sharp social critique. This quote shows deep disappointment and despair. They believe that the world is no longer a safe place for them to live, so paradise becomes their only hope that they will go to a more beautiful place after they die.

“sanctuary” describes a safe, peaceful, and sacred place of refuge. “Paradise” is not considered a physical place, but rather an ideal condition in which every space and situation is a place that can provide a sense of security and acceptance. They call it paradise because it is impossible for black people to obtain it while still living in the real world. For the Black community, there is no truly safe place for them except in heaven someday. The next quotes is “& nothing is a gun” depicts a black community free from gun violence, which historically and socially has taken the lives of many black men in America. In paradise, they will live free without fear of weapons that could kill them at any moment.

*dear badge number  
what did i do wrong?  
be born? be black? meet you? (lines 241-243).*

This quote directly criticizes police violence against black people. They question whether being born black is a mistake so they deserve all this injustice. This quote describes the experience of structural racism, where black people are often automatically positioned as suspects without clear and reasonable grounds. The police, who are supposed to be a symbol of the state present to protect, have instead become a threat and killers. This quote also shows frustration and despair because they are punished not on the basis of their mistakes, but only because of their identity. This quote also highlights the issue of how flawed the legal system in America is, oppressing minority groups, particularly Black people.

“dear badge number” clearly indicates that this message is addressed to the police. This quote illustrates that the police are one of the threats to the lives of Black people. The next quotes is “What did I do wrong?” This question reflects the confusion over the injustice they have experienced. The victim is questioning and seeking a reasonable explanation for why Black people can become targets. This indicates that there is no logical or moral justification for the violence inflicted on Black people other than their racial identity. The last quotes is “Be born? Be black? Meet you?” This quote is a form of bitter irony. Black people question the reasons why they experience all this injustice. Is being born with black skin a mistake? Is being stopped by the police a mistake? All of this shows that the very existence of black people is considered a threat, even before they have done anything.

*that world of laws rendered us into dark  
matter. we asked for nothing but our names* (lines 254-255).

This sentence refers to the dark irony that the legal world, which is supposed to be a source of justice, makes the existence of the black community even more invisible. This quote describes a harsh criticism of the legal and governmental systems, especially in the United States, which have existed for so long. They use the law to oppress certain groups such as black people, eliminating the basic rights of black people, even the right to be recognized as individuals with names. Black people are also considered invisible, unimportant, or inhuman objects, even though they continue to suffer and struggle within the system.

“the world of laws” describes how the legal system does not provide justice for the black community. The term “dark matter” describes the condition of black people, whose lives are ignored and invisible, yet always affected and influential. The legal system renders the black community legally insignificant, morally invisible, and humanly unappreciated. The next quotes is “we asked for nothing but our names” This quote shows a simple request that had a huge impact. Smith shows that the demands of black people were very simple. They just wanted to be recognized as human beings, as individuals with equal rights.

*you are not welcome here. Trust  
the trip will kill you. go home* (lines 260-261).

This quote shows rejection and alienation. This quote seems to describe a warning or threat directed at someone from outside. The word “you” here most likely refers to the police, racist white people, or anyone

who brings violence and oppression to the black community. The quote “you are not welcome here. Trust / the trip will kill you. Go home.” is a powerful statement about rejection, protection, and recovery from unethical power. Smith asserts that the paradise he created in his dreams is not just any place, but a special place for those who have experienced oppression, suffering, injustice, and unjust death.

“You are not welcome here” emphasizes that this place (heaven) is not for those who have destroyed the lives of Black people. This sentence describes a place of refuge heaven that cannot be entered by those who have sinned. The next quotes is “go home” conveys a strong rejection. It is a simple sentence, but it is hurtful. An oppressor does not deserve a place in heaven.

*we earned this paradise  
by a death we didn't deserve* (lines 262-263).

This statement emphasizes that they had to die in an undeserved way without being able to fight back and they can only accept but they deserve to find "paradise" where they will not be hurt again. This quote conveys a satire of the social reality in which black people will be able to live peacefully after death because in the real world they continue to be hunted, killed, and judged. It describes a form of anger towards a system that allows generation after generation of black people to die in vain. This quote also suggests that heaven for them is not a promise from God, but compensation that must be paid for the miserable lives they have experienced

“We earned this paradise.” This quote refers to an imaginary or metaphorical place where the souls of black people who have been killed due to racial violence finally find peace in heaven. “Paradise” here does not exist in the real world, but rather a safe space that can only be attained after death. The word “earned” highlights the irony and pain of Black people, who were never granted paradise while living in the world, and thus must die first to attain it. The next quote is “by a death we didn't deserve” emphasizes that their deaths were unjust, not the result of crimes or mistakes they committed. These deaths were undeserved solely because of their skin color, systemic racism, and police violence. This quote shows that these deaths were the result of injustice, not fate or mistakes that deserved punishment.

## 2. “Dear White America”

Poem “Dear White America” depicts a moral reflection on society's failure to respect human dignity. Smith uses this poem to show how the black community is treated not as an end in itself, but as a means to maintain an unequal social structure. Smith expresses anger in this poem as a moral demand for universal principles of humanity to be upheld once again.

*I've left Earth in search of darker planets, a solar system that revolves too near a black hole. (line 1)*

This quote illustrates the black group's desire to “escape” from a world that rejects their existence as black and queer people. The disregard for the existence of certain individuals makes them feel like they have no place on earth. This is a form of denial of an individual's moral right to be

respected. This quote expresses disappointment with the oppressive and dangerous social structure of America for black people. They are made to feel unsafe, causing them to dream of leaving this cruel world. A desire to find a place inhabited only by black people, where their identity is not a threat or a reason to be killed. The quote, “I’ve left Earth” *in search of darker planets, a solar system that revolves too near a black hole,*” is a profound expression of despair caused by racism, which makes them want to escape from an unjust world.

“I’ve left Earth” This quote describes the desire to leave this world. This quote expresses a deep sense of despair toward the reality of racism and injustice experienced by Black people. “Left earth ” is a metaphorical expression signifying the desire to escape from a world filled with injustice, a world where the lives of Black people are not acknowledged. The next quotes “in search of darker planets” is interpreted as a safe place for black people, a place where their skin color is not a threat. The word “darker” makes it clear that they are looking for a world where there are only black people so that they can live freely.

*I want the fate of Lazarus for Renisha, want Chucky, Bo, Meech, Trayvon, Sean & Jonylah risen three days after their entombing, their gost re-gifted flesh and blood, their flesh & blood re-gifted their children (line 5)*

In this quotes, the author mentions the names of black victims of racial violence, particularly killings by police or white civilians. The author seeks justice for the death of the victim. These names refer to real victims of police violence and racial brutality against black people in America. Renisha McBride was shot after seeking help at someone’s house. Trayvon

Martin was a black teenager who was killed by armed officers. Sean Bell was killed by police on the eve of his wedding. Jonylah Watkins was a 6-month-old baby who died in a shooting in Chicago (Lartey, 2014). The author mentions their names in the poem as a refusal to forget the tragic events that have befallen Black people. Additionally, this quote clarifies that the poem is intended as a defense against the injustice experienced by Black people.

This quote clarifies a demand for justice that voices rejection of a social system that causes death. Structural injustice that results in death without reason, especially against black children and teenagers. This quote clarifies that this poem is indeed intended for the victims of social injustice, namely black people.

*i tried, white people. i tried to love you, but you spent my brother's funeral making plans for brunch, talking too loud next to his bones (line 14).*

In this excerpt, the author expresses her deep disappointment with the indifference of white people. This quote shows the anger and despair of black people who see how all forms of injustice, such as violence and death experienced by their community, are ignored by the dominant society. There is no collective responsibility for the racist system that exists. This is a picture of injustice where the deaths of black communities are considered unimportant. Black lives are seen as inferior and disposable compared to the comfort of white lives.

“I tried, white people. I tried to love you.” This quote is a painful confession from black people. They want to live peacefully and coexist with

white people, but their efforts have been ignored and disregarded. “You spent my brother’s funeral making plans for brunch, talking too loud next to his bones.” This quote describes someone who is grieving, but another person (white) ignores the death without respect and without showing empathy, even acting indifferent and uncaring. White people can still go about their lives as if nothing has happened, without thinking about the suffering experienced by the black community.

*you put an asterisk on my sister’s gorgeous face! call her pretty (for a black girl)*  
(line 16).

This quote shows symbolic violence in the form of racism and stereotypes against black women. This quote illustrates the standards of beauty that are based on their position. They place white European skin as the main standard. This quote contains subtle racism in everyday culture, where they claim to value diversity but still perpetuate racial stigma. Black women are often objectified. This is a form of cultural racism, where the existence of black women’s bodies and faces is overshadowed by social labels that place them below the standard.

"pretty (for a black girl)" is an example of a quote that indirectly demeans black women who are only beautiful among black women, and will be less beautiful when compared to white women. This quote illustrates a form of racist praise (a backhanded compliment). It is as if someone is not only calling her beautiful, but adding “*as a black woman*” as if beauty in black women is something unusual. It’s as if the true standard of beauty is white skin, and if a Black woman is considered beautiful, it is seen as

unusual or surprising, even impossible. This highlights the difference in treatment between Black and white people.

*Because Jordan boomed. Because Emmett whistled. Because Huey P. spoke.  
Because Martin preached (line 17)*

Each name in this quote is a black figure who was murdered or attacked because of their activism, their existence, or their voice. By naming the victims, the author shows that simply being black is reason enough to be killed. All actions taken by the victims show that even small or legitimate actions such as giving speeches, talking, playing music, and even whistling are considered valid and reasonable reasons for murder. In fact, all of these actions are their right to express themselves freely and are legitimate. The author is criticizing a social system that views the existence of black people as a threat, even when they are only exercising their basic rights.

Through this quote, Danez Smith describes the reality that systemic racism results in death not because of what black people do, but because of their identity.

Name of victim	Explanation
Jordan Davis	a 17-year-old black teenager who died after being shot in 2012 simply for listening to loud music  (Fausset R, 2014).
Emmett Till	a 14-year-old black teenager who was brutally murdered in 1955 for allegedly “whistling” or flirting with a white woman (Tyson T, 2017)
Huey P. Newton	activist and one of the founders of the Black Panther Party. Killed in 1989 for being known as a vocal advocate for black rights.  (Joseph P,2006)
Martin Luther King Jr.	a prominent figure in the civil rights movement who was assassinated in 1968 for his struggle against racism through speeches and peaceful protests.

*you cannot steal or sell or cast overboard or hang or beat or drown or own or redline or shackle or silence or cheat or choke or cover up or jail or shoot or jail or shoot or jail or shoot or ruin (line 20).*

This quote lists a long series of violent incidents, repeatedly using the phrase “jail or shoot.” This repetition emphasizes that the cycle of violence and oppression against black people in America is ongoing. Several actions in the quote indicate specific forms of injustice, including :

Action	Meaning
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Steal / sell / own	Slavery
Cast overboard / drown / hang / shackle	torture and brutal murder
Redline	racially based economic violence
Silence / cheat / choke / jail	Structural violence and social repression
Shoot	Police violence and killings
Ruin	The destruction of the future of the black community

This poem shows a strong rejection of the racist system. Black people cannot continue to be treated this way. This quote is like an ethical proclamation and moral resistance. The phrase “you cannot...” is a rejection of the systemic violence that has been going on. This quote voices that all this injustice is morally unjustifiable and cannot continue.

### 3. “It Won’t be a Bullet”

The poem “It Won't Be a Bullet” highlights the trauma, fear, and inner suffering experienced by the black community even without physical violence. Smith describes that for black people, death does not always come from bullets, but can arise from the pressures of life, discrimination, and injustice. This poem highlights the structural and psychological violence that creates feelings of insecurity, loss of hope, and social depression

because they live in a world that rejects their existence. “It Won't Be a Bullet” not only discusses physical death, but also moral and spiritual death caused by an unjust system.

*The doctor will explain death & I'll go practice* (line 2).

This quote explains about the deviant health system where the health of black individuals is always sidelined. The reality is that Black communities in America must accept that death can come at any time because the system does not protect them. Based on the analysis of the three poems above, the researcher can tentatively conclude that in the poems, there are various forms of ethical violations experienced by black individuals. These violations include physical violence (police shootings), social marginalization, racial discrimination, and disregard for human rights. All of these forms of injustice are violations of Kantian ethical principles, especially the categorical imperative principle, which treats humans not as ends, but only as tools for an unjust system. The characters depicted in the poem are shown as victims of institutions that ignore universal moral values and treat individuals based on skin color, not as rational and dignified persons. This quote can also be interpreted as a criticism of a healthcare system that is reluctant to treat black people fairly. They often ignore the pain or even the lives of black people.

"the doctor will explain death" it illustrates that doctors do not try to save the lives of black individuals and will be left to die. The quote “*The doctor will explain death*” refers to the medical process or scientific, cold,

and objective explanation of death. The next quote is “I’ll go practice” has a sarcastic and tragic meaning. Black people seem to have grown accustomed to death, even having to practice dying because they could die at any moment. The word “*practice*” emphasizes that they must prepare mentally for various possibilities of death, as the system constantly makes Black people feel threatened.

*in the catalogue of ways to kill a black boy* (line 3).

This quote implies that society has a "list" of ways to kill black children. This shows how they are treated as objects of violence. Also explained in the quote “i’m not the kind of black man who dies on the news.” This quote shows that black death has become so commonplace that only those who die in 'shocking' ways are noticed. The quote from the “catalogue” suggests that the deaths of black boys have become something that is recorded and organized, meaning that the killing of black boys is not accidental but socially accepted. This quote also suggests that there are various formal and informal ways used by society and the system to destroy the lives of black boys.

The author attempts to show the systemic dehumanization that occurs against black children. Their deaths are not considered human tragedies, but statistics that can be stored in the “catalog” of American history. This quote also conveys the despair and frustration of the black community due to the repeated deaths of their group. The world seems no longer surprised or concerned because it has become a common occurrence.

This quote also shows the failure of society and the state to respect the lives of black children as human beings who have the right to live in safety.

*i'm the kind who grows thinner & thinner & thinner / until light outweighs us.*  
(line 4)

This statement describes the gradual disappearance of the black group's existence until it becomes so transparent that it finally disappears and their existence is no longer considered (disappeared).

“grows thinner and thinner” refers to a body that is becoming increasingly thin. Symbolically, this phrase represents the gradual loss of existence and eventual disappearance from the social world due to oppression, trauma, and feelings of being ignored.

“Until light outweighs us” describes a loss of body mass and meaning in life that becomes so light, it no longer has any weight. A form of existence that is increasingly disappearing physically, spiritually, and socially.

## **B. Kantian Ethical Analysis of Violence in *Don't Call Us Dead* by**

### **Danez Smith**

Based on Immanuel Kant's theory of Kantian ethics, moral action should be based on the principle that humans should be treated as ends rather than means, and should be valued equally as rational beings. The findings in the poems "Summer, Somewhere, Dear White America, and It Won't be a Bullet" show a form of offense that systematically violates Kantian ethical principles. This discussion will reveal how the injustices experienced by the

black community are considered to violate the principles of Kantian ethics. The researcher will show how these violations violate the three main principles of Kantian ethics, namely Principle of Universality, The Human as a Goal Principle, and Autonomy Principle.

Danez Smith's poem shows how injustice always befalls certain groups, not only physical violence but also moral and human rights violations. In Danez Smith's poems, the violations that occur against black individuals reflect a serious violation of Kantian ethical principles. Kant's first principle emphasizes that humans should be treated as ends and not means. Kant upholds that human beings should always be treated as ends in themselves, not merely as means to fulfill other ends. This principle asserts that every individual has intrinsic moral value that should not be sacrificed for any interest. However, in this poem, Smith depicts a clear violation of the Kantian principle.

### **1. Human as a Goal Principle**

This poem is evident in the dehumanization and violence against black individuals. In his poem, Smith shows how black lives are worthless and are treated arbitrarily. This shows that they are not valued as rational beings with intrinsic value. In the poem *Summer, Somewhere*, Smith fantasizes about a world where black children killed by racial violence can live freely and peacefully. But in this poem, Smith criticizes the reality that in real life black individuals are treated as if they are tools to maintain social order based on racial discrimination. The poem also shows the police brutality in

treating black individuals which illustrates how they are not valued as a goal with moral dignity, but rather treated as a threat that must be controlled for the security of the majority group.

### **1. “Summer, Somewhere”**

According to the previous analysis in the chapter A, this poem depicts a reality where black subjects are dehumanized, which is the loss of their human dignity through acts of violence, discrimination, and killing for no apparent reason. These actions reflect a violation of Kantian ethics as individual lives are not valued properly and they are treated like objects that can be simply destroyed. In Kant's view, these actions are considered highly immoral because they violate the principle of respect for human dignity.

In “Summer, Somewhere's” poem, black children are not seen as children with dreams, hopes, or a future. Instead, black children would be seen as a dangerous threat, simply because of the color of their skin. This shows that society treats them not as children who need protection but as a problem to be dealt with. Black children are only a tool for false order, not recognized for their dignity as human beings. The writer tries to show that the police or the legal system treats them as objects to be controlled and also tools for false order, not as individuals who deserve to be treated with respect and affection like children in general. They seem to be just "tools" to keep the majority society safe.

When someone kills another person just because of unreasonable fear (based on skin color), it means that that person does not consider the

victim as a whole human being with value and dignity and is only seen as a number in statistics and also a "danger" that must be eliminated. This is the clearest form of treating humans as tools, tools to maintain a sense of security, even if that security is built on discrimination. This is a gross violation of the Kantian principle that humans should be valued for being human, not removed because they are no longer "useful" to the system.

## **2. “Dear White America”**

In the poem “Dear White America”, Smith illustrates that black people are made to feel the need to "leave the earth" because they cannot live freely in the world and are considered a threat. This shows that the existence of black individuals is not considered an important part of society, but rather a nuisance that must be removed. Society treats them as a tool to create a sense of security that is actually built on injustice. Smith also explains about institutions that have great influence such as the law, schools, and churches that should be a safe place and a source of justice for every human being, but instead participate in eliminating the identity and dignity of the black group. Black people are forced to forget who they really are. Black people have to fight hard just to be "*allowed*" to be in this world. They are not given the space they deserve to live as themselves. They are not valued as the human beings they are, but must prove themselves to be accepted.

Immanuel Kant's first categorical imperative principle states that every human being must be treated as an end in itself, and not merely as a

means to another end. According to Kant, every human being has a dignity that does not depend on his or her utility, power or social position. In fact, humans have value because they have rationality and free will, not because they function for something or someone. Looking at the various forms of hate crimes described in the poems “Summer, Somewhere, Dear White America, and It Won't be a Bullet”, it is clear that Kantian ethical principles are systematically violated. All forms of violence, injustice, and discrimination experienced by black individuals show a dehumanization. Black individuals are treated not as individuals of value, but as tools to maintain an entrenched system of injustice.

Overall, all forms of evil in the poem show the same pattern of black individuals not being treated as ends with inherent value, but rather as tools for a false sense of security, to maintain the comfort of majority culture, to maintain social dominance, and to cover up collective guilt. Kantian ethical principles emphasize respect for fellow human beings regardless of their background. When black individuals are forced to sacrifice their lives, identity and freedom for the benefit of an unjust system, it means that society has failed to value them as human beings. Thus, any act of evil such as discrimination, de-identification, oppression, and violence deliberately directed at black individuals as depicted in the poems, is a fundamental violation of Kantian ethical principles. Therefore, it is clear that in this poem Smith not only shows a violation of Kantian principles in the form of

individual dehumanization, but also reflects on the systemic failure to recognize black and queer people as whole and dignified entities.

## **2. Universality Principle**

The second categorical imperative principle is the principle of universality. According to Kant, morality must be universal, which means that what is right for ourselves must be right for everyone, without exception. If an action cannot be made a general rule that applies to everyone without producing moral ruin, then the action is considered morally wrong. Thus, Kant emphasized that in treating humans, the principle of universality must be used, which demands justice and consistency, regardless of race, religion, social status, or other backgrounds.

### **1. “Summer, Somewhere”**

In the poem *Summer, Somewhere*, Smith shows the reality described in the poem where law and justice are not applied universally or law and justice are not applied equally between blacks and whites. The law is supposed to protect every individual with the same standards. This injustice violates Kantian principles because laws and protections are only fair to certain groups and not applied to all humans. This poem also depicts the right to life which is not universally respected. Every human being has the right to live regardless of race or background. But in reality, this poem shows how black people feel they have to “*move somewhere else*” in order to live in peace, because in the real world they live in, they don't have a respected right to life. If respect for the right to life only applies to certain

groups (white people only), then it clearly violates the principle of universality. Because in this principle, Kant emphasizes that basic rights such as life must apply to everyone, without discrimination.

The poem also shows that human dignity is not universally recognized. In the real world, children are often not respected. They are not treated as fully dignified human beings, but as threats. According to Kant's principle, every human being should be respected as a human being with dignity. If human dignity is only recognized based on skin color, it is considered a violation of the principle of universality where respect does not apply equally. The act of racial discrimination shown by Smith in this poem cannot be taken as a general rule. If everyone was free to treat another human being unfairly just because of race, the world would be filled with violence, fear, and broken human relationships. There would be no trust, safety, or honor between people.

## **2. “Dear White America”**

In the poem “Dear White America”, Danez Smith also writes an open letter addressed to white Americans expressing his disappointment, anger, and deep hurt due to the persistent racial discrimination. Through his poem, Smith shows that American society fails to treat every individual with universal principles of justice and equality. In this poem, it is depicted that black individuals always live in fear of police violence, hatred, and death, while white people can live safely. When only some groups (whites) get

security and the right to live without threat, it is a major violation of the principles of universal justice.

In the other hand, moral standards differ based on race in this poem also include actions that violate universal principles. Normal actions performed by white individuals (being expressive, loud or angry) are often considered dangerous and threatening if performed by black individuals. The poem also shows institutional discrimination that is not based on universal rights. Smith reveals that American institutions (police, law, education) tend to treat black individuals cruelly, in contrast to how they treat white individuals.

All the crimes in this poem go against the principle of universality in Kantian ethics. Kant emphasized that what is true for oneself must also be true for others, regardless of race and identity. But in reality, black individuals are always treated with lower standards, live in fear, and are forced to endure an unjust system. So it is clear that universal moral principles have failed to apply in American society.

### **3. “It Won’t be a Bullet”**

In addition, “It Won't be a Bullet” also highlights that the deaths of black individuals are not only due to physical violence, but also due to systemic failures such as neglected health systems, poverty, and prolonged stress. Health and social systems only care for white individuals, while black individuals are left to suffer and die slowly. This violates the Kantian principle that every human being is entitled to fair and respectful treatment

without exception. The poem also emphasizes that the death of black bodies does not only occur directly (such as shootings), but also through an unjust social system.

All forms of violations present in this poem contradict the Kantian principle of moral universality. If every human truly applies Kant's principles, then every human should receive the right to live and respect regardless of background, race, and social status. However, this poem illustrates how far reality is from that moral standard. Smith tries to represent the thoughts of Black individuals that death is no longer something shocking, but rather something that always lurks, whether from bullets or from a system that kills slowly. This poem serves as a harsh satire that moral justice will not be achieved until all human life is universally valued as desired by Kant's ethical principle.

### **3. Autonomy Principle**

The third principle of the Categorical Imperative is the principle of autonomy. In Kantian ethical theory, the principle of autonomy emphasizes that every human being has the right and ability to govern their own life based on reason and will freely. Everyone has the right to determine their own path in life, and outsiders are not allowed to impose their will in a way that violates someone's moral freedom. Treatment that triggers the destruction of freedom, belittles choices, or forces the will of others is considered a violation of the principle of autonomy. In this principle, humans must be respected as rational beings capable of making their own

moral decisions and should not be controlled arbitrarily by anyone. When justice does not apply to all races and groups, society has failed to implement the moral principles that form the basis of social existence. This illustrates that society still adheres to the discriminatory logic that Kant strongly opposed.

### **1. “Summer, Somewhere”**

In the poem “Summer, Somewhere,” it tells the story of many young black people who were killed for no clear reason before they had the chance to live their lives. They have not yet had the chance to gain their freedom to dream, love, build families, and determine their own paths in life. This has taken away their opportunity to live a life based on their own choices. Crimes such as killing people before they have a chance to make significant decisions in their lives, as well as destroying their autonomy to build a future, are a serious violation of moral autonomy.

Moreover, social power also plays a role in determining the value of a person's life. In reality, the legal and social systems unjustly determine that the lives of black individuals are valued less than the lives of white individuals. This poem shows that social power can arbitrarily decide who gets to live and who does not. Using power to determine who is entitled to a decent life is certainly an act that disrespects the autonomy of Black people over their own lives. This clearly violates the Kantian principle that no one has the right to control another person's life or treat another person as an object that can be disposed of at will.

Here, Kant also describes how the opportunity for black individuals to make moral choices is erased. Because their lives were brutally extinguished, the victims in this poem never had the chance to make moral choices during their lives. Removing someone's opportunity to act morally and eliminating their potential for ethical development is the most brutal form of violating autonomy, as it is considered to stop human rights before they can demonstrate their moral values. All these crimes are contrary to the Kantian ethical principle of autonomy. Kant emphasized that humans are rational beings with dignity and must be respected. However, in the reality depicted by Smith in his poem, the autonomy of Black people has been neglected and destroyed by systems of violence and racism.

## **2. “Dear White America”**

In the poem “Dear White America”, Smith also talks about how black individuals do not have the freedom to govern their own lives. They are constantly monitored, controlled, and restricted by the racist system. The right to determine their future is taken away, making black individuals feel that they must leave this world to gain freedom in life. If linked to Kantian ethical principles, this constitutes a serious violation of autonomy because humans are forced to live under a system that does not recognize their freedom.

In this poem, Smith also shows how Black individuals are forced to conform to white norms in order to be accepted or at least to survive. In the lives of Black individuals, they are constantly forced to prove that they are

worthy of respect and to prove that they are not dangerous. This is a heavy burden that hinders their autonomy. This constitutes a violation of the principle of Kantian ethical autonomy because it has pressured individual identities to conform to the standards of the majority and does not respect the freedom of Black individuals to live according to their values and freedoms.

### **3. “It Won't be a Bullet”**

In the poem "It Won't be a Bullet" it also shows how Black individuals never receive adequate and proper healthcare access. The healthcare system does not treat them as valuable individuals in need of help, but as statistics that can be ignored and left to die. The group of Black individuals depicted in this poem is forced to live with the awareness that death is their destiny, not as a result of their choices, but due to an indifferent system. This clearly violates the principle of Kantian ethical autonomy because they deprive the right to live healthily, thus failing to fight for their future and refusing to help individuals make worthy life choices.

The poem “It Won’t Be a Bullet” illustrates that the Kantian principle of autonomy for black people has been stripped away through the neglect of healthcare and social systems, limited scope, devaluation of life based on race, and the destruction of hope and future even before birth. In Kantian ethical principles, such treatment is considered highly immoral because it disregards a person's right to life, right to choose, and right to develop. This means that black individuals are no longer considered rational

and free human beings, but rather as objects that can be allowed to suffer and die.

The ethical violations depicted in some of the poems from *Don't Call Us Dead* above can be considered violations of Kantian ethical principles because they violate the three main moral principles of Kantian ethics. First, human beings are not treated as ends in themselves, but rather as tools used to maintain a discriminatory “social order”. Furthermore, the discriminatory actions also violate the principle of universality, because if the rule is applied to everyone, it will create injustice that goes against moral rationality. And lastly, the individuals in the poem lose the right to determine their own lives because they are silenced by unjust structural power. Thus, the poem shows that the various actions depicted in the poem cannot be morally justified based on Kantian ethical principles. When humans do not have the freedom to live life to the fullest and make their own moral decisions, they are considered to have lost their substance as rational beings. Therefore, violations of this principle constitute a form of murder against the very essence of human morality.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This chapter contains conclusions and suggestions from the results of research on the poems in Danez Smith's book *Don't Call Us Dead* based on Immanuel Kant's ethical theory. The conclusions are summarized from the main results of the research on the forms of violence and ethical violations described in the poems. In addition, this chapter also contains recommendations that are expected to contribute to further research in the fields of literary criticism and ethics.

#### **A. Conclusion**

This research focuses on analyzing how the poems “Summer, Somewhere, Dear White America, and It Won't Be a Bullet” by Danez Smith depict various forms of violence and injustice that violate the principles of Kantian ethics, especially the categorical imperative principle where humans must be treated as ends, the principle of universality, and the principle of autonomy.

In the three poems, the researcher managed to reveal that black individuals in America are treated unfairly, both through physical violence and through structural violence such as human rights violations, systemic discrimination, health injustice, and social stereotypes. The violation of the Kantian principle that humans should be treated as ends, not means, can be

seen in how the bodies and lives of black individuals are reduced to tools to maintain social order based on racial discrimination. The principle of universality is also violated in this poem when moral standards that should be common to all humans are applied unfairly and violence and injustice against certain groups occur. The violation of the principle of autonomy is also seen in how the lives of black individuals are controlled, restricted, so that black individuals have limited and unfree lives.

Through this research, it can be concluded that Danez Smith's work in the poetry book *Don't Call Us Dead* not only highlights racial violence, but also reveals the violation of human dignity that should be upheld, in accordance with the teachings of Kantian ethics.

## **B. Suggestion**

This study specifically uses a Kantian ethical approach to examine the moral transgressions in Danez Smith's poetry. These moral transgressions mainly pertain to the unfair treatment of the black community in the United States. Although the findings of this analysis have shown that literary works can serve as critical tools to counter moral and humanitarian violations, other researchers can still continue this research. By analyzing the works of other black writers, both from America and other countries, who also address themes such as discrimination, racism, or social injustice, future studies can expand their research subjects. This will help provide a broader comparison of the way such experiences are represented in various cultural and historical contexts.

The methods used do not have to be limited to Kantian ethics. Beside that, the methods used do not have to be limited to Kantian ethics. By using different methods, researchers will be able to show new dimensions of the social issues raised in the poems. They will also be able to broaden their perspective on the way literature assesses morality and justice.

Readers are expected to understand that literature, especially Danez Smith's poetry, is not just an expression of art, but also a form of resistance against moral violations and social injustice. According to Kantian ethics, every person has dignity that must be respected. These poems, however, show that these principles are often ignored in the real world, especially in terms of the treatment of black people in America. Therefore, it is very important for us to continue fighting for a more just world that sees humans as an end, not a means for racial, economic, or power interests alone.

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## CURRICULUM VITAE



**Maulida Risqa Kamila** was born in Malang on May 7, 2003. She graduated from MA Al Ittihad Malang in 2021. During high school, she participated in several English language competitions and was a finalist in the 2019 Anti-Drug Ambassador competition. She was also actively involved in organizations and served as one of the leaders of the Youth Scientific Works extracurricular club. She continued her education at Maulana Malik Ibrahim State Islamic University in Malang, majoring in English literature. In her fifth semester, she chose to enroll in the Tourism profession course. She once worked as a tour guide for foreign visitors at the Jakarta History Museum in 2024.

## Appendix

### summer, somewhere

somewhere, a sun. below, boys brown  
as rye play the dozens & ball, jump  
in the air & stay there. boys become new  
moons, gum-dark on all sides, beg bruise  
-blue water to fly, at least tide, at least  
spit back a father or two. i won't get started.

- ⑤ history is what it is. it knows what it did. ~~✗~~  
bad dog. bad blood. bad day to be a boy ✓  
color of a July well spent. but here, not earth  
not heaven, we can't recall our white shirts  
① turned ruby gowns. here, there's no language  
for officer or law, no color to call white. ✓  
if snow fell, it'd fall black. please, don't call ✓  
② us dead, call us alive someplace better. ~~✗~~  
we say our own names when we pray.  
we go out for sweets & come back.

//

sometimes a boy is born  
right out the sky, dropped from  
a bridge between starshine & clay.  
one boy showed up pulled behind

a truck, a parade for himself  
& his wet red train. years ago

- ③ we plucked brothers from branches ~~✗~~  
peeled their naps from bark.

sometimes a boy walks into his room  
then walks out into his new world

still clutching wicked metals. some boys  
waded here through their own blood.

does it matter how he got here if we're all here  
to dance? grab a boy! spin him around!

if he asks for a kiss, kiss him.  
if he asks where he is, say gone.

//

*just this morning the sun laid a yellow not-palm  
on my face & i woke knowing your hands*

*were once the only place in the world.  
this very morning i woke up*

*& remembered unparticular Tuesdays  
my head in your lap, scalp covered in grease*

*& your hands, your hands, those hands  
my binary gods. Those milk hands, bread hands*

*hands in the air in church hands, cut-up fish hands  
for my own good hands, back talk backhands, hurt more* ✗

*than me hands, ain't asking no mo' hands  
everything i need come from those hands*

*tired & still grabbing grease, hum  
while she makes her son royal onyx hands.*

*mama, how far am i  
gone from home?*

//

this is how we are born: come morning  
after we cypher/feast/hoop, we dig

a new one from the ground, take  
him out his treebox, shake worms

from his braids. sometimes they'll sing  
a trapgod hymn (what a first breath!)

- ⑥ sometimes it's they eyes who lead ~~✗~~  
scanning for bonefleshed men in blue. ~~✗~~  
we say *congrats, you're a boy again!*  
we give him a durag, a bowl, a second chance.  
we send him off to wander for a day  
or ever, let him pick his new name.  
that boy was Trayvon, now called *RainKing*.  
that man Sean named himself *i do, i do*.  
O, the imagination of a new reborn boy  
but most of us settle on *alive*.

//

*dear air where you used to be, dear empty Chucks  
by front door, dear whatever you are now, dear son*

- ⑦ ✓ they buried you all business, no ceremony.  
cameras, t-shirts, essays, protests

*then you were just dead. some nights  
i want to dig you up, bury you right.*

*scrape dirt until my hands are raw  
& wounds pack themselves with mud.*

*i want to dig you up, let it rain twice  
before our next good-bye.*

*dear sprinkler dancer, i can't tell if i'm crying  
or i'm the sky, but praise your sweet rot*

*unstitching under soil, praise dandelions  
draining water from your greening, precious flesh.*

*i'll plant a garden on top  
where your hurt stopped.*

//

do you know what it's like to live  
on land who loves you back?

no need for geography  
now, we safe everywhere.

point to whatever you please  
& call it church, home, or sweet love.

- ⑧ paradise is a world where everything ~~✗~~  
is sanctuary & nothing is a gun.

here, if it grows it knows its place  
in history. yesterday, a poplar

told me of old forest  
heavy with fruits i'd call uncle

bursting red pulp & set afire  
harvest of dark wind chimes.

after i fell from its limb  
it bandaged me in sap.

//

i loved a boy once & once he made me  
a red dirge, skin casket, no burial.

left me to become a hum in a choir  
of bug mouths. he was my pastor

in violet velvet, my night nurse  
my tumor, my sick heart, my bad blood

all over his Tims. he needed me  
so much he had to end me.

i was his fag sucked into ash  
his lungs my final resting place.

my baby turned me to smoke  
choked on my name 'til it was gone.

i was his secret until i wasn't  
alive until not. outside our closet

i found a garden. he would love it  
here. he could love me here.

*last night's dream was a red June  
filled with our mouths sticky*

*with sugar, we tiny teathed brown beasts  
of corner stores, fingers always*

*dusted cheeto gold. do you remember  
those yellow months? our calves burned*

*all day biking each other around on pegs  
taking turns being steed & warrior*

*at the park we stormed like distant shores  
our little ashy wars, shoes lit with blue sparks*

*those summers we chased anybody  
who would say our names, jumped fences*

*just to prove we could jump, fingers stained  
piff green with stank, riding around*

*barely old enough to ride around, dreaming  
a world to conquer? i wish you ended me, Sweet Cain.*

//

the forest is a flock of boys  
who never got to grow up

blooming into forever  
afros like maple crowns

reaching sap-slow toward sky. watch  
Forest run in the rain, branches

melting into paper-soft curls, duck  
under the mountain for shelter. watch

the mountain reveal itself a boy.  
watch Mountain & Forest playing

in the rain, watch the rain melt everything  
into a boy with brown eyes & wet naps—

the lake turns into a boy in the rain  
the swamp—a boy in the rain

the fields of lavender—brothers  
dancing between the storm.

*dear brother from another  
time, today some stars gave in*

*to the black around them  
& i knew it was you.*

*my ace, my g, my fellow  
kingdomless king*

*they've made you a boy  
i don't know*

*replaced my friend  
with a hashtag.*

*wish i could tell you  
his hands are draped*

*from my neck, but his  
shield is shaped like*

*a badge. i leave revenge  
hopelessly to God.*

if we dream the old world  
we wake up hands up.

sometimes we unfuneral a boy  
who shot another boy to here

& who was once a reaper we make  
a brother, a crush, a husband, a duet

of sweet remission. say the word  
i can make any black boy a savior

make him a flock of ravens  
his body burst into ebon seraphs.

this, our handcrafted religion.  
we are small gods of redemption.

we dance until guilt turns to sweat.  
we sweat until we flood & drown.

don't fret, we don't die. they can't kill  
the boy on your shirt again.

//

*when i want to kiss you  
i kiss the ground.*

*i shout down sirens.  
they bring no safety.*

*my king turned my ache  
my one turned into my nothing.*

*all last month was spent in bed  
with your long gone name.*

*what good is a name  
if no one answers back?*

*i know when the wind feels  
as if it's made of hands*

*& i feel like i'm made of water  
it's you trying to save me*

*from drowning in myself, but i can't  
wed wind. i'm not water.*

dear dear  
my most distant love—

when i dream of you i wake  
in a field so blue i drown.

if you were here, we could play  
Eden all day, but fruit here

grows strange, i know before me  
here lived something treacherous.

whose arms hold you now  
after my paradise grew from chaos?

whose name do you make  
thunder the room?

is he a good man?  
does he know my face?

does he look like me?  
do i keep him up at night?

//

how old am i? today, i'm today.  
i'm as old as whatever light touches me.

some nights i'm new as the fire at my feet  
some nights i'm a star, glamorous, ancient

& already extinguished. we citizens  
of an unpopular heaven

& low-attended crucifixions. listen  
i've accepted what i was given

be it my name or be it my ender's verdict.  
when i was born, i was born a bull's-eye.

i spent my life arguing how i mattered  
until it didn't matter.

who knew my haven  
would be my coffin?

dead is the safest i've ever been.  
i've never been so alive.

//

if you press your ear to the dirt  
you can hear it hum, not like it's filled

with beetles & other low gods  
but like a tongue rot with gospel

& other glories. listen to the dirt  
crescendo a kid back.

come. celebrate. this  
is everyday. everyday

holy. everyday high  
holiday. everyday new

year. every year, days get longer.  
time clogged with boys. the boys

O the boys. they still come  
in droves. the old world

keeps choking them. our new one  
can't stop spitting them out.

//

dear badge number

⑨ what did i do wrong?  
be born? be black? meet you?

//

ask the mountainboy to put you on  
his shoulders if you want to see

the old world, ask him for some lean  
-in & you'll be home. step off him

& walk around your block.  
grow wings & fly above your city.

all the guns fire toward heaven. ✓  
warning shots mince your feathers.

fall back to the metal-less side  
of the mountainboy, cry if you need to.

⑩ that world of laws rendered us into dark  
matter. we asked for nothing but our names

in a mouth we've known  
for decades. some were blessed

to know the mouth.  
our decades betrayed us.

④ you are not welcome here. trust  
the trip will kill you. go home.

⑫ we earned this paradise  
by a death we didn't deserve.

i'm sure there are other heres.  
a somewhere for every kind

of somebody, a heaven of brown  
girls braiding on golden stoops

but here—

how could i ever explain to you—

someone prayed we'd rest in peace  
& here we are

in peace whole all summer

dear white america

- ⑥ i've left Earth in search of darker planets, a solar system revolving too near a black hole. i've left in search of a new God. i do not trust the God you have given us. my grandmother's hallelujah is only outdone by the fear she nurses every time the blood-fat summer swallows another child who used to sing in the choir. take your God back. though his songs are beautiful, his miracles are inconsistent. i want the fate of Lazarus for Renisha, want Chucky, Bo, Meech, Trayvon, Sean & Jonylah risen three days after their entombing, their ghost re-gifted flesh & blood, their flesh & blood re-gifted their children. i've left Earth, i am equal parts sick of your go back to Africa & i just don't see race. neither did the poplar tree. we did not build your boats (though we did leave a trail of kin to guide us home). we did not build your prisons (though we did & we fill them too). we did not ask to be part of your America (though are we not America? her joints brittle & dragging a ripped gown through Oakland?). i can't stand your ground. i'm sick of calling your recklessness the law. each night, i count my brothers. & in the morning, when some do not survive to be counted, i count the holes they leave. i reach for black folks & touch only air. your master magic trick, America. now he's breathing, now he don't. abracadaver. white bread voodoo. sorcery you claim not to practice,
- ③ hand my cousin a pistol to do your work. i tried, white people. i tried to love you, but you spent my brother's funeral making plans for brunch, talking too loud next to his bones. you took one look at the river, plump with the body of boy after girl after sweet boi & ask why does it always have to be about race? because you made it that way! because you put an asterisk on my sister's gorgeous face! call
- ② her pretty (for a black girl)! because black girls go missing without so much as a whisper of where?! because there are no amber alerts for amber-skinned girls! because Jordan boomed. because Emmett whistled. because Huey P. spoke. because Martin preached. because black boys can always be too loud to live. because it's taken my
- ⑤

papa's & my grandma's time, my father's time, my mother's time,  
my aunt's time, my uncle's time, my brother's & my sister's time ...  
how much time do you want for your progress? i've left Earth to  
find a place where my kin can be safe, where black people ain't but  
people the same color as the good, wet earth, until that means  
something, until then i bid you well, i bid you war, i bid you our  
lives to gamble with no more. i've left Earth & i am touching  
everything you beg your telescopes to show you. i'm giving the stars  
their right names. & this life, this new story & history you cannot  
steal or sell or cast overboard or hang or beat or drown or own or  
redline or shackle or silence or cheat or choke or cover up or jail or  
shoot or jail or shoot or jail or shoot or ruin

④

this, if only this one, is ours.

### it won't be a bullet

becoming a little moon—brightwarm in me one night.  
thank god. i can go quietly. the doctor will explain death  
& i'll go practice.

- ① in the catalogue of ways to kill a black boy, find me  
buried between the pages stuck together  
with red stick. ironic, predictable. look at me.
- ② i'm not the kind of black man who dies on the news.  
i'm the kind who grows thinner & thinner & thinner
- ③ until light outweighs us, & we become it, family  
gathered around my barely body telling me to go  
toward myself.

