

The Cold War and New Sacred Poetry

Li-Young Lee, Suji Kwock Kim, and Kathleen OSSIP

 Philipp Reisner

Abstract

While one might expect that poets who engage with the Cold War primarily adopt a political voice, many of them, in fact, rather assume a religious voice. Indeed, poets such as Li-Young Lee, Suji Kwock Kim, and Kathleen OSSIP examine the Cold War in light of theological questions. Their poems bear witness not to personal suffering inflicted by political and societal circumstances but instead to human resilience bolstered by faith in the face of traumatic experience. Their writings are not best captured by the frequently invoked “Poetry of Witness,” understood as witness to injustice, but rather “new sacred poetry”: colored by individual experience of trauma, their poetry serves as a vehicle for expressing spiritual and mystical experience. They thereby innovate not only poetry but also contemporary theology. The Cold War becomes the backdrop for the struggle between faith and suffering brought about by political, societal, and personal circumstances.

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The Cold War and New Sacred Poetry

Li-Young Lee, Suji Kwock Kim,
and Kathleen Ossip

Philipp Reisner

Many poets who engage with the Cold War adopt a religious rather than a political voice. Indeed, poets such as Li-Young Lee, Suji Kwock Kim, and Kathleen Ossip examine the history of the Cold War in view of important theological questions. These poets bear witness not to personal suffering inflicted by political and societal circumstances but instead to human resilience supported by faith in the face of traumatic experience. Hence, these poems are not “Poetry of Witness” in the sense of a witness to injustice; rather, these authors’ poetry is a means of facing traumatic experience with the help of faith.¹ Accordingly, their poems exemplify what I propose to call “new sacred poetry”: colored by individual experience of trauma, these poems express spiritual and mystical experience, thereby transforming both poetry and contemporary theology. The Cold War becomes the historical backdrop for the struggle between faith and suffering brought about by political, societal, and personal circumstances.

Any treatment of Cold War poetry in English must distinguish between poetry written since the 1980s *about* topics related to the Cold War and poetry written *during* the Cold War.² The second category—that of classic Cold War poets—probably more readily comes to mind, as it includes luminaries such as Charles Olson, Richard Wilbur, Randall Jarrell, Robert Lowell, Derek Walcott, Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, and Seamus Heaney. Their works have been investigated from a variety of perspectives—in view of poetic communities and schools,³ the influence of science,⁴ and academic professionalization,⁵ among others. The younger generation of Cold War poets, such as Li-Young Lee, Suji Kwock Kim, Kathleen Ossip, Brooks Haxton, Christian Wiman, Peter Cole, Eavan Boland, and Kevin Hart, offers a retrospective perspective on this generation-defining conflict. Their Cold War poems address questions relating to religion and spirituality, albeit from different denominational and cultural perspectives. Indeed, these poets belong to a larger movement which views the Cold

War as intertwined with the sacred. This movement emerged in the 1980s, which represent a turning point in the history of mysticism (as an important dimension of the sacred, and hence also of sacred poetry; this “mystical turn” has also been described as an “apophatic turn”) and in the work of many poets internationally, for example in China following the return of modernism after the death of Mao Zedong.⁶ In the context of contemporary American poetry, Diana von Finck and Oliver Scheiding have introduced a period starting in the 1980s, citing “language poetry” and neoformalism as significant new developments. The theological work of poetry in response to experiences of Cold War history adds a key layer to the definition of this new sub-epoch.⁷

Cold War history has recently turned its attention to the so-called second front of the Cold War, examining how the six powers—the United States, the Soviet Union, China, Japan, and North and South Korea—forged political and cultural environments that were distinct from the experience of the Cold War in Europe.⁸ Cold War studies has also turned to the long-neglected subject of religion.⁹ Axel Schäfer has suggested that the Cold War years offered “an unexpected ideological windfall for religious groups” and “bolstered the religious component in American culture and society.”¹⁰ Accordingly, Cold War poetry must be understood in view of this “religious renaissance,” which has been dubbed a “Cold War awakening.”¹¹

My selection of Li-Young Lee and Suji Kwock Kim, two poets of East Asian descent, and Kathleen Ossip, the author of a poetry cycle programmatically titled *The Cold War* (2011), follows from this reassessment of Cold War historiography. Scholars have frequently interpreted Lee’s and Kim’s poetry through the lens of ethnic studies, a tendency reinforced by the discourse on linguistic and cultural hybridity, which has only recently been counterbalanced by more nuanced readings.¹² Framed by the historiographical shift mentioned above, and considering Lee’s rejection of all ethnic labeling,¹³ I will suggest in this article that reading Lee’s and Kim’s poems for their historical and religious meanings unlocks alternatives to previous readings. Similarly, the spiritual aspects of Ossip’s poetry draw on her religious roots. The religious upbringing and denominational backgrounds of these three poets inform the way religious dimensions and biblical text appear in their poetry. I hence maintain that one needs to consider the poets’ religious roots—a dimension frequently neglected in poetry scholarship—before exploring the significance of their ethnic origins. Granted, ethnicity plays an important role in this tradition of Cold War poetry; however, this role is secondary to religious belief. That is, the more important questions these poems raise concern religious rather than ethnic culture.

Both Li-Young Lee and Suji Kwock Kim come from Protestant backgrounds. Lee inherited his faith from his father, who worked as a Presbyterian priest for the socially

marginalized in Vandergrift, Pennsylvania. Lee's father converted to Christianity as an adult before emigrating from China, which set him and his family on a long migratory journey through East Asia prior to arriving in the United States. In Lee's case, religiosity is thus not directly connected to ethnicity. For Kim, in contrast, the significance of religion may be explained by the central role Christianity plays in the Korean immigrant community. The experience of immigration reinforced the importance of religion for both Lee and Kim since Christian churches and communities supported the newcomers. I will read their poems alongside the work of Kathleen Ossip, the founding editor of the poetry review website *SCOUT* and author of three volumes and a chapbook of poetry. Within the Protestant–Catholic divide that marks Western Christianity in the United States, Ossip's work takes on a special significance: Similar to other contemporary (crypto–)Catholic US-American women poets such as April Bernard and Martha Serpas, her work displays a sustained engagement with the after-effects of Catholic spirituality.¹⁴ The main topic of her latest collection, *The Do-Over* (2015), is the phenomenon of death, which she addresses from the perspective of faith.

Notably, all three poets engage a sacred dimension that does not impose its religiosity upon the reader in the way pious or devotional poetry does. Rather, these poets conceal predominant religious motifs and clear denominational markers behind the Cold War experience and behind a spiritual veneer that could be misread as too general and vague. Reading their poems alongside one another in view of their different Christian backgrounds helps understand the significance of the Protestant–Catholic divide in Western Christianity, a tension reflected in the binary worldviews of the Cold War. Poetry thus functions as a mirror of theological developments. The unique quality of their works derives from their proximity to biblical text, which reveals itself only upon close readings of single poems within larger poetry cycles and with an eye to the authors' oeuvres. Overall, their poems may be seen as part of a trend of sacralization, characterizing much of contemporary literature, which is discreetly colored by religious, especially Judeo-Christian, motifs and allusions. However, the current cultural paradigm often glosses over these dimensions of poetry.

This neglect of religious meanings is exacerbated by contemporary views of religion and current trends in scholarly publishing—which emphasize ethnicity, culture, and form rather than spirituality, religion, and theology. Such revisions of our interpretations of poetry are, however, crucial to the field of American studies. After all, the systematic analysis of the history and interpretation of poetry adds to our knowledge about the historical conditions that shaped American studies in the post-war era. Re-calibrating our critical approach, in turn, helps us understand the field's objectives and driving forces. The insights thus gained are especially relevant

at a time when the field's tendency to focus primarily on the United States' relation to Europe is being recalibrated.¹⁵ Current approaches which attempt to counteract this transatlantic bias explore transpacific, transequatorial, hemispheric, and post-national dimensions.¹⁶ Contemporary American poetry may play an important role in this project.¹⁷

What is striking about the poetry cycles of Lee, Kim, and Ossip is how they convey mystical experience through traumatic personal experiences. Czesław Miłosz has distinguished the twentieth-century poet from the reporter and described the poet's relation to the wealth of material, knowledge, and facts as requiring a "distillation of material."¹⁸ Drawing on this notion, poetry offers a concise form which allows witnesses to draw on the silence that faith demands. In this sense, poetry becomes the voice arising from the silence of the seventh day of Creation and its aftermath to praise the Lord; this form of witnessing is about the communicative function of silence in imitating Christ as much as it is about the human incapacity of faith and the insignificance of human words in the face of God's Word.

Lee's, Kim's, and Ossip's works belong to a larger movement in twentieth-century poetry that I would like to call "new sacred poetry." This type of poetry seeks to find new forms to express religious sensibilities of modernity.¹⁹ Silence is a key means of expression in this context. To be sure, silence may be considered a defining feature of poetry more generally, but numerous experiences of the twentieth century reinforced its centrality—experiences that led to a mystic attitude, renewed interest in biblical text, and a search for spiritual truth growing out of a sense of disillusionment.

Notably, while the term "new sacred poetry" has been used to refer to different literary and poetic renewals since the beginning of the Christian era, it has so far not been applied to contemporary American poetry, for which the aesthetic dimension of suffering, the literary channeling of pain, has prompted a religious reaction, as poets have responded to suffering with a voice of faith. In new sacred poetry, traces of Cold War politics introduce political, societal, and personal circumstances that bring about pain, which causes a questioning of faith. Hence, witnessing draws on its biblical and theological roots: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us."²⁰ According to traditional interpretations, this New Testament passage leaves open whether the Old Testament heroes of faith introduced in the previous chapter are now watching or "witnessing" believers' lives and whether they witnessed to their faith by their words and lives.²¹ New sacred poetry responds to this question (i.e., whether the Old Testament heroes of faith are now watching or "witnessing" believers' lives)

by reflecting on the existence of an afterworld, rather than by focusing only on historical events of the poets' personal experience in the twentieth century. Hence, new sacred poetry provides an eschatological perspective on the future that is inspired by a theological, textual, biblical past. Trauma constitutes the psychological motivation for such transgenerational reflections.

These elements of trauma, transgenerational reflection, and a theological perspective on time can be found in the works of the three poets I will examine in this article. Ossip's award-winning debut volume, *The Search Engine* (2002),²² shows a religious penchant as well as a concern with the twentieth century as a subject of poetry in poems such as "My 20th Century," "Rose of Sharon," and "The Witness." Her exploration of the nexus of faith and history in these poems set the stage for her more focused engagement with the Cold War in more recent collections. In "My 20th Century," the female voice of the poem addresses her mother on the subject of religion in a monological conversation over tea:

Ma, I say, there's this
guy who says all religions
derive from a shared mythology.
What do you think? She
swivels and rides
away on her trike.²³

The dialogical nature of this poem establishes a connection to the Cold War because the daughter asks her mother questions about developments in the early twentieth century, which the daughter views from her perspective of somebody born after the Second World War. The daughter represents a younger female voice speaking from Cold War times, raising several questions concerning its prehistory.

The topic of religion recurs in the prose poem "Rose of Sharon," demonstrating that Judeo-Christian theology and faith have a bearing on the twentieth century when looked at from its end: "The Lord lifted up his hand and gave her a forlorn hope: . . . Love of the least sentimental kind."²⁴ The poem "The Witness" engages with politics and death from a religiously informed perspective, while "On Political Crisis" from Ossip's most recent collection, *The Do-Over*, uses the typographic device of crossed-out words for emphasis, in this case the central theological term "grace":

~~Grace~~ Success consists in ignoring
what you don't like, as a bunny

leaps past tinfoil
in his search for greens.²⁵

These poems mark their connection to the Cold War by their turns of phrase and use of words. For example, words such as “posturing” and “reordering” (used in “On Political Crisis”) began to be used more frequently during the Cold War. Through manifold references, Ossip’s poems reflect the formative years of her own linguistic socialization during the Cold War, thereby drawing attention to the extent to which the Cold War was also a war of words, a war in which a new vocabulary for critique spread and created a “new language of universal values, the power of which each mirrored the enemy’s weaker points.”²⁶ “In the Atrium,” the opening poem of *The Search Engine*, presents a speaker’s “pure experience” and observations of street scenes and people in Manhattan, for example amid “the marmoreal yet midwestern hauteur of the lobby bar / of the opulence-is-democracy-in-action Times Square hotel.” Within this scenery appears a couple, he with a “face toothsome as an olive, eyes Slavonic.”²⁷ These observations and references continue toward the end of the cycle in a poem with a similar setting and tone, “57th Street,” which mentions Chagall, focuses on “six laquered Russian nesting dolls,” and ends with the anaphoric couplet “You’re already nostalgic for the twenty-first century. / You tense for the tractable what-happens-next.”²⁸ Subtle but persistent allusions such as these set the stage for her continuous poetic exploration of the connectedness and difference between East and West later to be explored with a topical focus on the Cold War. This political turn in her poetry takes inspiration from the Confessional poets, as demonstrated by her “Ballade Confessionnelle,” which is subtitled “(Plath and Sexton).” Two lines in this poem capture the haunted character of the political situation during the Cold War: “The world is full of enemies. / I could not stop looking.”²⁹

In a recent article, Ossip makes her understanding of the political dimension of poetry explicit: “In fact, poetry is the only utterly free space for language that I’m aware of, and that is what makes it indispensable to me, and also what makes writing it and reading it a political act.”³⁰ Her interest in poetry as a political act evolved into a book-length engagement with the Cold War.³¹ Despite its title, *The Cold War*, the theme surfaces only indirectly aside from the closing title poem. The section titled “I will be your country soon” from the poem “American History (A Fearsome Solitude)” consists of two parts of comparable length that are divided by “or—.” The first part represents physical and mental torment, perhaps even torture of a female, through a third-person lyrical I:

Now she was thrown smack up against—
Why doest Thou hurt the already hurting?
was a serious question, asked in the wired
bucket, in the tired barrel, in a voice of abiding—

A weird sort of serious yarn: *the big C* or
maybe just a bruise, an undistinguished imitator.
 She made a journey of herself, she assumed
 the position of a snail, she wept, she sought counsel:

Use them willingly, shrink from none of them!
Three drops of blood, nerve pain of surpassing—
 and no sincere effort, no methodology thwarted.
 Try to accept that you may have an—

Try to admit the possibility.
 Some people, however, carry this too far by—³²

In the second line quoted above, the use of Early Modern English introduces a biblical tone which evokes the King James Version. The line recalls both the covenantal language of Genesis and the despair of Job,³³ while the rest of this section disrupts the comfortable position of the reader by combining imagery of physical violence (“Now she was thrown smack up against”) with the suffering caused by cancer (“*the big C*”), thus raising theological questions concerning present societal concerns.

The second part of the poem assumes a more reflective, first-person stance:

In the beginning was the first person singular. I thought my words
 meant something. Then I saw a thin pinched face that looked as if it had
 once suffered great pain.

The storm burst, and—motivation, action, result. A squalid past, but it
 wasn't mine. I don't see any way around it—will have to tell the truth.

Tilted and then righted. Strained and then blew it. Vulnerable does not
 equal deep. Literature does not equal the way out.

A time will come when these pins and needles shall not bother me no
 more. Compassion. Enchantment. And sing an outside song:

The snow is plopping down, in clods, beyond my window. It venerates
 the knots of trees. Promises a pillow.³⁴

Ossip's discontinuous style emphasizes surprise. At every turn, a new unexpected aspect is introduced, keeping the reader on the edge but at the same time involved through an array of familiar textual allusions and references. Beyond the meta-literary critique characteristic of post-war poetic sensibilities, epitomized by the sentence “Literature does not equal the way out,” Ossip elevates this critique to the realm of the theological: “In the beginning was the first person singular” refers

to Creation and New Creation in Genesis,³⁵ a passage echoed in Hebrews,³⁶ and the opening of the Gospel of John (“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.”).³⁷ Thus, the poem imitates the typological structure of the Bible, as its first part refers to Old Testament passages, while the second section opens with a New Testament reference. The two sections are tellingly separated by the word “or—,” which is aligned to the left side of the page together with the title of the section, “I will be your country soon.” Tying both testaments together in an awkwardly idiosyncratic, politicized version of Judeo-Christian syncretism, Ossip’s work is an excellent example of the Old Testament turn in recent contemporary American poetry. She links these biblical references, in the overall context of the cycle, to a critique of both the potential self-centeredness of literature and the postwar individualism which undermines societal cohesion. The veiled biblical subtext becomes instrumental to her poetry’s gesturing toward ethical questions of the recent past.

“American History,” exemplifies the concern with Creation and New Creation which characterizes Ossip’s poetry more generally. Ossip’s cycle mimics a basic biblical structure, as the final poem in *The Cold War*, the eponymous “The Cold War,” takes on a prophetic tone, similar to Revelation in the New Testament, whereas the first poem of the cycle, “The Human Mind,” looks toward the past with its opening words “In those days.” Throughout her cycle, Ossip employs remarkable language to evoke the glaring surfaces and particularities of everyday life during the Cold War, thereby creating a textual fabric embedded in the time frame indicated by the cycle’s title. Reflections on experiencing the divine capture the irony of latent tendencies toward the binary worldview characteristic of the era: “Sometimes it was hard to figure out how to be sincere” is a line at the beginning of a series of poems centering on “The Status Seekers.”³⁸

Religious allusions do not end there, though: “the truth” mentioned in the “I will be your country soon” section of “American History” reinforces the connection with New Creation and Jesus as “the way, and the truth, and the life.”³⁹ The “storm” that “burst” alludes both to the deluge in Genesis when “the fountains of the great deep burst forth” and to Jesus calming the storm in the synoptic gospels.⁴⁰ “[P]ins and needles” references techniques of maleficent harming effigies of the victim, which marks both early modern witchcraft persecutions and contemporary witchcraft, and evokes torture as a technique used in twentieth-century warfare and policy. Since torture was an integral part of the early modern witchcraft persecutions and the first half of the section titled “I will be your country soon” describes a torture scene, this section of the poem offers a powerful reflection on torture in historical perspective. Yet the allusion to torture remains indirect, as “pins and needles” simultaneously alters the tone of the poem by leading readers away from the depiction of

physical pain (inflicted on a woman) that marks its first part toward a more abstract and distant reflection on past events and concepts such as “pain,” “truth,” “literature,” “Compassion,” and “Enchantment.” After all, “pins and needles” also evokes the phrase “to be on pins and needles,” the more common meaning of nervous anxiety or “a state of agitated suspense and extreme uneasiness.”⁴¹ The image of projected guilt and scapegoating conjured by the reference to witchcraft nevertheless leads to the concluding image of snow, biblically denoting innocence, turning the “drops of blood” mentioned in the first part of the poem into a promise of forgiveness according to Isaiah: “Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.”⁴²

Following a series of biblical and historical allusions, Ossip ends her unusual reading of the fearsome solitude of American history in the twentieth century. The tormented woman of the first part represents perhaps the victims of US-American imperial aggression. As the poem adopts a prophetic voice in both its stylistic and allusive references to the biblical text, the prophetic function of the woman in Revelation comes to mind, supported by the use of “[t]hou hurt,” which also occurs in Revelation.⁴³ The allusion to the Book of Psalms and its reference to salvation with the line “sing an outside song” may be read as both reinforcement of the biblical reference and an ironic critique of Judeo-Christian American imperialist tendencies.⁴⁴

The prophetic tone of “A time will come when these pins and needles shall not bother me no more. Compassion. Enchantment” demonstrates how new sacred poetry incorporates contemporary theological critiques of superficial compassion and of idolizing the suffering of others, here in a particularly ironic tone. Patricia Snow has critiqued this idolizing from a Christian perspective, as she considers it a misguided interpretation of Western Christianity by overemphasizing the individual and treating empathy and symbolic compassion to be more important than charity and fearless passion.⁴⁵ Such superficial features of compassion are precisely the target of Ossip’s critique, which she articulates by blending biblical allusion and biting irony.

Such an ironical tone also occurs—if to a much lesser extent—in Suji Kwock Kim’s work, which is equally replete with biblical allusions. In her poetry collection *Notes from the Divided Country* (2003), Kim reflects on the Cold War in view of her family history and her traumatic war experiences in the wake of the division of Korea.⁴⁶ Chronicling a life similar to hers from the point of view of a female voice from before her birth to adulthood, Kim memorializes past suffering from a mystical perspective. Biblically inflected, her cycle interweaves the genesis of the individual and that of the world, moving from a poem based on Genesis at the beginning to a poem on

the Book of Revelation at the end, reflecting immigrant experience and history, as the titles of her poems of the first section of her cycle make clear: “Generation,” “The Tree of Unknowing,” “The Tree of Knowledge,” “Middle Kingdom,” and “Translations from the Mother Tongue.” In a cry of despair, her poem “The Tree of Knowledge” responds to the atrocities of the Korean War by invoking the Book of Psalms and the Book of Job in a prayer before turning to irony, similar to Ossip’s voice:

*Lord, how long wilt thou hide thy face? [Job 13:24]
Why should we be patient, when death lies at the end like the fruit of life?
Why didst thou bring me forth from the womb? [Job 10:18]*

Seek and ye shall
seek: I wanted to die, but death
is no remedy for having been born.⁴⁷

“Seek and ye shall / seek” inverts Matthew (“Seek, and ye shall find”) to reinforce Job’s despair and the lament of the thirteenth Psalm.⁴⁸ In other poems, Kim links this tone of prayer with the atrocities of the Korean War, again with reference to biblical precept. Thus, one reads the following passage in the long poem “Fragments from the Forgotten War,” which is dedicated to her father and stands at the center of her collection:

I’ll never forget the smell of burning flesh.
I’ll never forget the stench of open sores, pus, gangrene,
the smell of people rotting who hadn’t died yet:

or the cries of the wounded moaning without morphine,
a boy sinking his teeth into his arm
to take his mind off the gash that ripped his stomach,
biting down and down until you saw bone glinting through
like teeth in a mass grave.

In the last lines, the voice of the poem returns to this boy as an indelible memory:

I think of that boy biting his arm
who didn’t live through the night,
wild dogs gnawing at his skull in the morning, his whole face an “exit wound”:

I think of a carcass foaming with maggots, the bone black with hatching flies.⁴⁹

Referring to the last lines of Charles Olson’s poem “The Kingfishers” (1949) through the allusion to Samson finding honey and a swarm of bees in the carcass of the lion he had previously slain,⁵⁰ the end of this poem takes up Olson’s “maggots,” adding “hatching flies” to underscore the atrocity of the scene. The poem hence suggests

that humanity has “progressed” or further declined since the war with respect to violence and inhumanness. The last line links the proto-Cold War moment of 1949 (the year Olson’s poem was published) to a retrospective reflection on the Korean War, insisting that cruelty persists and will consistently reappear.

Inscribing the war experience into the story of Samson’s marriage,⁵¹ and vice versa, emphasizes the ways in which violence and cruelty are related to gender. It also turns the promise contained in the Samson story into a fatal, accusing prophecy that results from the forgetfulness surrounding the Korean War in Western cultural memory. Finally, the flies recall the false God of Ekron, Baal-zebub, as the Lord of Flies,⁵² identifying the devilish nature of war, “a war between gods who weren’t gods,” as stated earlier in the poem. The line references the plurality of gods in Genesis and reinforces the allusion through repeated use of anaphora and enumeration.

Kim concludes the next poem in the cycle, “Montage with Neon, Bok Choi, Gasoline, Lovers & Strangers,” in which the city of Seoul today brings back memories of the war, in a section written from the perspective of old men who may have experienced the war:

whose spirits could not be broken,
whose every breath seems to say:
after things turned to their worst, we began again,

but may you never see what we saw,
may you never do what we’ve done,
may you never remember & may you never forget.⁵³

To live with the knowledge of the war is a paradox which seems to suggest that one may self-consciously overcome trauma by embracing it and gaining knowledge from it, drawing ethical consequences for one’s own life. This is what Li-Young Lee calls the paradox of the God who acts in history and time and the God of the pure present or mystical encounter.⁵⁴ Believing that the two may be reconciled, he presents a similar passage on remembering and forgetting in his collection *Behind My Eyes* (2008):

And if you’re one of those
whose left side of the face doesn’t match
the right, it might be a clue

looking the other way was a habit
your predecessors found useful for survival.
Don’t lament not being beautiful.



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Get used to seeing while not seeing.
Get busy remembering while forgetting.
Dying to live while not wanting to go on.⁵⁵

This passage is from the second poem of the cycle, “Self-Help for Fellow Refugees,” a poem in which the male voice recalls having witnessed his father being arrested as a child—an allusion to the arrest of Lee’s father in front of the boy’s eyes by the Sukarno regime in Indonesia, an experience that ultimately led to his father’s conversion to Christianity. In the poem, the father wants the male voice to see the event and the mother wants to spare the male voice the sight. Even more biblically, “remembering” here is used in the sense of remembering the obligations toward others in the way God remembers the faithful. In Lee’s dense inflection of personal experience, poetic expression, and theological reflection, this moment also serves as a reference to his father’s conversion, which is the source of his own deeply Christian poetry, which explores the workings of the divine in contemporary history. Lee continues this work in his collection *The Undressing* (2018), where the mystical merger of the divine and the poetic voice rearticulate the bold mysticism of the fourteenth-century Persian poet Khwāja Shams-ud-Dīn Muhammad Hāfez-e Shīrāzī (pen name: Hafez). Lee also turns to the goddess Sophia while invoking the erotic imagery of religious mysticism and extending his preoccupation with “the Word” as another testimony to the influence of his father’s Protestantism.

Lee’s work is one example of how contemporary American poetry emphasizes Creation and New Creation in response to lived experiences of the Cold War, thereby anticipating a return to the theology of Genesis within contemporary biblical and dogmatic theology. This, in turn, may be a necessary condition for understanding Catholic–Protestant relations during the Cold War. Other Catholic poetic voices of the present, including Kevin Hart,⁵⁶ for whom poetry is a medium of theological exploration rather than pious devotion, may serve as helpful points of comparison, both in terms of imagery and theological substance. This poetry reflects the continuous literary struggle with the Protestant–Catholic divide that has characterized a good part of the literary production in the Anglo-American realm. In ways not yet sufficiently realized, the currently dominating readings of poetry (and literature), which neglect their groundedness in biblical text, derive from the sacralization of literature. In this process, the ongoing Catholicization of American Protestantisms—that is, the subtle reversal of the Protestant impetus at the beginning of the New England settlement despite its cultural prominence—seeks and finds literary and poetic expression. In a new admixture of a Protestant interest in the Word and a Catholic turn toward the things and sufferings of this world, new sacred poetry derives much of its energy from its basis in a biblical tradition mediated through a biblically inspired literary (poetic) tradition in English (a tradition built on Catho-

lic-Protestant [re-]conversions and tensions). The lingering force of the Protestant scriptural tradition and influence renders this derivation textual in ways the cultural paradigm is not. This recent turn of poetry toward theology matches the turn of theology to poetry throughout the twentieth century—a turn that, through the sheer force of its literary effectiveness, raises the question to what extent theology is literature’s own terms. To put this differently, the poets and their work analyzed here exemplify that poetry that knows itself becomes religion. This notion results from a thoroughly theological perspective on literature which, in the words of Terence Wright, recognizes that “the indirect mode of reference employed in literature constitutes some of the most effective theology.”⁵⁷ Poetry as the most metaphorically loaded literary genre may be seen to emulate biblical style. In the case of the new sacred poetry, metaphorical strategies coincide and overlap as the poetic language seeks to evoke biblical precept. The readings of the work of Li-Young Lee, Suji Kwock Kim, and Kathleen Ossip raise the question concerning how poetry itself may be grasped as a kind of theology. Using the term “new sacred poetry,” one may consider it to be the place where theology—occasionally and momentarily—finds itself.

Beyond exploring the paradoxes arising from personal experiences in the polarized world of the Cold War, these poets renew the engagement with literature and biblical precept by seeking poetic expression grounded in their spiritual worlds and religious heritages. The study of how their work anticipates contemporary theology opens up an important field of investigation: literature is to be understood with regard to the theological dimension of language and not as an object in the context of cultural identity politics. The new sacred poetry examined here intensifies and redefines the relationship between theology, history, and poetry. Because it condenses and interprets experience in meaningful ways, it may serve as a potent tool to understand how the legacy of the Cold War continues to define the present, and how the fault lines of its history determine the contours of contemporary theology. Contemporary poetry cycles of this kind, which take up the structure of the Bible by opening with an allusion to Genesis and concluding with an allusion to the Book of Revelation, respond to the bias of mid-twentieth century literature that focuses predominantly on the New Testament.⁵⁸ The Old Testament is thus reappraised for the purpose of redefining Christian views. The significance of this theological work in the form of poetry should not be underestimated since theologians and philosophers have turned to poetry for its explanatory value regarding questions of the transcendent. New sacred poetry will play an important role in our efforts to understand the field of American studies in the twentieth century not only literarily, culturally, and historically, but also theologically: Through the theological work of their poetry, poets such as Li-Young Lee, Suji Kwock Kim, and Kathleen Ossip link their personal experiences of specific facets of the Cold War to their personal takes on the

religious traditions they inherited. This double honesty toward their religious and spiritual ancestry and the specific historical moment, for which they have developed a precise poetic sensorium, shows the importance of paying heed to (theo) poetic engagements with Cold War culture.

Notes

- 1 Carolyn Forché, *Against Forgetting: 20th-Century Poetry of Witness* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993); Carolyn Forché and Duncan Wu, eds., *Poetry of Witness: The Tradition in English, 1500–2001* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014).
- 2 Edward Brunner's anthology *Cold War Poetry* (2001) connects the rise in perception and reception of Cold War poetry to the emergence of creative writing programs and professorships at US universities. Most poets writing retrospectively about the Cold War come out of these programs. Edward Brunner, *Cold War Poetry: The Social Text in the Fifties Poem* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004).
- 3 Stephen Voyle, *Poetic Community: Avant-Garde Activism and Cold War Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).
- 4 Peter Middleton, *Physics Envy: American Poetry and Science in the Cold War and After* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).
- 5 Eric Bennett, "Creative Writing and the Cold War University," in *A Companion to Creative Writing*, ed. Graeme Harper (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 377–92.
- 6 Louise Nelstrop, "Introduction: Remembering and Forgetting the Mystical in Contemporary Theological Discourse," in *Exploring Lost Dimensions in Christian Mysticism: Opening to the Mystical*, ed. Louise Nelstrop und Simon D. Podmore (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 2–3; Wolfgang Kubin, "Fernes Verstehen: Zur Sicht der chinesischen Welt aus deutschem Blick," lecture series "Die Kunst Kulturen zu verstehen: Das Andere im Eigenen," July 17, 2013, *HHU Mediathek*, July 23, 2013, <https://mediathek.hhu.de/watch/d6dco323-d279-445e-86af-e8cf26d9e2aa>; Dian Li, *The Chinese Poetry of Bei Dao, 1978–2000: Resistance and Exile* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), 27.
- 7 Oliver Scheiding, "Ideas of Order in Contemporary American Poetry," in *Ideas of Order in Contemporary American Poetry*, ed. Diana von Finck and Oliver Scheiding (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2007), 9, n. 5.
- 8 See Marc S. Gallicchio, *The Cold War Begins in Asia: American East Asian Policy and the Fall of the Japanese Empire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Peter Lowe, *Containing the Cold War in East Asia: British Policies Towards Japan, China and Korea, 1948–53* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997); Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *The Cold War in East Asia, 1945–1991* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); Xiaobing Li, *The Cold War in East Asia* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2018).
- 9 See Clemens Six, *Secularism, Decolonisation, and the Cold War in South and Southeast Asia* (London: Routledge, 2018); Dianne Kirby, "Religion and the Cold War: An Introduction," in *Religion and the Cold War*, ed. Dianne Kirby (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 1, 20.
- 10 Axel R. Schäfer, *Piety and Public Funding: Evangelicals and the State in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 25.

- 11 Andrew Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 440.
- 12 See Jeffrey F. L. Partridge, *Beyond Literary Chinatown* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004); Jeffrey F. L. Partridge, “The Politics of Ethnic Authorship: Li-Young Lee, Emerson, and Whitman at the Banquet Table,” *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 37, no. 1 (2004): 101–26; Jahan Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Brigitte Wallinger-Schorn, “So There it Is”: *An Exploration of Cultural Hybridity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 78–9, 90–3; Walter S. H. Lim, “Ethnicity and the Southeast Asian Diaspora in Li-Young Lee’s *The Winged Seed*,” in *Narrating Race: Asia, (Trans)Nationalism, Social Change*, ed. Robbie B. H. Goh (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 69–88; Walter S. H. Lim, *Narratives of Diaspora: Representations of Asia in Chinese American Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Steven G. Young, “The Precision of Persimmons: Hybridity, Grafting and the Case of Li-Young Lee,” *Literature Interpretation Theory* 12, no. 1 (2001): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10436920108580279>; Steven G. Yao, *Foreign Accents: Chinese American Verse from Exclusion to Postethnicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- 13 James Kyung-Jin Lee, “Li-Young Lee,” in *Words Matter: Conversations with Asian American Writers*, ed. Cheung King-Kok (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2000), 275, 279.
- 14 Similar to other contemporary Catholic American poets, the Catholic background of Ossip’s work repeatedly comes to the fore. Her early poem “The Complaints of Maria Goretti,” for example, reflects on the life of the eponymous Catholic saint (1890–1902). Kathleen Ossip, “The Complaints of Maria Goretti,” in *The Search Engine* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2002), 19–22. Characteristically, this poem also bears the signs of neoformalism typical of (crypto-)Catholic contemporary American poetry. These neoformalist tendencies translate the significance of tradition in the Roman Catholic Church to the field of poetry. *The Search Engine* features two more neoformalist poems: “A Conception” and “The Flat Tire” (50–51; 63–65).
- 15 Notably, my article also advances an intervention in Cold War history within the field of American studies. This is important insofar as American studies was a product of the Cold War.
- 16 Laura Bieger, Ramon Saldivar, and Johannes Voelz, eds., *The Imaginary and Its Worlds: American Studies After the Transnational Turn* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2013); Harris Feinsod, *The Poetry of the Americas: From Good Neighbors to Counter-cultures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Yunte Huang, *Transpacific Imaginations: History, Literature, Counterpoetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).
- 17 For reasons beyond the scope of this article, I would prefer to replace “American” with “Anglo-American” to designate poetry written in English under the influence of North American culture—the United States, in particular. The term “Anglo-American” transcends national and ethnic boundaries and hence reflects the dynamics of Cold War poetry. In the post-Cold War environment, the numerous creative writing programs in the US and the publishing and teaching circuits of established English-language poets have ensured American poets’ global influence. The resultant loose geographic focus represents a unique movement within the landscape of contemporary poetry written



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- in English. See Nathan Suhr–Sytsma, *Poetry, Print, and the Making of Postcolonial Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 208.
- 18 Czesław Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems, 1931–2001* (New York, NY: Ecco, 2003), xxiii.
- 19 Nicholas Boyle, *Who Are We Now? Christian Humanism and the Global Market from Hegel to Heaney* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 295.
- 20 Heb. 12:1, ESV. Unless the poems use the King James Version (KJV), I quote from the English Standard Version (ESV). The use of the KJV is in line with a long literary tradition which makes allusions stand out stylistically, imbuing the poems with a biblical voice colored by Early Modern English. On traces of the KJV in the ESV, see Leland Ryken, *The ESV and the English Bible Legacy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011).
- 21 English Standard Version: The Holy Bible: English Standard Version Student Study Bible (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 1655.
- 22 Kathleen Ossip, *The Search Engine* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2002).
- 23 Kathleen Ossip, “My 20th Century,” in *The Search Engine* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2002), 8.
- 24 Kathleen Ossip, “Rose of Sharon,” in *The Search Engine* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2002), 12.
- 25 Kathleen Ossip, “On Political Crisis,” in *The Do-Over: Poems* (Louisville, KY: Sarabande Books, 2015), 32.
- 26 Ilya Budraitskis, “The Language of Cold War,” *Manifesta Journal* 18 (2015): 57.
- 27 Kathleen Ossip, “In the Atrium,” in *The Search Engine* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2002), 3–4.
- 28 Kathleen Ossip, “57th Street,” in *The Search Engine* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2002), 69–72.
- 29 Kathleen Ossip, “Ballade Confessionnelle,” in *The Search Engine* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2002), 11. In *The Search Engine*, Sylvia Plath is also mentioned in the poem “Nobody Talks about the moon anymore.” Plath’s work appears among the sources of the poems “Ballade Confessionnelle” and “Three Prayers.” In *The Do-Over*, Plath and Anne Sexton are referred to by their first names in “Lyric,” and Sylvia Plath is mentioned in the long prose poem “After.” Plath is also the subject of “No use,” and Plath’s poems “The Moon and the Yew Tree” and “Mirror” are among the “Borrowings” listed in the collection.
- 30 Kathleen Ossip, “Why All Poems Are Political,” *Electric Literature*, June 1, 2017, <https://electricliterature.com/why-all-poems-are-political/>.
- 31 Kathleen Ossip, *The Cold War: Poems* (Louisville, KY: Sarabande Books, 2011).
- 32 Kathleen Ossip, “American History (A Fearsome Solitude),” in *The Cold War: Poems* (Louisville, KY: Sarabande Books, 2011), 12.
- 33 See Gen. 26:29 and Job 35:4–8.
- 34 Ossip, “American History,” 12.
- 35 Gen. 1:1.
- 36 Heb. 1:10.
- 37 John 1:1.
- 38 Kathleen Ossip, “The Status Seekers,” in *The Cold War: Poems* (Louisville, KY: Sarabande

- Books, 2011), 15.
- 39 John 14:6.
- 40 Gen. 7:11.
- 41 “Pin,” *Oxford English Dictionary*, accessed January 25, 2020, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/144028>.
- 42 Isa. 1:18.
- 43 Rev. 6:6 (KJV). Revelation alludes to the woman in 2:20, 12:1, 12:4, 12:6, 12:13–7, 17:4–6, 17:7, 17:9, and 17:18.
- 44 For example, Psalm 98:1 reads: “Oh sing to the Lord a new song.”
- 45 Snow expresses her critique as follows: “In place of Christ’s fearless, definite Passion, we offer others our problematic, uneasy pity, a passion from which no one rises incorrupt.” She also asks whether it is a “coincidence that in a world that has made a fetish of vicarious suffering, suffering itself—real suffering—has become taboo.” Patricia Snow, “Empathy Is Not Charity,” *First Things* 276 (2017): 44–6.
- 46 Suji Kwock Kim, *Notes from the Divided Country: Poems* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003).
- 47 Suji Kwock Kim, “The Tree of Knowledge,” in *Notes from the Divided Country: Poems* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 11; parenthetical references to Bible verses added by author.
- 48 Matt. 7:7; Ps. 13:1–6.
- 49 Suji Kwock Kim, “Fragments from the Forgotten War,” in *Notes from the Divided Country: Poems* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 30–2.
- 50 Judg. 14:8.
- 51 Judg. 14.
- 52 2 Kgs. 1:2–3. On the meaning of Baal-zebub as “Lord of flies,” see English Standard Version Student Study Bible, 481.
- 53 Suji Kwock Kim, “Montage with Neon, Bok Choi, Gasoline, Lovers & Strangers,” in *Notes from the Divided Country: Poems* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 37.
- 54 Li-Young Lee, “The Subject Is Silence,” in *A God in the House: Poets Talk About Faith*, ed. Ilya Kaminsky and Katherine Towler (North Adams, MA: Tupelo Press, 2012), 126.
- 55 Li-Young Lee, “Self-Help for Fellow Refugees,” in *Behind My Eyes* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008), 17.
- 56 Kevin Hart, *Flame Tree: Selected Poems* (Hexham: Bloodaxe Books, 2002); Kevin Hart, *Morning Knowledge* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011); Kevin Hart, “How the Sacred Appears: Poetry and the Dark One,” *Literature and Theology* 31, no. 2 (2017): 130–48, <https://doi.org/10.1093/litthe/frx010>; Nathan Lyons, “Written in White: A Reading of Kevin Hart’s ‘Colloquies,’” *Literature and Theology* 31, no. 2 (2017): 149–63, <https://doi.org/10.1093/litthe/frw029>.
- 57 Terence R. Wright, *Theology and Literature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 10.
- 58 Examples of other poetry cycles of this kind include: Dan Albergotti, *The Boatloads* (2008), Bruce Beasley, *Signs & Abominations* (2000), Lucille Clifton, *Quilting: Poems, 1987–1990* (1991), Louise Erdrich, *Baptism of Desire: Poems* (1989), Alice Fulton,



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Dance Script With Electric Ballerina (1983) and *Palladium* (1986), Rigoberto González, *Unpeopled Eden* (2013), Jorie Graham, *Never* (2002), Jason Gray, *Photographing Eden* (2008), Brooks Haxton, *Dominion* (1986), John Newlov, *The Green Plain* (1981), Jacqueline Osherow, *The Hoopoe's Crown* (2005), Anthony Piccione, *For the Kingdom* (1995), Lynn Powell, *The Zones of Paradise* (2003), and Vikram Seth, *Summer Requiem* (2015).

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About the Author

Philipp Reisner teaches in the English and American Studies Department of the University of Düsseldorf, Germany, and the Obama Institute for Transnational American Studies at the University of Mainz, Germany. He is the author of *Cotton Mather als Aufklärer: Glaube und Gesellschaft im Neuengland der Frühen Neuzeit* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012). His current project is a structural study of biblical presence in contemporary American poetry titled *Faith in Verse: Biblical Presence in Contemporary Anglo-American Poetry*.

Contact: Philipp Reisner; University of Düsseldorf; Department of English & American Studies; reisner@phil.hhu.de.