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# To Keep Nothing Godlike: Poetic Structure in Tongo Eisen Martin's "We Charge Genocide Again!"

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## Abstract

'Sympathy' is an important and contentious word for modern poetry. Since at least Wordsworth, the capacity to feel what another is feeling has been taken as a register for a receptivity to higher moral feeling, just as the capacity for poetry to stimulate such feeling has

been taken as the marker of good writing. A community of universal sympathy is, and remains

in some circles, the endgame of a certain species of poetic endeavour, as well as the limit of poetry's political aspiration. For other writers, however, sympathy has also been located as the

very enemy of political purpose, functioning as a gateway drug to sentimentality, false

identification and an incapacity to understand the historical forces at work behind the suffering

of individual people. This paper aims to elaborate the stakes and possible resolution of this

dynamic via a reading of Tongo Eisen Martin's free education document, *We Charge Genocide*

*Again!* (2012). Martin, who has worked extensively in free public education projects and has published four collections of poetry, published the document online as a course guide with the stated aim of having "teachers and students engage the reality of extrajudicial killings of black

people with critical thinking and analysis." In my reading, I want to elaborate how Martin's

invitations to the reader / student to step into and narrate the experiences of both police officers

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at work and black youth in the moment of their brutalization generate a space for critical

engagement belied in the asinine liberal insistence that other people have feelings too.

Sympathy, in this context becomes a tool for the foundation of an oppositional, critical

community. I will argue that Martin's encouragement towards sympathy as a tool for thinking

critically about social reality is necessarily both disingenuous and sincere and that it is this

combination which enables it to take on a political valence. As a key part of this reading, I aim

to show how Martin's use of anaphora, irony and citation allow one to read *We Charge*

*Genocide Again!* as a close cousin of his poetry, making the text simultaneously a course

textbook and a living document.

**Bio:**

Tom Allen is an International Fellow at the KWI in Essen where he is working on his first

monograph: *Care for Trapped Things: Literature and the Critique of Insurance*. From April

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