

## So Much Calculation, So Little Creativity: On Compassionate Anti-Natalism and the Meaning of *Amor Fati*

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Only great pain, that long, slow pain that takes its time and in which we are burned, as it were, over green wood, forces us philosophers to descend into our ultimate depths and put aside all trust, everything good-natured, veiling, mild, average—things in which formerly we may have found our humanity. I doubt that such pain makes us “better”—but I know it makes us *deeper*. — Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction: A Hard Conclusion to Swallow

While preparing to write this essay, I became sick with a severe case of Covid-19. Isolated overseas, I nursed a fever, painful cough, and what has colloquially become known as the omicron “broken glass” sore throat. I lost my senses of taste and smell; I was frustratingly fatigued, yet failed to sleep more than a few hours at a time. David Benatar’s *Better Never to Have Been* sat on the dresser across the room. “You win,” I thought, recalling Benatar’s description of his conclusion as “hard...for most people to swallow.”<sup>2</sup>

Benatar’s aim, though, is not merely to win a debate. He argues with sincere conviction that it would be better never to have been born and, if we are truly committed to being compassionate, better not to bring potential sufferers into existence.<sup>3</sup> As Benatar observes, while it seems we do not think we have a duty to bring happy people into existence,<sup>4</sup> we sense that we are under a stringent obligation to prevent bringing suffering people into existence.<sup>5</sup> He goes on to assert, “pleasure and pain are asymmetrical in a way that makes coming into existence always a harm,”<sup>6</sup> and “for any given child we cannot predict what form these harms will take or how severe they will be, but we can be sure that at least some of them will occur. None of this befalls the non-existent. Only existers suffer harm.”<sup>7</sup> In the midst of a global pandemic, ongoing climate crises, and the regularity of gun violence in the United States, it is easy for me to grant the premises that (1) existing always includes significant harms and (2) the non-existent do not suffer. Even if we

do not consider the suffering that results from moral and political failures, Benatar notes that we humans experience unavoidable natural disasters, illness, frailty, and anxiety in the face of our own death.<sup>8</sup> Put plainly, those who exist will suffer. Non-existence makes suffering impossible. If we aim to prevent suffering, we should aim to prevent would-be sufferers from coming into existence, right?

Benatar acknowledges his arguments run up against a strong pro-natalist commitment, which “manifests itself in many ways. For example, there is the assumption that one should (get married or simply cohabit in order to) produce children, and that, infertility aside, one is either backward or selfish if one does not.”<sup>9</sup> Benatar also notes our strong evolutionary drives and the incentives governments institute to encourage procreation among citizens. Benatar is careful to be clear that his view “arises, not from a dislike of children, but instead from a concern to avoid the suffering of potential children and the adults they would become, even if not having those children runs counter to the interests of those who would have them.”<sup>10</sup> This view beckons potential parents to think critically about and ultimately to forgo the benefits of bringing new children into existence, especially since Benatar claims “that people’s lives are much worse than they think and that all lives contain a great deal of bad.”<sup>11</sup>

The purpose of this essay is to imagine how Nietzsche might respond to Benatar’s philanthropic anti-natalism. It is important to understand from the outset that there is no *one* way Nietzsche might have replied to Benatar. Nietzsche’s perspective shifts based on which text we are considering, and interpretation of his work shifts as readers ruminate. For example, when *Zeal* reached out to ask if I was interested in considering how Nietzsche might reply to Benatar’s anti-natalism, my first response was to think, “I’m not sure Nietzsche *would* respond.” I had in mind Nietzsche’s declaration in *The Gay Science (GS)*, “*Amor fati*: let that be my love from now on! ... Let *looking away* be my only negation! And, all in all and on the whole: someday I want only to be a Yes-sayer!”<sup>12</sup> Then again, Nietzsche might say something like the following if we consulted *Beyond Good and Evil* instead of *GS*:

You want, if possible (and no “if possible” is crazier), to *abolish suffering*. And us?—it looks as though *we* would prefer it to be heightened and made even worse than it has ever been! Well-being as you understand it—that is no goal; it looks to us like an *end!*—a condition that immediately renders people ridiculous and despicable—that makes their decline into something *desirable!* The discipline of suffering, of *great* suffering—don’t you know that *this* discipline has been the sole cause of every enhancement in humanity so far?<sup>13</sup>

If we consider *On the Genealogy of Morality* (a polemic, after all), Nietzsche might call Benatar's view nihilistic—a reduction of the meaning of human life to nothing, at least at the species level, because Benatar is careful to say he is not claiming that once individuals exist they should not enjoy life or make meaning in response to suffering.<sup>14</sup>

An exchange between Nietzsche and Benatar might stall early, though, because where Nietzsche practices autobiography, Benatar avoids it.<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche frequently refers to his own experiences as deeply formative and instructive to understand his views.<sup>16</sup> At the start of *GS*, he even goes so far as to say, “This book might need more than one preface; and in the end there would still be room for doubting whether someone who has not experienced something similar could, by means of prefaces, be brought closer to the experiences of this book.”<sup>17</sup> In contrast, as Joshua Rothman reports in his *New Yorker* article about Benatar:

Undoubtedly, Benatar is a private person by nature. But his anonymity also serves a purpose: it prevents readers from psychologizing him and attributing his views to depression, trauma, or some other aspect of his personality. He wants his arguments to be confronted in themselves. “Sometimes people ask, ‘Do you have children?’” he told me later. (He speaks calmly and evenly, in a South African accent.) “And I say, ‘I don’t see why that’s relevant. If I do, I’m a hypocrite—but my arguments could still be right.’” When he told me that he’s had anti-natalist views since he was “very young,” I asked how young. “A child,” he said, after a pause. He smiled uncomfortably. This was exactly the kind of personal question he preferred not to answer.<sup>18</sup>

I cannot help but smile when I read Rothman's description of Benatar speaking “calming and evenly” and compare this to Nietzsche's frequent use of italics and exclamation points to make his case. Whether he would joyfully look away or pugnaciously dig in, Nietzsche would disagree with Benatar's claim that it would have been better never to have been.

In this essay, I limit my scope to what Nietzsche the life-affirming pugilist would say. An initial observation is that his account in *GS* of returning to health after a period of severe illness complicates Benatar's philanthropic anti-natalism. I focus on *GS* because the text offers an occasion to think about the meaning and value of surviving profound suffering. I think Nietzsche would agree with Benatar that human existence will inevitably involve suffering, but Nietzsche would disagree that this means we should aim to *prevent* would-be sufferers from coming into existence at all, as he does not regard the prevention of suffering as the greatest imperative.

To this end, I contemplate what Nietzsche means by *amor fati*, or love of fate. On my reading, Nietzsche might challenge what Benatar calls “Pollyannaism” about the quality of one’s own life by pointing out that, while suffering is inevitable, through it we can also bring about personal transformations that inspire “a more delicate taste for joy, with a more tender tongue for all good things, with merrier senses, joyful with a more dangerous second innocence, more childlike, and at the same time a hundred times subtler than one had ever been before.”<sup>19</sup> Benatar would not disagree with the fact that suffering can bring about valuable and interesting personal transformations; Nietzsche would challenge Benatar to dislodge suffering from the central role it occupies in how he understands the merits of existence v. non-existence in the first place.

After considering Nietzsche’s discussion of *amor fati*, I anticipate two potential misunderstandings. First, I address the objection that *amor fati* simply amounts to the kind of toxic optimism that prompts people to cope with suffering by claiming that “everything happens for a reason.” Second, I demonstrate why the claim that suffering can make us deeper, more self-aware, and more alive to ourselves and our surroundings does not amount to unreflectively embracing the ascetic ideal to make meaning out of suffering, which Nietzsche observes has long been a guiding ideal for humans when met with the problem of our own suffering.<sup>20</sup> When we survive suffering, we are often left facing the world with new insight. In the spirit of *The Gay Science*, I offer a short autobiographical example to make an important distinction between endorsing suffering and saying yes to becoming who I am following this suffering.

### **Nietzsche the Cheery Creator**

To the pro-natalist and optimist, Benatar uses an analogy with Russian roulette to issue the following challenge:

The optimist surely bears the burden of justifying this procreational Russian roulette. Given that there are no real advantages over never existing for those who are brought into existence, it is hard to see how the significant risk of serious harm could be justified. If we count not only the unusually severe harms that anybody could endure, but also the quite routine ones of ordinary human life, then we find that matters are still worse for cheery procreators. It shows that they play Russian roulette with a fully loaded gun—aimed, of course, not at their own heads, but at those of their future offspring.<sup>21</sup>

To repeat, I am not sure Nietzsche would take on this challenge of justifying “this procreational Russian roulette” given his stated aim in *GS* that looking away may become his only form of negation. However, if Nietzsche the cheery creator of *GS* did reply to Benatar, I imagine his commitment to *amor fati* would feature prominently. So, what does Nietzsche mean by *amor fati*? Elizabeth Grosz offers this insightful description:

This love involves both suffering and joy, both good and bad health, both opportunity and threat: it involves learning to love necessity, to love not only what one accomplishes in processes of self-stylization but also all the indignities to which one may be subjected, to love the eternal return of everything, however dull, fleeting, and insignificant, however horrible, world-transforming, and destructive. The lesson of the eternal return is not resignation and acceptance, but joyous affirmation, gaiety. And love itself cannot be adoration, the passive delight in being in proximity with love’s object, but only full affirmation, upholding. Love that works, that creates, that is, love that is artistic, that makes: “I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things: then I shall be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love henceforth!” (*GS* #276).<sup>22</sup>

Nietzsche’s declaration of *amor fati*, then, does not amount to a passive acceptance of one’s fate. Instead, Nietzsche offers an account of having survived a long period of severe illness; this experience transforms him and adds depth to his perspective. In the preface to *GS*, he notes, “After such self-questioning, self-temptation, one acquires a subtler eye for all philosophizing to date; one is better than before at guessing the involuntary detours, alleyways, resting places, and sunning places of thought to which suffering thinkers are led and misled on account of their suffering.”<sup>23</sup>

Nietzsche claims that, even if suffering does not make us better, it surely makes us deeper, subtler, with more delicate tastes. Is this depth desirable, though, if it requires suffering? In the spirit of *GS*, I think Nietzsche would say yes. Yes, because this depth opens up space for us to exercise our creative forces and notice new patterns of behavior, thought, and endurance. Yes, because waking up, coming back to life after long periods of suffering can expand our intellectual and emotional horizons, especially when we survive something we may not have thought ourselves capable of surviving. As Nietzsche says, he was “all of the sudden attacked by hope, by hope for health, by the *intoxication* of recovery.”<sup>24</sup>

I do not think Benatar would take issue with any of this; recognizing the potential to create meaning from suffering by those who *already* exist is consistent with his view, as I understand him. So, let’s return to playing

Russian roulette with a fully loaded gun. We know that anyone who exists will suffer. There is a path by which they will not suffer, but only if they never exist. We have the power to prevent their existence. Should we? I imagine Nietzsche would say that there is so much more to life than attempting to avoid suffering—and by this I do not simply mean that he would say we ought to weigh potential pleasure against potential pain. So much calculation, so little creativity! Why is inevitable suffering what should matter *most* in our thinking about bringing future people into existence? Nietzsche might concede that Benatar’s argument is valid. But “life is not an argument.”<sup>25</sup> The fact that we can survive, transform, and create in response to suffering should impact our judgements about how bad it is to bring someone into the world who will inevitably suffer.

Alternatively, Nietzsche may bite the bullet, or even all six of them. Yes, all who exist will suffer. All the better! He might say, “The tension that breeds strength into the unhappy soul, its shudder at the sight of great destruction, its inventiveness and courage in enduring, surviving, interpreting, and exploiting unhappiness, and whatever depth, secrecy, whatever masks, spirit, cunning, greatness it has been given:—weren’t these the gifts of suffering, of the discipline of great suffering?”<sup>26</sup> In brief, it is better to have been than to never have been, suffering and all—*amor fati*!

### **Two Possible Misunderstandings of *Amor fati***

These are misunderstandings I had when I first encountered *amor fati* in Nietzsche’s work. First, I worried that Nietzsche’s endorsement of *amor fati* amounted to a kind of toxic optimism. In a culture in which believing that “everything happens for a reason” is often the best we can muster in response to our own suffering and the suffering of loved ones, I worried Nietzsche was making a similar move. Yet, upon reflection and careful reading, it became clear to me that *amor fati* need not be understood as delusional, deterministic, or defeatist. Quite the contrary!

Instead of granting that there is a reason for our suffering, a reason we may or may not ever discover, Nietzsche reminds us that *we* are the ones who decide what impact our suffering has on becoming who we are. The attitude we cultivate in relation to our suffering matters for how we make meaning. As he affirms in *Ecce Homo*, “Accepting oneself as if fated, not wishing oneself ‘different’—that is in such cases *great reason* itself.”<sup>27</sup> So, instead of thinking that the love of fate which Nietzsche describes forecloses agency and creativity, we can understand this love of fate as an opportunity to learn how to love ourselves and our lives *as if* fated, especially if our lives have included severe suffering.

Second, Nietzsche's claim that suffering can make us deeper (if not better) does not amount to unreflectively embracing the ascetic ideal to make meaning out of suffering. In the third treatise of *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche outlines how the ascetic ideal has motivated humanity to keep going in the face of suffering. He explains:

Precisely *this* is what the ascetic ideal means: that something *was lacking*, that an enormous *void* surrounded man—he did not know how to justify, to explain, to affirm himself; he *suffered* from the problem of his meaning. He suffered otherwise as well, he was for the most part a *diseased* animal: but the suffering itself was *not* his problem, rather that the answer was missing to the scream of his question: “*to what end suffering?*” ... The meaninglessness of suffering, not the suffering itself, was the curse that thus far lay stretched out over humanity—and *the ascetic ideal offered it a meaning!* Thus far it has been the only meaning; any meaning is better than no meaning at all.<sup>28</sup>

Is *amor fati* another iteration of the ascetic ideal? Or does Nietzsche offer a way to make meaning out of suffering that does not require saying no to oneself and to life? Nietzsche's use of *amor fati* encourages us to say yes to our lives, to make meaning through affirmation instead of negation. This may not come easily, as we are steeped in a world of ascetic practices which tries to justify suffering by thinking self-negation now will result in eventual rewards. The most obvious example is thinking that, by denying oneself on earth, one will experience abundance in heaven. This is not what Nietzsche means by *amor fati*.

Allow me to make an important distinction by way of autobiographical example, namely, the distinction between endorsing suffering and affirming that this suffering has contributed to who I have become.<sup>29</sup> When I was twelve years old, my father died of cancer. He was sick for a few years, and I witnessed his declining health every day. It was excruciating. After he died, many attempted to console me by saying, “Everything happens for a reason” and, “He is in a better place.” This did not satisfy my search for answers as to why he had suffered so much and died so young. In an undergraduate class my senior year, I submitted a creative writing piece in which I wondered if my mom and dad would have decided to have children if they knew he would die at forty-one years old. Perhaps it would have been better never to have been.

Yet, as I matured, it became clear to me that I was able to notice, appreciate, and empathize in valuable ways because of what I had witnessed and experienced as a child and teenager. Early on, when I recognized this,

it felt like a betrayal of my dad. Would I be a philosopher now if I had not spent so much time wrestling with *why*? Would I be who I am now absent this suffering, his suffering? If not, and if I like who I am today, does that mean I am glad my dad suffered so much? With Nietzsche's help, I eventually concluded it does not.

Nietzsche's conception of *amor fati* suggested how I could affirm who I have become without endorsing the suffering my dad and my family experienced. What I know is that he did suffer, I witnessed that suffering, and it transformed me into who I am today. I can affirm this and myself without allowing wishful thinking about what might have been to distract me from my opportunities to make meaning in *this* life now. It is outside of my power to change what happened; it is within my power to recognize and affirm how it changed me.<sup>30</sup>

### **Future Friends, "I'll Take It All"**

I have proposed that Benatar would not disagree with Nietzsche that we can make meaning from suffering once we *already* exist. Benatar's argument, however, concerns being responsible for *starting* a life that we know will involve suffering. So, what might Nietzsche say about being responsible for bringing into existence a new sentient being who will suffer? How do we deal with the fact that, while it is true that the non-existent will not suffer, it is also true that they cannot speak up to say that they would rather exist and suffer than never to exist at all?

Luckily, Nietzsche is no stranger to imagining future people.<sup>31</sup> In the way that Nietzsche writes about the future friends who may read and understand his work, he might see these future friends as among the non-existent Benatar aims to prevent from suffering. By Nietzsche's lights, these future friends and free spirits might say yes to the inevitability of suffering, yes even to the possibility of severe suffering, yes to creating meaning when faced with suffering, yes to life—to all of it. As Nietzsche asks in "The heaviest weight" (GS #341), "Do you want this again and innumerable times again?' would lie on your actions as the heaviest weight! Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to long for nothing more fervently than for this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?"<sup>32</sup> Becoming "well disposed" to yourself, recognizing the generative and transformative potential in embracing our defeats and successes, our mistakes and transformations, our deepest loves and our deepest fears—well, I think Nietzsche's future friends may say all of this matters enough to upend Benatar's notion that escaping suffering is the ultimate good.

In her poem, “Instructions On Not Giving Up,” our recently appointed poet laureate Ada Limón writes:

... Patient, plodding, a green skin  
growing over whatever winter did to us, a return  
to the strange idea of continuous living despite  
the mess of us, the hurt, the empty. Fine then,  
I’ll take it, the tree seems to say, a new slick leaf  
unfurling like a fist to an open palm, I’ll take it all.<sup>33</sup>

When I talk with people now about what it felt like to have Covid while far from home over the summer, I’m honest with them. I tell them it was terrible. I also tell them being isolated reminded me of how many people have died during this pandemic without a chance to say a proper goodbye to their loved ones. I tell them I feel guilty for complaining because I know others have had it much worse. I tell them that, while suffering from the illness, it was difficult to imagine I would ever feel like myself again. I know firsthand that there is no guarantee that the pain, illness, or grief will subside. But sometimes it does. This time it did. Either way, I’m with Nietzsche. *Amor Fati*. No Pollyannaism here. I’ll take it all. Will you?

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Josephine Nauckhoff (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 6–7.

<sup>2</sup> David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 58.

<sup>3</sup> Reporter Joshua Rothman recalls the following interaction with Benatar: “Ultimately, [Benatar] said, ‘unpleasantness and suffering are too deeply written into the structure of sentient life to be eliminated.’ His voice grew more urgent; his eyes teared up. ‘We’re asked to accept what is unacceptable. It’s unacceptable that people, and other beings, have to go through what they go through, and there’s almost nothing that they can do about it.’ In an ordinary conversation, I would’ve murmured something reassuring. In this case, I didn’t know what to say.” See Rothman, “The Case for Not Being Born,” *The New Yorker*, November 27, 2017, online at [www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/the-case-for-not-being-born](http://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/the-case-for-not-being-born).

<sup>4</sup> Benatar writes, “[T]he reason why we think that there is a duty not to bring suffering people into existence is that the presence of this suffering would be bad (for the sufferers) and the absence of the suffering is good (even though there is nobody to enjoy the absence of suffering). In contrast to this, we think that there is no duty to bring happy people into existence because while their pleasure would be good for them, its absence would not be bad for them (given that there would be nobody who would be deprived of it).” See *Better Never to Have Been*, 32.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 88–89.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>12</sup> Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, 157.

<sup>13</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Judith Norman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 116–117.

<sup>14</sup> In response to Christine Overall’s recent article “My Children, Their Children, and Benatar’s Anti-Natalism,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 56 (2022): 51–66, Benatar acknowledges, “I agree that meaning can be sought and found in hardships and even in poor quality lives. When that meaning is *felt* then it can have some impact on the felt *quality* too, even though that positive impact does only marginally modulate the poor quality. Thus, Professor Overall’s examples of the author, the teacher, and the nurse, who endure hardships but whose work is ‘worthwhile and meaningful,’ are entirely consistent with my claims about life’s *quality*. Notice, however, that just because those we create might find meaning in their hardships does not mean that coming into existence is in their interests.” See Benatar, “Misconceived: Why These Further Criticisms of Anti-natalism Fail,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 56 (2022): 119–151, at 135.

<sup>15</sup> Once more in response to Overall, Benatar cautions, “Taking general arguments personally is ill-advised, not least because one’s personal investments are prone to introduce well-known biases. This is not to deny that a personal perspective can be relevant. Instead, it is to caution that one can take arguments *too* personally, thereby precluding a fair evaluation of them.” Ibid., 131.

<sup>16</sup> Consider Nietzsche’s claim in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 85, that “there is *only* a perspectival seeing, *only* a perspectival ‘knowing.’”

<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, 3.

<sup>18</sup> Rothman, “The Case for Not Being Born.”

<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, 7.

<sup>20</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 83.

<sup>21</sup> Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been*, 92.

<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 123.

<sup>23</sup> Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, 5.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>26</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 117.

<sup>27</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 687.

<sup>28</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 117–118.

<sup>29</sup> It may be of interest to a reader that Nietzsche also discusses the impact of experiencing his father’s death in his childhood on his thought and work: “The good fortune of my existence, its uniqueness perhaps, lies in its fatality: I am, to express it in the form of a riddle, already dead as my father, while as my mother I am still living and becoming old.” See *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 678.

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<sup>30</sup> To be clear, I do not think Benatar would resist this distinction, but it seemed like a point worth making in the event that a reader has experienced similar thoughts about what it means to become who one is through experiences of suffering.

<sup>31</sup> In *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche writes, “Thus when I needed to I once also invented for myself the ‘free spirits’ to whom this melancholy-valiant book with the title *Human, All Too Human* is dedicated: ‘free spirits’ of this kind do not exist, did not exist—but, as I have said, I had need of them at that time if I was to keep in good spirits while surrounded by ills (sickness, solitude, unfamiliar places, *acedia*, inactivity): as brave companions and familiars with whom one can laugh and chatter when one feels like laughing and chattering, and whom one can send to the Devil when they become tedious—as compensation for the friends I lacked. That free spirits of this kind *could* one day exist, that our Europe *will* have such active and audacious fellows among its sons of tomorrow and the next day, physically present and palpable and not, as in my case, merely phantoms and hermit's phantasmagoria: I should wish to be the last to doubt it. I see them already *coming*, slowly, slowly; and perhaps I shall do something to speed their coming if I describe in advance under what vicissitudes, upon what paths, I *see* them coming?” See *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 6.

<sup>32</sup> Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, 194–195.

<sup>33</sup> Ada Limón, *The Carrying: Poems* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2018), 66.