

SURVIVAL POLITICS AND SACRIFICIAL TRANSMEDIATION:  
LIU XIAOBO AND *SIGNATURE EVENT CONTEXT*

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ABSTRACT

This article interrogates the medial politics of 2010 Nobel Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo through a re-situation of Marc Abélès's concept of "survival politics." It understands Liu's energetic self-representation in multiple media as an attempt to produce a usable Derridean signature, connections between texts and contexts that allow for cohesion inside endangered communities, as well as methods by which to contest dominant narratives. By reading Liu's graduate thesis, "Aesthetics and Human Freedom," alongside Derrida's essay "Signature Event Context," this article theorizes that minoritarian discourses that face erasure often choose vigorous transmedial production, self-sacrificially constraining their own freedoms in order to work toward the improbable appearance of signed texts. The article finishes by raising the possibility that the politics of authenticity and hypervisibility in contemporary African American intellectual culture are also interpretable through the lens of self-sacrificial hypermediation.

KEYWORDS: Liu Xiaobo, Derrida, media studies, Nobel, dissidence

Why was Liu Xiaobo 刘晓波, the cultural critic, literature scholar, prisoner of conscience, and winner of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize, also a poet? Why is the person responsible for *Charter 08*, a document that attempted to rewrite the basic assumptions of Chinese political culture, often depicted standing with one of the artist Liu Xia's 刘霞 macabre, suffering dolls perched on his shoulder? Why did he, unlike many Chinese intellectuals born in the 1950s, speak so glowingly of the Internet? During his late imprisonment, why did so much attention center around his marriage to Liu Xia—how was heterosexual

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pair-bonding salient to his intellectual and political contributions? What actions in culture is dissidence comprised of, really, and why do they so often ignore or violate what we commonly think of as deconstructionist epistemologies? This essay will begin by reading Liu Xiaobo's energetic and diverse acts of self-mediation as intentional, considered tactics of survival politics. It then rereads Liu Xiaobo's 1988 dissertation *Aesthetics and Human Freedom* 《审美与人的自由》 in relation to Jacques Derrida's "Signature, Event, Context," and finally reflects on minority media politics and minority visibility under mortal threat through comparison with contemporary African American intellectual culture.

I employ the term *survival politics* in this essay in contradistinction to Marc Abélès's use of the term in *The Politics of Survival*. He describes the collapse of "a tradition that places harmoniously living together (convivance) as the highest aim of social beings" and claims that "it is now the idea of survival that orients our concerns and choices through the reshaping of the public sphere."<sup>1</sup> I rethink his intervention by defining the "we" in his writing as minor or minority communities for whom convivance—living by eliciting consent or disinterest from powers with the capability to destroy one's home and kin—has always been indistinguishable from survival. Rather than identifying with a Euro-American, white situation of post-empire in which "There are no longer single protective powers, long embodied by the monarch or more recently by the welfare state, that make life safe" (Abélès 16), this essay attempts to think through the intersubjective and convivial (i.e., political) methods through which people and groups with no traditional expectation of safety survived and continue to survive. In Giorgio Agamben's terms, this essay will attempt to think through the cultural production of those who can be "killed but not sacrificed," bare lives that the majority sometimes considers to be outside citizenship, outside value, and who can then be extinguished but not murdered.<sup>2</sup> Understanding the context of the erasable subject, the bare subject, will help explain the medial practices of Liu Xiaobo and minority thinkers like him, and demonstrate why, for some, an understanding of the impossibility of authentic signification only reinforces perceptions of its necessity.

### *Authenticity and the Reception of Liu Xiaobo*

When the essayist and cultural commentator Xu Zhiyuan 许知远 writes about Liu Xiaobo, he begins by describing his own entry into Liu's world, the way in which Liu came to feel real for him. He describes the shock of

reading about Liu's eleven-year prison sentence when it was announced on Christmas Day, 2009—an excessive, even unprecedented, sentence for a person whose crime was the successful circulation of a petition. He reflects briefly on the way that the prison sentence was intended to threaten all those who violate or ignore the state's monopoly on political power, and then carefully scrutinizes the picture of Liu that accompanies the news article he's reading:

照片上的刘晓波留着短短的寸头，神态平静而疲倦，脸上流露着抽烟过度的痕迹。这是过去几年中，西方媒体经常使用的标准照。你很难想象，他曾经身体极好，走在二十年前的校园里，别人说他像是健壮的火车司机或搬道岔的铁路工人。<sup>3</sup>

The Liu Xiaobo in the picture had kept his short crew-cut. His bearing was serene but tired; his face showed the marks of excessive cigarette smoking. This was a standard picture that the Western press had frequently used in the past few years. It was hard to imagine that his health had once been excellent, striding across campus twenty years ago, when people said he looked like a burly train engineer or the worker that manages the railroad switch.

Xu has a comprehensive understanding of the medial complexity of the image—it is a standard Western press photo, taken years before the announcement of the sentence, published by the *International Herald Tribune*. In this description, though, provoked in part by the realization that the body in the picture will undergo a long and arduous prison sentence, Xu interprets it as authentic information about Liu, and his scrutiny of the photograph places the image into a particular story of sacrifice and decline. One can read his shock at the long prison sentence, and those feelings help overcome his sense of disbelief. He has a feeling about the real Liu Xiaobo despite the kind of scrutiny we all bring to photographic images: was this photograph of Liu selected to faithfully represent him or to make him seem to be something he isn't? Was this a tired-looking moment during an otherwise great day? Is that what he looks like? Is it really him sitting there? These are not theoretical questions when consuming texts or images belonging to someone who has been accused of being a foreign agent. When Liu won the 2014 Democracy Award from the National Endowment for Democracy, for example, the state-run *Global Times* 环球时报 gave Liu rare, post-Nobel coverage so that they could point out the Endowment's deep relationship to American government, quoting one of its founders saying that "A lot of what we do today was done covertly by the CIA 25 years ago."<sup>4</sup> The struggle

over mediation was also a struggle over connection and solidarity. Xu's sense of Liu's reality, alongside many similar responses by other viewers of news stories and images, served as barriers to Liu being branded a traitor and forgotten in prison. The threat of forgetting was specific to Liu personally, but is also a subset of the erasure experienced by all Tiananmen survivors: Louisa Lim quotes film professor Cui Weiping 崔卫平 saying "A massive secret has become a massive vacuum . . . this secret is like a poison that has contaminated the air we breathe and our whole life and spirit."<sup>5</sup> The Tiananmen generation here forms a "we" for whom particular types of mediation are necessary for social and physical survival.

Like his press photos, Liu Xiaobo's poetry seems designed to knit his textual practice, bodily presence, and personal narrative into a single experience, provoking the perception of a unified textual, moral, and physical presence. His circulated poetry has two basic types: poems commemorating the Tiananmen demonstrations and the massacre after, and poems addressed to his wife, Liu Xia 刘霞. What the two types have in common is their insistence on very specific contexts and the centrality of their claim to be valid reproductions of those contexts. They use the tradition of poetry, the expectations derived from a history of face-to-face recitation, to address their audience in a way that insists on presence. Many of the elegies of his translated collection *June Fourth Elegies* are written on successive anniversaries of the massacre; as the twenty poems in the collection pass by, so do twenty years of remembrance, each one stamped at the top with its date and the number of years between its date and June 4, 1989. The poems work hard to superimpose the present and the past, to colocate them:

From the massacre's bloodshed to harsh surveillance  
the horrors of that night  
have yet to move half-a-pace away  
After the house-raid then handcuffs  
after handcuffs then prison  
after prison then the police sentry at my building's gate.<sup>6</sup>

The present and 1989, distanced by the rupture of time, are pulled together again by the tether of annual commemoration and by the suturing force of the poem. The community that came together in the square, both physically and politically, is invited to visualize themselves at a yearly ritual at which Liu is speaking. Meanwhile, Liu's presence at the events of June Fourth—when he negotiated for the evacuation of some students before the People's Liberation Army stormed the square, but was powerless to

save many other people who died that day—is reproduced by his deep and continuous mourning, his suffering as an embattled survivor, and by the guilt and anguish of commemoration. The repetition of the process helps elevate his remembrances from a genre that can be two-dimensional, contrived, or untrustworthy into a ritual of yearly return, into dissident texts that repetition makes more interpretable as defiant acts.

Liu's poems to Liu Xia have an irretrievable function in their interpersonal context, but to outside readers, they are also notable for producing Liu as a prisoner of the state. Their occasion as prison missives, handed over during her visits to his place of incarceration or saved up until the end of one of his terms, is not just the poems' context, but also their content. In "Your Lifelong Prisoner," he visualizes Liu Xia as an encompassing space: "在你的躯体里 / 我在黑暗中探索 / 用你品尝过的葡萄酒 / 撰写寻找你的诗篇" (Inside you / I grope in the dark / and use the wine you've drunk / to write poems looking for you).<sup>7</sup> Always given a date and always specifically addressed "to Xia," readers are invited to encounter these poems as if the speaker of the poems is the real Liu Xiaobo, expressing his honest and intimate feelings. This runs, however, contrary to contemporary interpretive practice. Who can say that they were really written in prison or were really addressed to Liu's spouse, rather than being a fictitious occasion for an address to a general audience? Who can say that they weren't edited later or that Liu Xia, a much more celebrated poet, didn't have a hand in writing them? These are legitimate questions, the kind that provoke critics to distinguish the poet of a poem from the fictive speaker constructed by it: the poems, though, rigorously insist on their own authenticity as Liu Xiaobo's voice. This insistence, deepened by the yearly repetition of Tiananmen poems by the endless entreaties to Xia, in fact seems *constitutive* of the poetry itself.

*Signatures: Theories of Mediation in Liu and Derrida*

The aesthetics of authenticity in Liu Xiaobo's poems and photographs are acts of survival politics. They produce the perception of an authentic poetic and photographic subject, militate against forgetting, and pull viewers and readers into a public community. The urtext of Liu's theory of aesthetic politics is his 1988 Beijing Normal University dissertation, *Aesthetics and Human Freedom*. Abstract, freewheeling, and doctrinaire, *Aesthetics* is more often described than examined: biographer Yu Jie describes it as "a hundred thousand words, with zero citations"<sup>8</sup>—in book form, it does have a smattering of citations,

although they are mostly of foreign literature and never of secondary Chinese research. Both Yu's biography and Tong Qingbing's 童庆炳 foreword to the book version of the dissertation focus on the scene rather than the content of Liu's dissertation defense, during which hundreds of people packed into the east conference hall on the eighth floor of the main building at Beijing Normal University. In retrospect, however, the thesis contains a theory of mediation that is visible in Liu's later life and work, one in which aesthetic production's liberatory or revolutionary power comes from its multiplicity, in which mediation is self-sacrificial, and which is underpinned by a deeply grim attitude toward human nature and the futile necessity of survival.

To Liu, “**审美的自由是主观情趣对客观法则的超越,**” (the freedom of aesthetics is the overcoming of objective rules by subjective interest). The limits of society, the mind, and the body can all be exceeded, if only momentarily, by the creation of an aesthetic object: in this moment of transcendence, the subject makes the objective into its tool (30). This moment of creation is driven by what I translate as *interest* (*qingqu*, 情趣) above, but could also be translated as appeal or delight: it is volitional and arises from desire. Aesthetic reception, too, is driven by this desire and also seen as a creative moment. Liu's model of aesthetic perception in chapter one is based on love at first sight, a preconceptual, unalienated act of simultaneous perception and discovery (41). The repeated production and perception of aesthetic objects creates a kind of chain of free choices: he writes, “**审美对象不要求服从, 而是允许主体的自由的选择和再创造.**” (31) (The aesthetic object does not require obedience, but instead permits the subject to choose freely and create anew). Non-aesthetic creation, however, is sacrificial: the recording, representation, or depiction of a thing must necessarily bind that thing. “**人的造物一旦作为离开了 人的创造活动的产品而出生后, 便作为与人对立的客体来要求主体服从他**” (31) (As soon as the objects of creation are birthed into products that have separated from the activity of creation, they oppose themselves to humans as objects that demand obedience.) These demands for obedience are unavoidable and continuously felt. Society, science, and all the other putative objectivities sacrifice freedom in the service of 保存, persistence, and survival (32), and it must be so.

Mediation, then, to the extent that it claims certainty, mimesis or reproduction, is a limit: it is undertaken, Liu argues, for survival. Aesthetic creation and perception, by contrast, draws its freedom from its radical multiplicity. This is why, perhaps, some of Liu's most polemic language happens in his chapter on the centrality of synesthesia to aesthetic experience. If you can smell, he argues, the smoke coming from Picasso's *Guernica* or hear the rumble of the guns, you have inserted yourself into it and generated (rather than simply

received) an aesthetic appreciation (105). In a book based largely on persistent advocacy, it is in this chapter that the rhetoric turns most sharply to the direct imperative: “开动你的五官感觉，去看、去听、去尝、去嗅、去触摸吧！” (107) (Activate your five senses! Go see, go hear, go taste, go smell, go touch!) Synesthesia seems to be a tool for the multiplication of the media object, a space for the self to enter and negotiate with an object. During synesthetic reception, it meaningfully does not matter whether the viewer’s experience of the object is similar to that of other viewers or of the artist’s own experience: it is multiply productive, not predictably reproductive. Human progress toward freedom, in the dissertation’s account, can be seen as the struggle to expand the realm of this multiplicity until daily life has the flexibility of a game (34).

In translating Liu’s thesis into English and typifying it, I have already been using terminology from a celebrated essay on authenticity and mediation, Jacques Derrida’s essay “Event Signature Context.” Derrida argues that since every text originates in a context, every text undergoes rupture from that context when it is circulated to readers; every text can be grafted into new texts and can be the target of graft in the form of theft, re-attribution, misinterpretation, and counterfeiting.<sup>10</sup> And yet readers nevertheless constantly become convinced that a text is related to some context, and in fact, they must do so if they are to act on what they find in a text. Readers do this through a relationship with the text’s *signature*, a unique type of mark that implicitly or explicitly indicates that its associated text is reliably connected to an authorial context. Signatures cause an endless struggle between validating powers and falsifying powers—indeed, the power to validate *is* the power to falsify. On a government form, a signature is only valid if the signer can reproduce it in other contexts: that ability to reproduce means that other signatures can be created and imitated. This double bind shows itself in many different forms of the signature, from human fingerprints to encrypted data to literary style. If a signature can be read, it can be reproduced. This centralizes power in the hands of validating institutions like governments, which are responsible for the signatures that validate individual cultural identities (a birth certificate, a tax number) and also have the power to create or destroy those signatures (to make a refugee a citizen or to make a citizen a stateless person). But the government is not the only validating agency. We believe that a contemporary piece of fiction was written by the person whose name appears on the cover because the publisher tells us so; we believe the daily weather report because we trust that it comes out of the weatherperson’s scientific practice. None of these beliefs are built on a firm epistemology, and yet, for the purposes of our own survival, we engage in them endlessly.



Derrida patiently reveals the thinness and fungibility of the signature, then, at the essay's end, writes his own signature, a half-joke, half-helpless admission that the struggle over the signature is unavoidable.

Liu Xiaobo likely never read Derrida's essay, which had not been translated into Chinese in the 1980s. We can, however, in reading these two theories of mediation and representation together, see their mutual echoes. What Liu would call creative subjectivity, the freedom to endlessly create signatures and make claims, is liberatory; authenticity or objectivity, a trustworthy and validated relationship between signer and signature, is a contested and necessary element of public culture, and as both Liu and Derrida admit grudgingly, a basis for society itself. Derrida argues that a signifier is separated from the signified by a "force of rupture" (Derrida 9) that indicates the absence of the signified even as the signifier claims connection to the signified; Liu says that once a creation becomes an object "物化的形式独立于人之外, 那么它们便象脱缰的野马 一样难以控制" (7) (with a material form independent from humanity, then it becomes as difficult to control as an unbroken horse that's thrown off its reins). Both thinkers are marking the distance between the made text and everything else, and both expose the power of fictions that bridge that distance. Both see the sign system as ultimately fluid, open, and changeable, and both seem to valorize the ludic and metamorphic.

Liu and Derrida's concepts of the iterability and weight of the signature are meaningfully different, and their difference goes much deeper than Derrida's focus on epistemology and ontology as compared to Liu's more frequent recourse to ethics and transcendence. Mu Ling, in his own dissertation, interpreted Liu Xiaobo's writing in its political context. After the anti-liberalization movements of 1986 and 1987, Mu argues that Liu retreated to aesthetics as a shield to hide from political scrutiny—an understandable tactic, as the State Education Commission would eventually insist that doctrinaire Marxist faculty assess Liu's thesis (Yu, *Steel Gate*, 41). The embattled nature of Liu's thought is visible, Mu says, in the thoroughly pessimistic vision of "the harsh conflict between the individual and society."<sup>11</sup> The language of aesthetics offered not just a model for human liberation, but also itself was an unsecured space in which Liu could make arguments that would be unacceptable elsewhere: "when the aesthetic cloak over writing and reading was cast aside, Liu's idealization of aesthetics and aesthetic freedom actually became a direct appeal for the freedom of writing and reading . . . That explains why he saw 'cruel reality' as the basis of his aesthetic project" (Mu 86). I disagree with Mu that Liu's aesthetic theory can be discarded like a cloak, but he is insightful in connecting the tone of *Aesthetics and Human Freedom* to the world in which it was written. In



the conclusion to Liu's dissertation, which he titles "Beginning in Tragedy, Ending in Tragedy" (189), he writes, "人是注定要死亡的,肯定如此。但是即便毁灭,也要在与死亡的抗拒之中毁灭。" (197) (Human beings will eventually die, this is unassailable. But even as they are destroyed, they must die while resisting their destruction). Mu identifies the specific politics of this tonal register, and I extend that observation to describe Liu's sacrificial aesthetics as a survival politics, one that must face and think through its own potential erasure.

The concept of survival politics intervenes in Derrida's theory of the signature by radically changing its ontology. He concludes "Signature Event Context" by writing that "writing, if there is any, perhaps communicates, but certainly does not exist. Or barely, hereby, in the form of the most improbable signature" (Derrida 20–21). His statement is made from the perspective of an authority—whether that power is intellectual, scientific, or social—with the power to determine the existence of an object. In Liu's context and in many minority contexts, texts can kill, both the texts of the oppressor and the texts of the victim, and this is not up for theoretical negotiation by minority actors. Simultaneously, whether they really exist or not, whether they are true or not, signed and authorized texts serve as the basis for socially cohesive beliefs: the more trustworthy the signature, the more likely a text is to influence its readers. Liu Xiaobo, along with his co-organizers, seemed committed to the possibility that Chinese civic culture could be transformed by enacting the ideals of *Charter 08*: freedom, human rights, equality, republicanism, democracy, and constitutional rule.<sup>12</sup> The way they did it was to write a text and invite supporters to sign it, thereby arguing not only that the Charter's goals were desirable among intellectual and civic leaders, but that the transformation of the Chinese government was possible enough that the signatories were willing to risk punishment for the opportunity to make change. How little temporal power the document had outside the fact of its authenticity, and how violent and comprehensive the state's response was neatly demonstrates the existential threat faced by Chinese democrats in the late reform period.

Signatures for *Charter 08* were posted electronically and collected through email or in person—the organizers simply listed the signatories online without taking any pains to prove to readers that the names listed were, in fact, people who authentically supported the Charter. They didn't need to: as Liu Xiaobo did over the course of his entire career in dissidence, the organizers of the Charter used the technologies and practices of the state to validate their text. Central control of the media meant that any real person falsely added to the Charter would have immediate, highly visible recourse; the threat of punishment for signatories meant that nobody would

sign the document without the utmost sincerity. This technique of validating a signature is a hallmark of survival politics. When a hostile authority holds the tools by which texts and contexts are reliably connected, artists with few choices attempt to benefit from the co-optation of those tools. Even though they do not generally believe that the state is trustworthy, Liu and the supporters of *Charter 08* frequently circulate related court documents and use their defense cases to “publish” ideological material, as when Liu took the opportunity of a public trial in 2009 to read fourteen minutes of his essay “I Have No Enemies” 《我没有敌人》 (Liu, *No Enemies*, 321–326). These documents are validated both inside and outside government, they are scrupulously recorded and considered, made a part of the official record; that gives them a power often denied to speakers who work on the margins without capital, access to publishing, or the reifying attention of large audiences. Indeed, there is nothing that gives *Charter 08* the feeling of intention (the phrase used by J. L. Austin that provokes Derrida to theorize the signature) so much as the imprisoned, suffering bodies of the people who wrote it. We can see here a concrete example of a signature as a sacrifice. The validation of Liu’s political position as authentic is *in one gesture* also a quite concrete surrender of the ability to iterate or transform it.

But Liu Xiaobo was not limited to the signatory power of Chinese law and punishment. In addition to his location on a court docket or in a prison registry, he appeared in print, in photographs, on the Internet, as a news item, as a subject of his wife’s art, in poetry, and in state-sponsored academic discourses. Some oppositional voices and minority communities, because they lack officially verifiable contexts that make them legible and concrete to participants in mass culture, are suppressed without ever having the opportunity to mediate themselves.<sup>13</sup> Liu Xiaobo, by contrast, was a well-respected academic and author, the instigator of a “Liu Xiaobo Fever” in the 1980s that circulated among Beijing’s intellectual elite. He had long been, and he always attempted to be, a little bit famous. When Tong Qingbing 童庆炳 introduces Liu’s dissertation by describing the crowd at his defense, the message is clear: rather than simply being a projection of literary value or an assessment of such, Liu Xiaobo’s doctoral thesis was an event, not just semantic but also haptic. When Xu Zhiyuan thinks about Liu’s image in the newspaper, he forms a story that starts with Liu walking around the Beijing Normal campus like a “burly train engineer.” As Derrida wrote, “one characteristic of the semantic field of the world *communication* is that it designates non-semantic movements as well” (Derrida 1). Different forms of mediation provoke different types and intensities of non-semantic movements: the gathering around Liu’s thesis was enabled by its text and its context, including the Communist

party-state's construction of public intellectual space. It was Liu's mediation as a validated academic in that public space that helped him to feel real and trustworthy in the eyes of Beijing intellectuals and signatories to *Charter 08*.<sup>14</sup> That physicality, that successful mediation, ranging from Liu at Beijing Normal to Liu in Tiananmen Square on the eve of the massacre, was of concrete importance in organizing a group of people willing to take the risks of signing the Charter. It was just one of many semantic and non-semantic movements that comprised Liu's frantic mediation.

*Signatures as Sacrifices and Objects of Desire*

As a result of survival politics, Liu's theory of mediation understands that the signature becomes incontrovertibly real when it encounters and transforms a body. It is easy to read "Signature Event Context" as a text whose whole purpose is to cast doubt upon the veracity of signatures: in Christopher Norris' summary, signatures are fine for day-to-day use but impossibly contradictory grounds upon which to build a philosophy.<sup>15</sup> But the fact that the signature remains after its deconstruction that it is a *necessarily* contradictory basis for philosophy is harder to accept for abstract thinkers. The difficulty of feeling real without control of the engines of mediation, and the bodily cost of establishing that reality, was a constant issue for the Tiananmen generation. Thirty hours before the massacre started, Liu Xiaobo, Zhou Duo 周舵, Hou Dejian 侯德健, and Gao Xin 高新 circulated a statement signed with their own bodies:

我们绝食！我们抗议！我们呼吁！我们忏悔！  
 我们不是寻找死亡。我们寻找真的生命...  
 以行動抗議軍管：以行動呼籲一種新的政治文化的誕生；  
 以行動懺悔由於我們長期的軟弱所犯下的過失。

We announce a hunger strike. We protest, we implore, and we repent.  
 We seek not death, but to live true lives. . . .

We must, through action, resist martial law, declare the birth of a new political culture, and repent the mistakes to which our long-term weakness has given rise. (Liu, *No Enemies*, 277)

The signature makes for unsteady grounds upon which to pursue questions of ontology and epistemology, but the people around Liu, Zhou, Hou, and

Gao knew whether they were eating or not, and when Liu went to jail, that bodily arrangement was highly verifiable. As Liu knew full well, signing his texts in this way required sacrifice: the concrete reality of hunger, then prison, inhibited his ability to experience aesthetic freedom, to change and transform. He made this exchange, as laid out in his thesis, consistently throughout his later life. Indeed, that consistency was itself a sort of labor: whether his views were correct or not, whether he changed them over time or not, he always acted out his ideology with his own body.

Some of these concepts appear in “Signature Event Context” in a nascent form. Derrida says that “writing, if there is any, perhaps communicates, but certainly does not exist. Or barely, hereby, in the form of the most improbable signature” (21). Without papering over the transitory, occasional, and contested nature of the signature, this conclusion elevates the signature to the *sine qua non* of the existence of writing. If a text is to do more than endlessly point to other texts, if the sign system is to be connected to social, political, or material realities, it will be the signature that makes it possible. In the same passage, he explains that “Deconstruction cannot be restricted or immediately pass to a neutralization: it must, through a double gesture, a double science, a double writing—put into practice a reversal of the classical opposition and a general displacement of the system” (Derrida 21). He therefore produces, at the end of the essay, not just a void of cancelled signatures but a future space, a potential displacement of extant systems of trust and authority by the observation that signatures are easily iterated and forged. For the minority, the dissident, or the outsider, this is an opportunity; it is one of the reasons that postcolonial scholar Gayatri Spivak took special notice of the essay and its concrete, “humble pedagogical benefit” when applied to the daily procedures of the academy. A clear-eyed comprehension of the nature and limits of the signature, she wrote, can disclose “the condition of the possibility of the positive.”<sup>16</sup> For a minority under threat, this is an important outcome of the thinking in “Signature Event Context”: not whether or not the authorized and empowered sign system is built on false philosophical grounds, but how an understanding of the ontological flexibility of the signature can be used to prevent the social and physical erasure of the minor and the heterodox.

Liu’s aesthetics differ from Derrida’s account of the signature in that they emphasize intersubjectivity and volition. Liu argues that what connects a sign system to those who consume it is their *desire* (or “interest,” *qingqu*, as above) in doing so. Rather than human emotion being provoked by objects (情以物兴), he argues that the perception of objects is a function of human emotion (物以情兴) (116). In an epistemological frame, it seems unacceptable

to argue that a signature links a context to a text *when people want it to*, but the dynamics of real medial interactions make it clear that this is, in fact, often the determining factor. Pop stars feel real to consumers not exclusively because they are more thoroughly documented than others, but also because they are better loved (or more deeply hated). There is an argument to be made that the communitarian politics this observation provokes are related to the “general displacement of the system” that Derrida describes. There is certainly a kind of double-writing at play, as Liu seems to have embraced subjective, affective, epistemologically flexible, and even populist structures of authenticity, even as he insists that aesthetic perception has a mysterious power to make exteriors and surfaces transparent, allowing aesthetes to experience direct perception of the interiors of things (Liu 1988: 42).

The libidinal structures that produce signatures help explain, perhaps, why Liu Xiaobo’s wife, Liu Xia, is so consistently centered in accounts of his life, politics, and imprisonment. To tell a love story—as Liao Yiwu 廖亦武 does in the introduction to Liu Xia’s translated poetry—is to produce a context for the couple’s politics that is recognizable to many, legally supported (they were formally married by the state in 1996), and at heart, is about desire and bodies. Liao describes their relationship like this: “Liu Xia’s nature is to be an unrestrained bird. But because of the burden of [Xiaobo’s] ruthless, extreme love, this bird that longs to fly has been imprisoned in a cage.”<sup>17</sup> Liu Xiaobo’s ideological and emotional purity is translated into romance; to consume Liao’s story of Liu’s love for his wife is to assume certain views of his character. What might not immediately feel real to some—the state’s obsessive monitoring and management of Liu Xia as she was held under house arrest, or Liu Xiaobo’s immense stubbornness in pursuing his own beliefs at the detriment of his family and friends—is figured as the near-pathological adoration of a controlling husband. The overt negativity of Liao’s description of their relationship—he is too much, he is cruel—underlines that the project is not to be correct, but to encourage readers to choose to experience his dissent as an affective, aesthetic experience. Some readers can’t get enough love stories; others, like Xu Zhiyuan, are fascinated by photographs; and a third group might be swayed by Liu Xiaobo’s poetry. In each case, the result is that Liu Xiaobo, and by extension, *Charter* 08, feels more real to readers, his signature at the bottom of his texts becomes more trustworthy and more powerfully able to incite action. The construction of that textual person relies substantially upon the desire of readers to consume and believe. The epistemological sand that such a desire is built on also makes it possible for Liu Xia, during the long years of Liu Xiaobo’s imprisonment, to mediate on his behalf and to do the labor of image construction without consistent or predictable access

to his authentic thoughts and feelings—her visibility as prisoner and object paradoxically providing her with certain kinds of limited but valuable agency.<sup>18</sup>

Liu Xiaobo is an individual who is experienced by many as authentic and trustworthy, a person who matches his medial image<sup>19</sup>—but that experience arises from a group of cultural producers (including Liu Xia, but also the journalists, scholars, and other writers who create mediated representations of Liu Xiaobo) and is dependent upon a group of cultural consumers who desire or consent to Liu's authenticity. This is reflected by the way that Liu is typified as exemplary of the Chinese democracy movement, not in his difference or superiority, but through his connectivity and representativeness. The rights lawyer Teng Biao argues for his importance by saying that he was deeply connected to the movement both as “bridge and hub.”<sup>20</sup> The Nobel Prize statement, which reads “the campaign to establish universal human rights in China is being waged by many Chinese, both in China itself and abroad. Through the severe punishment meted out to him, Liu has become the foremost symbol of this wide-ranging struggle for human rights in China” (Leedom-Ackerman, 376), underlines that it is participating in a *symbolic* politics representative not of an individual but of a communal cultural expression, even as it occludes the communal medial, signatory, and aesthetic creation and reception that lies behind the phrase “has become.” On the stage of the Nobel ceremony that granted Liu Xiaobo the Peace Prize, there sat an empty chair. We know this chair acted as a symbol for the absent (ruptured) Liu, and we see it metonymically standing in for a large group of people that consented to be represented by him: “Signature Event Context” visualizes this as a process of authentication, of signatory labor. But Liu's dissertation reminds us that the chair became a symbol by first being an aesthetic object, by attracting attention, provoking affect, and eliciting consent to its use as a symbol.

### *Mediation and Minority Survival*

The investigation of Liu Xiaobo's acts of signature that appears above reorients critical attention away from the individual dissident and toward acts of community survival; it opens itself not to the Cold War model, in which a dissident's individual principles overcome an incorrect consensus by being unassailably correct, but in twentieth and twenty-first century identity politics of minority. In Liu Xiaobo's case, members of a minority group under threat engage in an intentional project where

hypermediation and authenticity politics reinforce one another. They pay the price of appearing in culture, both to each other and to the majority that oppresses them. That project is self-sacrificial—constraining individuals, making creators into objects, and relying on bodily harm as an event that medially reifies group authenticity—and intends to attract the volitional participation of both in-group and out-group members to validate a signature. Authenticity may attach to an individual or small set of symbols, but it is fundamentally created by communities: the fluidity, populism, and epistemological insecurity of the sign system allow for minority competition with antagonistic, monopolistic cultural interests. And indeed, intensive and self-sacrificial transmediation, the valorization of authenticity, and the repeated depiction of bodies in pain are also hallmarks of postwar African American cultural history, among many others. The echoes between the two calls into question the exceptionalisms that separate accounts of authoritarian cultural politics in China from accounts of American unfreedom.

Fred Moten starts his book *Stolen Life* by writing, “What it is to be given (as) something to hold, always in common, has really got a hold on me. It’s not mine but it’s all I have.”<sup>21</sup> The social address, the legibility in society, that the signed statement grants to the speaker is a form of possession, both a power of the artist (who can, in some cases, wield the signature) and a power of the reader (who gains a reproducible, usable, recontextualizable version of the artist’s work). Derrida’s assessment of writing—something that doesn’t exist except perhaps in the barest probability of the signature—is reinforced by the final sentence above: we don’t have it, but it’s all we’ve got. The tone of Moten’s sentence, though, and much of its force comes from his identification of enslavement as a thing that can happen to those whose subject-context bond, whose signed identity as people, is not legible to those they encounter. They become abstractions, labor, cases, something other than subjects: their lives can be stolen, they can be “given as something to hold.” The being-given of slavery, the sign and signature system that has been used to validate un-personhood, is different but not unrelated to the being-given in which the artist performs. As is true for Liu Xiaobo, Moten’s meditation on ethics and freedom centers again and again on the aesthetic moment, the work of musicians and authors:

The rough glide of Braxton’s musical movement, the burred terrain of Glissant’s words, sends us to find out more of what it means to have been sent to give yourself away. We are driven to resist this movement, where consent is now inseparable from a monstrous imposition, but



we are also drawn, at the same time, against ourselves, to the rail, to the abyss, by the iterative, broken singularity it hides and holds, by the murmur of buried, impossible social life . . .<sup>22</sup>

In this account, we can see the experience of self-sacrifice—at once an act of consent and a monstrous imposition—as it reaches out toward the unlikely possibility of the open and iterative aesthetic. The insistence upon transcendence that has led Mu Ling to describe Liu Xiaobo’s thesis as “so idealized that its real meaning becomes very hard to pin down” (Mu 82) is here revealed as the wholly rational desire for escape from a regime that wants very badly to pin its minority subjects down. In Moten’s synesthetic response to art, in which music has physical texture and writing has heft and shape, we simultaneously see an aesthetics of human freedom and the promise of building a community, a public culture, around new acts of signification and mediation.

In the face of existential threat, the tradition of Black cultural signifyin(g) formally insists on the union of text and context; it is made up substantially of statements that cannot be interpreted without context. Claudia Mitchell-Kernan writes:

The black concept of signifying incorporates essentially a folk notion that dictionary entries for words are not always sufficient for interpreting meanings or messages, or that meaning goes beyond such interpretations. . . . The hearer is thus constrained to attend to all potential meaning carrying symbolic systems in speech events—the total universe of discourse.<sup>23</sup>

This practice is persistently double. White supremacy often insists that Black people speak as and from blackness—contextualization that is inescapable because it is violent—and yet, at the same time, signifyin(g)’s insistence upon context, its inhabitation of Black identity as a meaning-making context for human life—builds cohesion, intimacy, and trust among participants. It resists erasure by anti-blackness. This hearkens to the double-bind of Liu Xiaobo’s eleven-year prison sentence, an authenticating punishment, an inhabitation of the label of criminal that, in the “total universe of discourse,” signified much more. Liu’s abstraction of the made representative object as a “horse that has thrown off its reins” which cannot be controlled takes on a much more sinister quality when some of those who consume and possess the object do so with an implicit or explicit desire to harm its maker. Liu Xiaobo’s willingness to be photographed as he died of cancer

under heavy guard invokes, in some ways, the choices that Black families make to release video of their loved ones as they are abused and murdered by American police. Texts are, after all, ruptured from their context, and the oppressive majority sometimes succeeds in severing them from minority contexts for use as weapons; the question of survival politics is whether the cost of creation exceeds the risk of invisibility.

This endless stack of concerns—the objectification of mediation as compared to the objectifications that take place without mediation—is a rhythm of life in minority, and a deeply shaping element of dissidence. It exists in the daily intellectual experiences of minority as much as it does in the explicit poetics of theorists. On Twitter, the sociologist, essayist, and public intellectual Tressie McMillan Cottom writes that “We’re all, all us black people in this space, trying to figure out how to be authentic w/out getting stolen; real without keeping it realest.”<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, Latoya Peterson, technologist and founder of the blog Racialicious, tweets about the price Black people pay for being held and viewed as an authentic and signed group of people: “That hypervisibility is draining. You can never just be you. You can never get that glorious sense of freedom that comes with anonymity.”<sup>25</sup> This is precisely Liu Xiaobo’s conundrum about aesthetics and freedom—to establish a signature, to knit a text to your context, is the highest act of freedom, and yet it makes the individual artist less free, less anonymous, and less flexible. Despite this doubleness, swift and repeated transmediation is a tool that the Black intellectual community has used to outpace and outcreate those who would falsify or adapt Black cultural codes. Oneka LaBennett’s monograph *She’s Mad Real* finds highly similar practices among Black and West Indian girls in New York City: “while a number of scholarly analyses interpret the pursuit of realness as serving to essentialize Black people and limit Black youths’ chances for success by situating them outside White mainstream America, *She’s Mad Real* reveals how girls use invocations of realness to (re)write their own social scripts.”<sup>26</sup> The double bind of the signature works in the same way at a popular, endemic level as it does in elite culture: communities choose authenticity narratives *despite* the sacrifices they require because authenticity discourses can be bent toward minority appearance and community survival. Marc Abélès’s timeline, in which convivance is transformed by neoliberal societies into a politics of survival, loops back on itself, as populations traumatically deleted from political life (the *demos*, in Wendy Brown’s terms)<sup>27</sup> seek out mutual trust and the lifesaving collective action it allows.<sup>28</sup>

This essay has attempted to understand the medial decision-making of minority communities under threat by triangulating between Liu Xiaobo’s medial theory and practice, Derrida’s essay “Signature Event Context,” and

media theory and practice in contemporary African-American culture. The strong echoes and homologies between these three practices serve as evidence that subjects in multiple cultural contexts are encountering similar problems of authenticity, signature, and collective action. The variety of means with which actors respond to the problem of the signature, however—from Derrida's lightheartedly contradictory signature at the end of "Signature Event Context," to Liu Xiaobo's poetry, to Fred Moten's descriptions of the musical solo—remind us of the historicity and contextual specificity at play in the response to the challenges of mediation. Medial practices are technologies, read and reinterpreted and shared across diverse cultural boundaries; Black activists interpret and selectively adapt the methods of Tiananmen just as the Tiananmen generation read and adapted the lessons of Civil Rights. Rather than treating the communities under study here as objects with static principles—arguing that all minority populations engage in hypermediation in the same way and for the same reasons—this essay instead instructs attention to and participation in the particular struggle through which threatened populations are intentionally, tactically, and sacrificially struggling to appear in culture. It seeks to serve as a reminder of the anti-genocidal and egalitarian potential—not the promise, but the potential—of transmediation and authenticity discourse, and it seeks to shift attention from the individual lives of dissident symbols to the distributed, communitarian labor that helps construct a shared symbolic system where difference survives.

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### Notes

1. Marc Abélès, *The Politics of Survival*, trans. Julie Kleinman (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 15.

2. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 53.

3. Xu Zhiyuan 许知远. *Kangzhebengzhe 《抗争者》* (The Protesters) (Xinbei: Baqi Wenhua, 2013). Epub, no pagination, ch. 12.

4. Global Times Editorial Board, "Sheping: Meiguo Minzhu Jijinhui You 'Banjiang' Saorao Zhongguo" "社评: 美国民主基金会又“颁奖”骚扰中国" (Op-ed: the American Democracy Foundation once again "gives awards" to harass China). *Huanqiu Shibao 《环球时报》* (*Global Times*), May 27, 2014. <https://opinion.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnJFolR>. (Accessed February 24, 2023).

5. Louisa Lim, *The People's Republic of Amnesia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 5.

6. Liu Xiaobo, *June Fourth Elegies*, trans. Jeffrey Yang (Minneapolis: Greywolf Press, 2012), 141. I provide only English for this poem because it does not appear in its appropriate place at <http://liuxiaobo.info/blog/archives/18406>, where his complete Tiananmen poems are sourced; I additionally can't find it in print, although the poem as it is translated in the Greywolf volume is highly similar to a Liu Xiaobo essay with an identical title, 《六四凌晨的黑暗——六四十五年祭》“Early Morning Darkness on June 4—A 15 Year Offering.” See 《大事件》 no. 1, October 2010, 92.

7. Liu Xiaobo, *No Enemies, No Hatred: Selected Essays and Poems*, ed. Perry Link et. al. (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2012), 175.

8. Yu Jie, *Steel Gate to Freedom*, trans. HC Hsu (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 39.

9. Liu Xiaobo 刘晓波, *Shenmei yu ren de ziyou* 《审美与人的自由》(Aesthetics and Human Freedom) (Beijing: Beijing Shifan Daxue Chubanshe, 1988), 7. Hereafter cited by page number.

10. Jacques Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” *Limited Inc.*, trans. Alan Bass. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 12.

11. Mu Ling, *Chinese cultural and literary criticism in the 1980s* (PhD diss., Cornell University, 1994), 81.

12. The Charter is translated in Liu, *No Enemies*, 300–312; its original version, with a list of signatories, is available at [2008xianzhang.info](http://2008xianzhang.info), which now also chronicles the arrests and disappearances of its organizers and signatories.

13. In this group, one could count rural deaths during the Great Famine, which sometimes were not even counted by central authorities, or the deaths of Black people in the massacre at Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1921; another example might be the Shadian Incident in 1975, in which Deng Xiaoping (as acting chief of the People's Liberation Army) and the late Mao government ordered the massacre of more than fifteen hundred Hui Muslims. This event was rhetorically useful neither to the Dengist state nor to the Maoist state, and its memory survives mostly among the Hui themselves; one account appears in Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals *Mao's Last Revolution*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2006, 387.

14. Compare the imprisonment and death of the Uyghur writer Nurmemet Yasin, who is represented in the press by a single, low-fidelity, poorly cropped photograph. For this reader, the emotional valence of photographs of Liu stack until each one is pregnant with feeling; Yasin, imprisoned for writing a short story, remains shadowy and distant. His case is more egregious, representative of a population under sharper mortal threat, and represents a politics that I support more enthusiastically than I do Liu's — but it is extremely difficult to collect sufficient cultural material to discuss Nurmemet, who had only a brief moment in which he could publish or express himself in public. This is a problem of signed mediation.

15. Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2002), 110.

16. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Revolutions that as Yet Have No Model: Derrida's Limited Inc.” *Diacritics* 10, no. 4, Winter (1980), 29–49, 48.

17. Liu Xia 刘霞, *Empty Chairs*, trans. Ming Di and Jennifer Stern, (Minneapolis: Greywolf Press, 2015), xii–xiii.

18. Liu Xia is a crucially important author and designer of the media presence of Liu Xiaobo, and does so from a substantially different conceptual and practical perspective: she is best studied independently and under separate cover, not as an adjunct to Xiaobo's media practice. She is the main figure in the penultimate chapter of my monograph-in-progress, *On Stricture*.

19. Belinda Kong concludes that “Liu Xiaobo's life lives up to its mythology.” Belinda Kong, *Tiananmen Fictions: Outside the Square: The Chinese Literary Diaspora and the Politics of Global Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 90.

20. Joanne Leedom-Ackerman, et al., eds. *The Journey of Liu Xiaobo: From Dark Horse to Nobel Laureate*, (Lincoln: Potomac Books, 2020), 84.

21. Fred Moten, *Stolen Life*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), ix.

22. Fred Moten, *The Universal Machine*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 135–6.

23. Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, “Signifying, Loud-Talking and Marking,” in *Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin' & Slam Dunking: a Reader in African American Expressive Culture*, ed. Gena Dagal Caponi (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 311.

24. Twitter, @tressiemcphd, <https://twitter.com/tressiemcphd/status/705202057628819456>. Retrieved 2/24/23.
25. Twitter, @LatoyaPeterson, <https://twitter.com/LatoyaPeterson/status/530113314895175680>. Retrieved 2/24/23.
26. Oneka LaBennett, *She's Mad Real: Popular Culture and West Indian Girls in Brooklyn*, (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 5.
27. Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).
28. This argument is made in different terms in Edgar Illas, *The Survival Regime: Global War and the Political*, p. xii–xiii, where he argues that discussion of survival as a rational biopolitics cannot explain “a present in which political rationales have precisely crumbled,” concluding that “Survival comes out of neoliberalism but also undermines it from within.”