

Claire Vaye Watkins, *Make a List of Everything You Have Lost*

Here is what I remember about how this billboard came to be: In the spring of 2020 Brent and I were both in the streets for Black lives, me in Portland, Oregon and Brent in Las Vegas. We noticed and compared the shapes of each city's grieving, how each was failing to protect its people, protect their right to protest and their very lives. What we were seeing, I think, were these cities confessing their true allegiances: to the police state, to white supremacy, and perhaps most of all, to money.

I would ride my bike to protests, towing my five-year-old daughter in a buggy behind me, and often we would end up in a downtown Portland shut down and boarded up. The Apple store had become a memorial. Graffiti covered storefronts and sidewalks, statues, the jail, state and federal buildings. Every civic surface seemed to be crying out. My daughter heard its cry, had questions about our city, our country. The last time she had questions like these was when we lived in Las Vegas. She'd been obsessed then, as I was when I was a girl, with that city's billboards. My daughter couldn't read back then, but she could feel plainly that the city—her grandmother's city, her great grandmother's city—was trying desperately to make itself understood. The billboards somehow disclosed to her the city's ongoing and unacknowledged state of emergency, perhaps it was some combination of their size, the way they were elevated, and the sheer number of them. It seemed in them she could hear Las Vegas screaming. She would beseech me to read every billboard we saw, agitated by the possibility of missing one, her way of honoring how badly the city needed to be seen.

And yet—and this was deeply frustrating for her, anguishing—when I read the billboards aloud to my daughter, they made no sense to her. Honestly, they have rarely made sense to me. Except those times they made too much sense, like when driving home from a visit to friend who'd been raped and a North Las Vegas billboard invited me to masturbate on camera for \$50.

What's it *About*? my daughter would ask when I read the billboards where they hovered in the sky, lit up like cheap gods. The answer was always "money."

Once Brent and I decided the project would be a billboard, we sensed the possibility of using it to lovingly violate the city's unspoken codes, as Brent's campaign for mayor had, and as I had tried to do years earlier in flying an anti-rape banner "ad" over the Michigan-Ohio State football game. We wondered when and how a city was honest with itself. When does Las Vegas tell the truth? We talked about the billboards the activist art collective Indecent put up in Vegas during the financial collapse. I thought almost daily of one in particular, the dummy hanging from it, one of Las Vegas's famous suicides beneath the words *I hope you're happy, Wall St.* I thought of Jennifer Bolande's 2017 Desert X billboards in Palm Springs, which featured the mountains the billboards themselves had obscured.

We were curious about how cities talk to themselves, what they say when they don't think anyone is listening, how they talk to us when we have no way to talk back. We talked about Las Vegas' façade of hedonism, how its popular mythology offers itself as America's id, a mirage of pure release. A free place, in short, when in fact it deeply needs the mores it pretends to reject, needs naughtiness and Christianity, cannot offer pleasure without transgression, a city built on loss which never acknowledges pain. I think we wanted the city to

confess and knew it never would. We wanted the billboard to speak to our children of something other than money. We wanted to speak not just *of* pain but directly *to* pain. We considered “we are all in so much pain,” but decided instead on this therapeutic exercise from Dr. Pauline Boss, who coined the term “ambiguous grief,” that is, loss without information. We wanted to invite the people of Las Vegas to say exactly what the city insists must never be said. This seemed a way to be useful.

Is there a prayer more Las Vegas than begging to be used? I’ll say again that we did this because we love you, Las Vegas, and wonder what would happen if this city could be what it pretends to be—open, free, deeply accepting of every imperfect being with a body? Couldn’t that heal us?

Reopening came. The state threw its workers at the virus like so much chum. It almost goes without saying that this was not an unfamiliar feeling to many of us who have lived in Las Vegas. Only the scale was new, arresting and grotesque, a staggering parade of optional death, a city ever more in service to making few rich men richer. In 2020 Vegas was as Vegas it had ever been. The place had only become more itself.

We considered using a stock image from the city’s common shorthand, some porny and instantly recognizable white woman with a finger in her mouth, probably. But that iconography looked exhausted against the photographs Brent took of Neon B. Carter, who completed the project. In Neon, the signal scrambling we’d been after now had a body, a Black body, the place where our nation’s pain bioaccumulates. (If what happens here stays here, where does it stay, precisely? In bodies like Neon’s.) Brent’s design complies with the conventions of the billboard form while Neon playfully defies them. We erected the billboard in front of Trump Tower beginning on October 20, 2020. The billboard and its hotline stayed up through the election and Trump’s attempted coup; both are up and running still. The sliding scale loss hotline is a public service from a future city, an imagined amenity from Las Vegas were that city to become a place of healing. The hotline is also real, and free, and has received many lists of loss to date. It is an absurd, inadequate and yet entirely sincere gesture of spiritual triage, sort of an oxygen bar for the soul.

As for the hat, it could one day occasion a call to the hotline, as it was stolen at a MAGA rally. As Neon herself put it, “The hat is on my ass because he can kiss it.”



Brent Holmes and Claire Vaye Watkins, *Make a List of Everything You Have Lost*, billboard  
Photograph Brent Holmes

**Claire Vaye Watkins** was born in Bishop, California in 1984. A graduate of the University of Nevada Reno, she earned her MFA from the Ohio State University, where she was a Presidential Fellow. She is the author of *Gold Fame Citrus*, and *Battleborn*. A Guggenheim Fellow, a Lannan Literary Fellow, a Shearing Fellow, and among Granta's "Best Young American Novelists," Claire is a professor at the University of California, Irvine. She lives in the Mojave Desert.

**Brent Holmes** is an artist, activist, and cultural animator whose work investigates contemporary social structures through a historical lens. Much of his work examines epistemological warfare, the body, food, play, and cultural discourse. He has exhibited at the Torrance Art Museum, the Nevada Museum of Art, and is part of the permanent collection of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas Marjorie Barrick Museum of Art. He is the co-organizer of local performance art event RADAR, a food writer, and a photojournalist.