A POETICS OF SUBJECTIVE RESISTANCE

JOSEPH BRENDAN FRANCES

PhD THESIS **2020**

A Poetics of Subjective Resistance: the Non-recuperable in Contemporary British and North American Innovative Poetry

Joseph Brendan Frances

Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Salford, UK

School of Arts and Media

2020

Table of contents

List of illustrations

Acknowledgements

I ought first to thank the NWCDTP, the funding body through which, by convoluted and indirect means, the British state paid for me to be in the immensely privileged position to focus singly on this project for three years, free from the necessity of wage labour. We must appropriate where we can the resources of the state against it, whilst refusing to be recruited by it, and I thank those who have colluded with me in this effort.

Immense thanks too to my supervisors, Scott Thurston and Nikolai Duffy, whose support, advise, ideas, knowledge and patience have been beyond generous throughout. They have listened to my thoughts as they struggle to take shape and worked through them in many a lengthy & greatly enjoyable discussion, always leaving me overfull of ideas in formation. I couldn't have asked for any better.

To my parents, Jan and Rich, for their kindness in both material and immaterial support, for listening, encouraging, checking in on me, proof-reading, and helping me to pay rent in the final months. To my partner, Lauryn, whose love and support particularly in the latter stages of writing, helping me to be a functioning person and being always present and loving, has been above and beyond. For all the care and energy that takes, and without which this thesis would have been nigh on impossible. Thank you <3

There are too many other friends and comrades for whom I am grateful. These ideas are only formed in collectivity, & only worth anything as they extend out to it. To those in the poetry community, in Manchester & across the UK and beyond, who push together to extend the horizons of our political and poetic imagination, & to conjure that world into being with their writing and action. At the reading, in the pub back room, in the street, in your mate's rented house, at a conference. And to those not in those scenes, who persistently recognise that these things matter, or remain steadfastly present anyway. Much love to you all.

Finally, to the memory of Sean Bonney. I was lucky enough to meet Sean in the time I was writing this thesis, though I don't think I told him about it, and to host him for one of the most tender and shattering readings I've witnessed. So much thinking on the radical possibilities of poetry and collective action would be impossible without his work.

Abstract

This doctoral thesis is a work of poetics, which speculatively casts into the future of possible writing, to ask how contemporary innovative poetry can enact or contribute towards political resistance. More specifically, it asks how poetry that finds its conditions materially and ideologically oppressive might imagine alternative realities through the language of those conditions, and contribute to their realisation.

The stakes and difficulties of resistance are established through an Althusserian account of ideology as universal and subject-forming. The question of poetic resistance is not how poetry can directly alter material conditions, but how poetry contribute to falteringly shifting those conditions by critiquing and re-forming the ideological premises for action and relation.

This takes the form first of a theoretical account of this problem and prospective solutions, integrating preceding radical poetics with a range of theoretical positions. This lays the groundwork for close engagements with works by four contemporary poets: Sean Bonney (1969-2019), Lisa Robertson (b. 1961), Bhanu Kapil (b. 1968) and Anna Mendelssohn (1948-2009).

This thesis contends that previous innovative poetics, while heavily invested in resistance, have focussed on poetry's ability to destabilise conceptual and linguistic frameworks, leaving under-discussed the possibility of gesturing towards *new* possible frameworks, relations and subjectivities.

It instead builds a tentatively propositional poetics, which takes the subject as a primary site of struggle. Resistive potential and instability in the cycle of ideological reproduction is found in divergent, not-yet-intelligible affective experiences, pains and desires. A poetry whose forms disrupt conventional, ideologically-formed limits of coherence might, I suggest, best gesture to, evoke or constitute these affective resistive potentials. This poetry posits and attempts forms of communication and affective recognition that are not based on realist expression, but nonetheless build solidarities across experiences rendered outside comprehension, between subjects who do not wish to be comprehended.

Chapter 1: Introduction

> practice arises from conditions
> yet these are the conditions we must change
>
> (Lisa Robertson, 'On Physically Real Being and What Happens Next', *3 Summers,* 2016, p. 47)

~

This thesis begins from a wish, or a drive, for things to be different. This simple wish underlies much of the more or less strung together traditions of experimental, innovative, alternative Anglophone poetry from at least the latter half of the twentieth century. How can poetry resist? How can the work of that (real and imagined) community of writer- and reader-ship contribute somehow towards acts of making-different. This might be reformulated as the question: how can poetry that finds its conditions materially and ideologically oppressive attempt to imagine alternative (better) realities through the language of those conditions – and contribute to their realisation?

The particular concerns, political perspectives, and longed-for horizons of the poets and critics brought together here will be various, and won't always coincide precisely with those which I bring to the thesis. As a starting point for articulating a loose shared understanding on the nature of the situation which they, and I, recognise as needing to be resisted, I might begin by suggesting a general, shared opposition to structures of *kyriarchy* – a term that expands the idea of patriarchy to think about structures of domination and subordination more generally, and the complicated and intersecting oppressions which emerge based on, for example, class, gender, race, and sexuality, within such structures.[1] Alternatively, I might use bell hooks' phrase 'imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy', to describe the interlocking systems of oppression that structure much of the world in which we live.[2] Across differences of specific politics and concerns, it is an opposition to this general framework of oppression, and a loose Marxist critique of material domination under capitalism, which I will be taking as the basic shared ground for the purposes of this thesis.

[1] Coined by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in *But She Said. Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation*, though the term has by now entered common vernacular within some contemporary activist and social justice circles, and online communities. Summarised as "a complex pyramidal system of interlocking multiplicative social and religious structures of super-ordination and sub-ordination, of ruling and oppression" (Fiorenza, 2013, p. 49 [footnote 4])

[2] Used frequently by hooks in essays, interviews, lectures, but e.g. (2004, p. 29)

This study is situated in the context of the somewhat amorphous, ill-defined, contemporary trans-Atlantic poetry communities and practices which call themselves or are called innovative, experimental, alternative, or other such contested and inadequate terms. The lineage or tradition in which this constellation of poetries sits might be characterised by reference to some of the more prominent of its predecessors: Linguistically Innovative and Cambridge Poetry in the UK, and the British Poetry Revival before them, and Language Poetry in the US. These themselves are ill-defined and sometimes contested terms for overlapping and interacting communities of poets and readers.

The British poetry Revival and the Linguistically Innovative and Cambridge scenes form an overlapping and semi-continuous strand of poetic activity in the UK. This is an 'alternative' tradition that has defined itself in opposition to a mainstream or orthodox tradition, of "officially-sanctioned British poetry" (Eric Mottram's phrase; Hampson & Barry, 1993, p. 26), which it sees as both politically and aesthetically conservative. Work within this alternative poetic tradition has mostly been distributed through small presses and little magazines, rather than higher profile platforms, which have often shown a lack of interest, and sometimes active animosity towards it.

The British Poetry Revival refers to a period of heightened creative activity roughly from 1960 to 1975. This reached a height of public profile and influence when a number of poets associated with the Revival took up positions on the council of the Poetry Society in 1971, and Eric Mottram became editor of *Poetry Review* (this period was forcibly put to an end by the financial strong-arming of the Arts Council in 1977). These poets took influence from neglected older British poets such as Hugh MacDiarmid, David Jones and Basil Bunting (who was President of the Poetry Society during this period), as well as American poets such as Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Allen Ginsberg, George Oppen, Louis Zukofsky, the New York School and those associated with the Black Mountain College. Key figures include Tom Raworth, Roy Fisher, Bob Cobbing, Elaine Feinstein, Barry MacSweeney, Tom Pickard, and Lee Harwood.

The name Linguistically Innovative Poetry originates in a letter from Gilbert Adair to Robert Sheppard's *Pages* magazine in 1988. Adair names a body of work "for which we haven't yet a satisfactory name" (Adair, 1988, p. 68), which was being written in the UK since 1977, as a direct descendent of the British Poetry Revival following its fragmentation. Sheppard describes how "during the 1990s the clumsy term […] began to be used of much of the

alternative British work of the era […] it is a term to constellate overlapping practices in the British alternative poetries from the 1980s onwards which operated under less propitious conditions than its predecessors" (2005, p. 142). As well as Sheppard and Adair, important figures include Maggie O'Sullivan, Robert Hampson, Geraldine Monk, Adrian Clarke, Wendy Mulford, Bill Griffiths, and poets like Allen Fisher, who was a key figure also in the earlier Revival. *The New British Poetry* anthology (1988), edited by Gillian Allnutt, Fred D'Aguir, Eric Mottram and Ken Edwards, collected much of these – alongside other relatively neglected poetries by women and black poets – connecting both of these generations of poets.

Cambridge Poetry is a narrower and more contested term, for a sub-set of poets across both generations, and on to the present day. These are poets who have been associated with Cambridge, and often specifically with the teaching of JH Prynne, who taught at Gonville and Cauis college from 1962 until 2005 – though I know from my own proximity that he continued to meet with and mentor younger poets until at least 2013. By 1980, there was a distinct enough sense of a particular Cambridge clique around Prynne for Blake Morrison to mention it, albeit somewhat derisively, alongside the group associated with Mottram, as an emerging strand of oppositional poetry in the 1970s (Morrison, 1980, pp. 145-6). In 1988, Robert Sheppard writes that "even 20 years ago an impressive collection of emerging 'Cambridge' poets could have been assembled," and refers to *A Various Art*, the 1987 anthology edited by Andrew Crozier and Tim Longville, as an anthology of Cambridge poetry (Sheppard, 1988, p. 49). Sheppard acknowledges that Crozier would reject such a definition, and Crozier's introduction explicitly rejects any strict categorisation by style or location, gesturing to the wider context of Innovative poetry. Poets associated with the Cambridge banner include Veronica Forrest-Thomson, Denise Riley, Douglas Oliver, Peter Riley, and later Drew Milne, Anna Mendelssohn, Andrea Brady, and Keston Sutherland.[3]

Language Poetry refers to a loose association of poets which emerged in the early 1970s in the United Stated "as both a reaction to and an outgrowth of" the same American poets who were influencing their UK counterparts (e.g. Black Mountain, New York School) (Preminger & Brogan, 1993, p. 675), and based predominantly in cities such as New York and San

[3] For further discussion of the history, influence, and constitution of the groupings described in the above three paragraphs – from which much of my own account is drawn – see e.g. Robert Sheppard's *The Poetry of Saying* (2005), Robert Hampson and Peter Barry's *New British Poetries* (1993)**,** or the introduction to Richard Caddel and Peter Quartermain's anthology, *Other: British and Irish Poetry since 1970* (1999)**.** For a discussion of the relative lack of women in these groupings, see David Kennedy and Christine Kennedy's *Women's Experimental Poetry in Britain 1970-2010* (2013).

Francisco. The Language poets also reciprocally read and interacted with their UK contemporaries, and shared a sense of forming an avant-garde against "the narrowness and provincialism of mainstream literary norms" (Silliman et al, 1988, p. 262). Centring around a number of journals such as *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, edited by Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein, Language Poets included Ron Silliman, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Steve Perelman, Barrett Watten, Rae Armantrout, Rosmarie Waldrop, and British-Canadian poets Steve McCaffery and Karen Mac Cormack (Preminger & Brogan, 1993, pp. 675-6) (it's worth noting that this grouping was notably more hospitable to women than its UK counterparts at that time).

Whilst this project, and the contemporary poets I will be discussing, have some hereditary relationship to these poetries in an ongoing tradition, the nature of their contemporaneity – with no yet formed canon – means that it is difficult for me to situate the works I'm reading, as a group, with any more specificity than as heirs of these lineages, within the umbrella of contemporary innovative poetry. Transient populations, and an extremely high level of interaction and connectivity, which characterise our current moment, make geographical- or scene- focussed characterisations even less helpful than ever. Yet, through interactions within critical conversations, conferences, overlapping publishing histories, public readings, reviews, shared readerships, there are webs of connections between many of the poets I will be discussing, which I hope will become more apparent as I go on. On the ground in the UK, the innovative poetry scenes are in a period of flourishing and activity, which has seen a shift away from the heavy male domination of previous periods, and with some significant – albeit recent, slow, and as yet wholly insufficient – movements being made to counter on-going historical exclusions around race and the whiteness of experimental poetry.[4]

Chapter 3 will begin by discussing the way that some resistance to the general state of things has long been taken as foundational to the self-conception of these experimental poetic traditions that are the context for this study. Central to this discussion will be three works of critical poetics – Veronica Forrest-Thomson's *Poetic Artifice*, Robert Sheppard's *The Poetry of Saying*, and Charles Bernstein's 'Artifice of Absorption' – which, whilst mutually informing, emerge from the Cambridge, Linguistically Innovative, and Language scenes respectively, and which I take as key examples. Veronica Forrest-Thomson, for example,

[4] One exemplary set of interventions comes from *Race and Poetry and Poetics in the UK.* Events include two conferences, one at University of London in February 2016, and one at the University of Cambridge in October 2018. See: http://www.rapapuk.com/

argues for a poetry that uses artifice to "challenge our ordinary linguistic orderings of the world, make us question the way in which we make sense of things" (2016, p. 36). Robert Sheppard gives an account of British Innovative poetics which describes how formal innovations were always conceived of as ways to disrupt pre-existing meanings, to cut through "the known" (2005, p. 3), as a way of critiquing the status quo and looking towards alternative possibilities. The drive towards formal innovation and poetic invention in these poetries has consistently been combined with some element of politically radical intention, in a wish to excavate and undermine current meanings which underpin current (e.g. capitalist, etc.) relations, and open up new possibilities in and through this disruption in language. This chapter will also include discussion of the poetic thinking of poet-critics such as Allen Fisher, Denise Riley, Andrea Brady and Keston Sutherland.

This radical poetics was influenced by key theoretical arguments such as those made, for example, by Theodor Adorno in his essay 'Commitment' (addressed later in this thesis), or by Julia Kristeva in *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Both argue that works of art which are highly disruptive of pre-given structures of signification are able to make resistive critiques and disruptions of the conceptual frameworks that underpin and perpetuate our oppressive material conditions.[5] These works are influenced by experimental poetic and literary works, and make arguments which have in turn been highly influential in shaping the political poetics that underpins many subsequent developments in experimental poetry.

This self-conception, this sense of radical politics as a shared ground from which, and sometimes, tentatively and with much scepticism, *for which* writing is done, continues as a central feature of contemporary trans-Atlantic experimental poetry communities. I will discuss this with reference to two conferences which occurred in 2013 – *Militant Poetry and Poetics* (Birkbeck, University of London) and *Poetry and/or Revolution* (UC Santa Cruz, UC Davis, UC Berkeley) – as well as the 2015 anthology of poetics, *Towards. Some. Air.*, edited by Amy De'Ath and Fred Wah.

[5] I have chosen to use "resistive" here, and throughout this thesis, as the adjective characterising that which enacts or aims towards political resistance, rather than the more common "resistant". The latter term seems to me to be laden with senses that aim for stillness, that drag their feet, that don't go anywhere – as one who is resistant to persuasion keeps their mind unchanged, or the body of one who is resistant to disease remains (nearly) as it was before. Of course, the resistant, uncooperative subject might also kick and scream, and resistance is ultimately about refusal. I have turned to the less common, but closely synonymous term, because I want to emphasise in the idea of resistance – of the refusal of the current state of things – also the more future-oriented, revolutionary impulse of resistance, not just to drag against the forces which structure our lives, but to push towards brand new possibilities to take their place.

~

> to put it simply, the purpose of song is not only to raise the living standards of the working class, but to prevent the ruling class from living in the way that they have been
>
> (Sean Bonney, 'Second Letter on Harmony', *Letter Against the Firmament*, 2015, p. 35)

~

The central focus of this thesis will be reading-encounters with contemporary poetry from the UK and North America which sits within this lineage, by poets who many within these scenes would consider pre-eminent members, elders, or recent predecessors[6]: Chapter 4 will focus on *Letters Against The Firmament* (2015) by British poet Sean Bonney (1969-2019); Chapter 5 will focus on *3 Summers* (2016) by Canadian poet Lisa Robertson (b. 1961); Chapter 6 on *Ban en Banlieue* (2015), by British-Indian and now US-based poet Bhanu Kapil (b. 1968); Chapter 7 on works by British poet Anna Mendelssohn (also known as Grace Lake, 1948-2009), spanning her pamphlets *viola tricolor* (1993), *Bernache Nonnette* (1996), *Tondo Aquatique* (1997), and her collection *Implacable Art* (2000).

In these readings I wish to advance from the position of tracing some exemplary and distinct ways in which resistance is being crafted out in the contemporary moment, how both its need and its possibility are conceptualised, and what these works show us through their example about the possibilities of future writing, and future being. In Chapter 2 I will explain in more detail how these readings will operate, in the context of this thesis as a work of poetics, in relation to the establishing of an overall argument which uses existing work to suggest speculative possibilities for resistive poetry yet to be written.

*

Whilst this project sits within a long lineage in which the question of how poetry, and specifically how experimental poetries, can engage in political resistance – to understand what I mean specifically by resistance, what problem these poems are facing, we need to understand in more detail how this thesis conceptualises the nature of the situation which must be resisted. I don't here mean just the harmful structures and conditions of the world,

[6] For most of the duration of the writing of this thesis, three out of the four poets in question were alive and actively writing, publishing and performing their work. Sean Bonney's most recent work, *Our Death* (Commune Editions, 2019), was published mere months before his unexpected death. His is a great loss to all of us engaged in the attempt at radical poetic writing.

described loosely above; also, importantly, any resistance must reckon with the processes through which those conditions reproduce themselves.

The groundwork for the understanding of resistance which this thesis brings to contemporary poetry begins from the understanding of ideology described by Louis Althusser in 'Ideology and ideological state apparatuses', summarised in the maxims "ideology is eternal" and "ideology has no outside" (1971, pp. 167/175).

It is important to distinguish here, as Althusser does, between "ideology *in general*" and "particular ideolog*ies*" (Althusser, 1971, p. 159); when I refer to ideology in this thesis, I am drawing primarily on the theoretical account given in the latter half of Althusser's essay, of "ideology *in general*". To clarify this distinction further, Althusser claims that "ideolog*ies have a history of their own"* whereas "ideology *in general has no history* […] in an absolutely positive sense", that is it "*omni-historical*" (1971, pp. 60-61, emphasis in original). Ideologies in the plural sense refer to particular mystifications which arise from particular historical conditions, such as those of capitalism, and are determined by class struggle, whereas the general form of ideology is an inescapable process. Althusser distinguishes his usage from what he calls the "positivist and historicist thesis of *The German Ideology*" (1971, p. 60), explicitly repudiating Marx's notion that the distortions and mystifications of ideology arise from "the material alienation which reigns in the conditions of existence of men themselves" (1971, pp. 163-4). This notion would elide the central distinction made above, and suppose the possibility that outside the specific alienating conditions of capital lies a non-ideological conception of the world. By contrast, Althusser claims that: "the representation given to individuals of their (individual) relation to the social relations which govern their collective and individual life [is] necessarily an imaginary relation" (1971, p. 165). Thus Althusser claims not just that the unjust and oppressive material conditions in which we live are also ideological, but that ideology is not a contingent inconvenience brought about by conditions as they are currently, but is a universal and subject-forming process of necessary mystification, an inescapable part of the experience of being a subject within a collectivity.

In this conception, individuals are always socialised as *certain kinds of subjects*, within pre-existing frameworks of understanding. The conceptual parameters of our thought, and our conception of possible actions, are limited by the historical and cultural forces through which we come to understand the world, and which are the conditions of our understanding anything at all. In very simple terms, we are always socialised, always educated in one way or another,

not just with facts, but with the basic concepts from which we might begin. This always mystifies and naturalises the conditions in which we live. To say that "ideology is eternal" is therefore to say that there is no possibility of a clear, objective understanding, or a 'free' action, which exists outside of these socially formed bounds of possibility. To say that "ideology has no outside" is to point out not just that there is no thought or action which doesn't occur within ideologically formed limits, but that we cannot perceive these limits at all, since they appear only as the true, obvious, or unquestionable conditions of the world, beyond which we cannot conceive.

> ~
>
> It is indeed a peculiarity of ideology that it imposes (without appearing to do so, since these are 'obviousnesses') obviousnesses as obviousnesses, which we cannot *fail to recognize* and before which we have the inevitable and natural reaction of crying out […]: 'That's obvious!'
>
> (Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and ideological state apparatuses', *Lenin and Philosophy,* 1971, p. 172)
>
> ~

To reiterate: Althusser is not saying that the domination of any *particular* ideological system is eternal, or that any *particular* ideology has exclusive and uncontested force within ideology as a general process. Ideology – *in general* – always operates this way; no social situation is more or less ideological than any other. Nonetheless, this process functions to primarily reproduce the conceptual frameworks, and concurrent power relations, of any given social and historical moment, as limits of the conceivable for subjects who emerge through it – Althusser's is an account of "reproduction of the conditions of production" (1971, p. 127). Ideology reproduces the social relations from which it emerges, to the inevitable benefit of those who are materially dominant within those relations, by shaping the bounds of what is possible.

This essay, and Althusser's account of ideology, has generated a great deal of discussion. It's not the place of this thesis to catalogue or respond to these discussions, but it's useful for me to point to one strand of response here. One recurring complaint is along the lines that Althusser's position is "depressing," (Eagleton, 2007, pp. 2), "bleak" (Eagleton, 2007, p. 145), or "pessimistic" (Ricoeur, 1994, p. 65; Elliot, 1987, p. 231). I pointedly say "complaint" here, rather than "criticism", since its being pessimistic says nothing about whether or not it is a useful or incisive account, and only that the complainant would wish things to be different. Gregory Elliot expresses a fuller version of this kind of response:

> in the class struggle in ideology the cards are always already stacked in favour of the ruling class because its particular interests coincide with the universal functional requirements of social reproduction [...] little efficacy can be assigned the oppositional ideologies Althusser nonetheless posits. (Elliot, 1987, p. 232)

The more substantive criticism is one of inconsistency then, that Althusser's position almost entirely rules out the possibility of resistance which he nonetheless argued for and believed in.

Related criticisms, of the totalising nature of Althusser's ideology and the picture it paints of society, have been made by a range of highly sympathetic readers. For example, Stuart Hall, in his essay 'Signification, Representation, Ideology', takes issue with what he calls the "functionalism" of the version of ideology presented in 'Ideology and Ideological State apparatuses': "Ideology seems to perform the function required of it (i.e., to reproduce that the dominance of the dominant ideology), to perform it effectively, and to go on performing it, without encountering any counter-tendencies" (Hall, 1985, p. 99). Hall claims that Althusser's ideology oversimplifies the social whole, and shows only the reproduction of dominant structures, and not the ongoing struggles and contradictions, that it leaves out "the ideologies of resistance, of exclusion, of deviation, etc." (Hall, 1985, p. 99).

A response that gets at a further aspect of this same area of criticism, this time focussing on the relative lack of space for deviations and agency at the level of the individual rather than the social whole which is Hall's focus, is made in Mladen Dolar's 'Beyond Interpellation'. I read this essay through its treatment in Judith Butler's 'Conscience Doth Make Subjects of Us All'. Butler quote's Dolar: "there is a part of the individual that cannot successfully pass into the subject, an element of 'pre-ideological' and 'presubjective' *materia prima* that comes to haunt subjectivity once it is constituted as such" (Dolar, 1993, p. 75; Butler, 1995, p. 18); "There is a remainder involved in the mechanism of interpellation" (Dolar, 1993, p. 85; Butler, 1995, p. 24). That is, there is an element of individual experience which will always elude the process of ideological subjectification. Butler explains the basis of this element: "Dolar thus criticizes Althusser for eliding that dimension of subjectivity that remains radically immaterial, barred from an appearance within materiality" (Butler, 1995, p. 18).

Concepts not dissimilar to Dolar's "remainder" will become very useful for me in this thesis; but Butler rightly criticises his claim that love is an example of that remainder, responding that our forms of love can be subject to the law – to ideology's structuring limits – and that we can indeed love the law, seek it out in "passionate pursuit" (1995, p. 24). This re-instates the all-encompassing element of ideological subjectification:

> that passionate attachment to the law is that without which the linguistic guarantee of existence for the subject proves impossible. This complicity at once conditions and limits the viability of a critical interrogation of the law. One cannot criticize too far the very terms by which one's existence is secured. (Butler, 1995, p. 25)

I take Butler's rejoinder here to be a useful one for all the above criticisms. In Hall's criticism, there is some moderate slippage between *ideologies* and *ideology.* As I take Althusser's terms, the conflictual ideolog*ies* and positions within the social whole are included in the function of *ideology in general*. The latter is a process, not a position or worldview – it is the pre-condition of any worldview being formed. It therefore does not preclude conflicts of position, but is a much broader and more intangible set of conceptual limits, which nonetheless helps to explain what Hall himself describes as the question of

> how a society allows the relative freedom of civil institutions to operate in the ideological field, day after day, without direction or compulsion by the State; and why the consequence of that "free play" of civil society, through a very complex reproductive process, nevertheless consistently reconstitutes ideology as a "structure in dominance." (Hall, 1985, p. 101)

That is, despite the open conflicts between positions of groupings and individuals, society's dominant structures, and the conditions through which we relate to one another, remain remarkably intractable.

It is my position – and a key working principle of this thesis – that Althusser's account of ideology, or my reading of it as given here, usefully describes the experience of being a subject in the social world, that its pessimism urgently presses the real extreme difficulty faced by any attempts at resistance. In this sense, I re-read Elliot's criticism above as a useful description. Since no one can escape pre-existing systems of thought and action, and all possible actions and speech are made within the terms of their ideological situation, any attempted acts of resistance will predominantly function to reproduce the dominant material and ideological relations out of which they emerge, even as they may improve conditions or have liberatory effects in specific and quantifiable ways. Any intervention that wishes to radically change the situation in which it occurs will likely change it only superficially, within the pre-given parameters of that situation; the primary result of any attempted resistance is failure, in the form of reproduction of the same.

And yet, fatalistic and difficult as this situation is, it is also true that things manifestly do change; difference can be produced in the place of sameness. Althusser's account does not deny this, but only shows how very heavily the odds are stacked; resistance is not impossible

here, only *almost* impossible.[7] This thesis begins with a commitment to take that radical challenge to the possibilities of resistance fully seriously, to a degree which, I contend, is relatively rare.

Within this framework, the question of the possibility of resistance to the particular systems of material and ideological oppression within which everyone lives – to the particular relations and structures of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy, etc – must be reframed as also a question of the possibility of resistance to the ideological processes which reproduce those relations. Yet this is a question I will be asking primarily through the framework of poetry and poetics, rather than through a focus on Marxist theoretical debates, of which I have given a brief flavour above. I wish to ask foremost how poetry can participate in or contribute towards activity that disrupts the reproductive function of ideology towards alternative ends, towards the purposive, ethically and politically driven production of difference rather than sameness. The apparent impossibility posed by this account of ideology, and the need to articulate the faltering and uncertain ways in which resistance is yet possible, is a central problem which underpins this investigation, and it is primarily for the spirit of this controversial insight that I invoke ideology in this form.

When the very possibilities of our thought and action are locked in a system of mutual formation with the conditions in which we live – produced by and in turn reproducing them – how can we even conceive, let alone concretely bring about, the possibility of something radically different, and better? This is an old question, but one that I think needs continually facing full on, in full awareness of its intractability.

[7] For example, Althusser posits that struggle, resistance and contradiction are already present within the spaces and structures which inscribe and enforce ideology: "the Ideological State Apparatuses may be not only the *stake*, but also the *site* of class struggle, and often of bitter forms of class struggle. The class (or class alliance) in power cannot lay down the law in the ISAs as easily as it can in the (repressive) State apparatus, not only because the former ruling classes are able to retain strong positions there for a long time, but also because the resistance of the exploited classes is able to find means and occasions to express itself there, either by utilization of their contradictions, or by conquering combat positions in struggle" (Althusser 1971, p. 147). These comments do not suggest that such resistance is easy, or that the ideological contradictions it mentions are readily apparent, but they do demonstrate that the possibility of resistance is always present in the account of ideology.

~

> speaking begins, plays its tenuous continuities near and in spite of the accreted institutions that compel anyone to obey, violate and buy, to be situated by identity's grid. But speech is never simply single […] The conversations are conditioned by profoundly ancient and constantly reinventing protocols – protocols we enliven, figure and transform with our bodies and their word, by beginning.
>
> (Lisa Robertson, 'Untitled Essay', *Nilling,* 2012, p. 73)

~

How does this thinking about ideology, reproduction and resistance specifically manifest itself in relation to poetry?

As our primary medium of communication, language is both necessarily shaped by, and plays a key role in, the formation of our conceptual and ideological limits. The limits of that which is expressible in language are ideological limits.[8] That is, the concepts and experiences of which any given language can coherently speak will have embedded within them assumptions about the world that arise from and reproduce the conditions of its historical and social formation – some of which may be so basic as to be beyond explication or recognition. A language will exclude from clear thought what it cannot name, and will wrench what can be named into particular shapes contingent on that formation.

Another common strand of objection to Althusser's account of ideology – a demand for objectivity, as if it were either possible or necessary for efficacious resistance – helps to demonstrate its productive challenge on this point. For example, Paul Ricoeur asks, in direct response to this account, "What would be the point in a critique of miscognition if it were not for the sake of a more faithful recognition?" (Ricoeur, 1994, p. 65). He goes on: "I do not see from where we could borrow the forces to resist the apparatus if not from the depths of a subject having claims that are not infected by this supposed submissive constitution," which is to say, objectively recognisable outside of the mystification of ideology, and instead suggests that "we need a utopia of total recognition" (Ricoeur, 1994, pp. 65-66). In my view, Ricoeur correctly sees the difficulty Althusser poses, but turns to the conceptually easier but ultimately unhelpful answer.

[8] There are resonances between the above Robertson quotation and its relevance here, and Adorno's expression of these problems in 'Lyric Poetry and Society': "For language itself is something double. Through its configurations it assimilates itself completely into subjective impulses; one would think it had produced them. But at the same time language remains the medium of concepts, remains that which establishes an inescapable relationship to the universal and society." (Adorno, 1991, p. 43)

The fact that Althusser's account rules out "total recorgnition" is one of its strengths for this thesis. The Althusserian position that ideology is generally mystifying, and there is no access to a clear pre- or non-ideological understanding, necessarily entails a critique of objectivity or clarity in language, since all possible expressions are mystified by the ideological boundaries that form their possibility; this requires that we see the "forces" with which we might resist as relying not on such a false horizon of objectivity, but emerging in and through the fact of that objectivity's lack. The demand for objectivity is not only fundamentally inconsistent with the understanding of ideology and the subject under which this thesis operates, but also counter-productive to any hopes for resistance, since it mis-diagnoses the nature and scale of the problem at hand. Any use of language that makes claims to communicate on these terms simply masks – even if by the necessary concession to the needs of everyday shared reality – the fact of its function to reproduce the conditions in which it exists**.** This might militate for uses of language that move away from holding up a value for 'clear' or 'objective' communication. I will expand on the relation of this critique of objectivity to my own writing practice in Chapter 2.

~

> We agreed for the moment not to speak of the nature of the individual tether, the institutions and lordships and instituted shortages, and certainly this agreement marked our complicity with the administration of shortage. But we did not know any other way to go on.
>
> (Lisa Robertson, 'First Walk', *Occasional Work and Seven walks from the Office for Soft Architecture,* 2011, pp. 192-3)

~

A specific consequence of these problems of ideology for the question of poetry's political resistance is that even the most apparently radical statement is made within the boundaries of intelligibility which are the conceptual limits of its ideological situation. Even these statements thereby function, as all else, primarily to reproduce those same limits, and the conditions which they entail.

~

> The notion of a 'message' in art, even when politically radical, already contains an accommodation to the world.
>
> (Theodor Adorno, 'Commitment', 1974, p. 88).

~

This is how I get to my specific understanding of the question of how poetry can involve itself in resistance, as the questions: how can poetry written in the language of its conditions meaningfully oppose those conditions; how can it contribute through its use of that language towards oppositional shifts in those conditions? Again, the effort to investigate answers to these questions must begin both from an acknowledgement of their intractability, and a conviction that resistance is yet possible. The tentative and uncertain attempt to reconcile these positions is a central matter of this thesis.

Althusser claims that artworks "make us 'perceive' (but not know) in some sense *from the inside*, by an *internal distance*, the very ideology in which they are held" (1971, p. 204). Althusser proposes the possibility of a resistance which cannot clearly recognise and destroy oppressive structures, but might instead critique and alter material relations, conceptual frameworks, language and limits on action, from within those conditions. He attributes special critical capacity to art to enact such critique.

Some of the work that most consistently and acutely recognises language as a socially mediated, opaque material, pre-loaded with the contents of the messy and oppressive social systems of which it speaks, is experimental poetry. Such work often accordingly takes an uncertain view of any expectations of simple communication. It is a premise of this thesis that poetry, and particularly experimental poetry, might on this basis have some specific and distinct utility for facing up to these problems of ideology and resistance, and for critiquing and re-forming ideological conditions from the inside.

> ~
>
> The law is a mouth.
> Glossolalia.
>
> (Sean Bonney, 'Lamentations', *Letters Against the Firmament*, 2015, p. 16)
>
> ~

The ways these ideas have been absorbed into the foundation of experimental poetics will be the subject of the beginning of Chapter 3, using Forrest-Thomson, Sheppard, Bernstein and Adorno. Through these accounts I will show how poetry's capacity to trouble expectations of clarity or ready intelligibility, or the terms by which such modes of communication might be constituted, has been central to radically-intentioned poetics. This context builds the groundwork from which an account of the contemporary possibility of resistance may step off, to develop these ideas further in the face of the enormity of the problem posed.

Whilst this project does not take for granted the possibility that disruptions in poetry have any meaningful resistive effect – and is in fact extremely sceptical of such a possibility – it follows from this conception of the reproductive function of ideology that any shifts in the material conditions of our society necessitate and entail reciprocal ideological changes. Each kind of change is necessary for the other to have any meaningful reality. Since poetry manifestly does not make any drastic material interventions, it is at the level of ideological change which I take to be its likely possible contribution to the ongoing work of resistance. It is by participating in the work of shifting each collective-individual subject's conception of themselves, the world and the relations within it, and the premises for the possibilities of day-to-day action, through complicated and diffuse mechanisms, that poetry might gradually push toward transformations in the conditions of living.[9] It is in this sense – exploring the possibilities of interventions in the process of ideological subjectification – that this thesis is a poetics of *subjective resistance*. So whilst resistance here is not explicitly resistance in the streets, poetry's role in exploring and re-forming conceptual premises and limits is also a direct contribution to the resistive efficacy and imaginative possibilities of such material resistance and action. This will be discussed more in chapters 3 and 4; such discussions will aim to break down any strict dichotomy between poetry as conceptual work *about* resistance and material work conceived as *actual* resistance, without positing poetry as sufficient resistive activity in itself.

*****

The second half of chapter 3 will use readings of Judith Butler, Denise Riley, Brian Massumi, Lisa Robertson and Andrea Brady to develop the notion that there are kinds of experience which are rendered inarticulable within any given conceptual or ideological framework, or elements of experience which exceed and overspill the limits constructed by ideology's interpellations, which exist beyond, or below, the threshold of clear articulation – something like the "remainder" named by Dolar above, though I won't be using his terms. It is by definition not possible for me to name directly what these experiences are, but as the thesis develops they will come to include the hazy and inarticulate edges of grief, melancholy, hunger, gendered and racial abuse – the pains and deprivations of life under imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy – as well as desire, for something different. I claim that these

[9] When I say that poetry does not make material interventions, I'm referring to poetry qua poetry, *as text*, and not thinking of the wider range, of the conditions of production and distribution of poetry. In these areas, the work of poetry could be involved in more materially resistive work, or at least work on explicitly anti-capitalist models, but these areas, important as they are, are outside of the scope of this thesis, and of poetics as such.

experiences offer a basis for resistance, conceived as the possibility for thinking, acting, and being differently than that which is produced and reproduced by our prior conditions.

This thesis asks how the affective fractures of such experiences can be articulated in a language they by definition lie outside of. Its exploration of the possibilities of resistance in poetry will develop through the idea that forms which disrupt or lie outside of realist modes of representation, or readily articulable meaning, might have some particular capacity for accessing and thinking about those experiences. It is here that I find the potentially vital capacity for ideological resistance of experimental poetics.

An additional contention, which will be developed more clearly in chapter 3, is that accounts of resistive experimental poetry have largely focussed on poetry's ability to destabilise conceptual and linguistic frameworks in which it operates, through techniques that create the effect which Robert Sheppard calls "defamiliarisation" (2005, p. 92), following the work of Victor Shklovsky. Such techniques include ironic distance, fractured language which disorients the reader and separates them from the certainty of their normal expectations, and a move away from deterministic or closed language towards openness and ambiguity, "plurivocity" in Allen Fisher's terms (2016, p. 76). A characteristic example of this tendency is Denise Riley's description of irony: "Once it has heard and has become alert to the harm in excessive reiteration, then it cannot any longer wear the old formulae" (2000a, p. 155); irony "illuminat[es] the historicity as well as the arbitrariness of the categorical words that consolidate me" (2000a, p. 3).

The "old formulae" may become unfamiliar, and this shaking off of the apparent necessity of historically hardened concepts might well be of vital importance in any critical resistance, but this leaves under-discussed the possibility of gesturing towards new possible frameworks, relations and subjectivities, or even of making positive diagnostic articulations of the harms of a given situation. A concept of resistance which focusses too strongly on destabilisation as an end goal is insufficient to my thinking because it supposes that the language of current conditions can in some sense be demystified, and in doing so implicitly suggests the possibility of a language shaken free of its problematic ideological baggage, and with it the possibility of a demystified or less ideological general state of being.

It is more difficult, and more necessary, to think about how we might use and heighten the instabilities that we find in language and ideology, in order to transform them into something new and better, whilst always inside the conditions which render that newness unrecognisable

before it is realised. This thesis aims to begin that discussion of more positive, if necessarily ephemeral or hard to describe resistive contributions, gesturing from within to some unknown elsewhere which is the possibility of alternative conditions, towards a realisation, an attempt to bring those conditions into being. It does so knowing that the attempt is necessarily slow, and easily turned back to safe comprehension under the logic of those conditions.

Chapters 4 to 7, those which make up the core poetic encounters of the thesis, will not make their answers to these questions in the form of a strictly sequential argument, and instead will develop a resistive poetics in multiple directions, taking its lead from the particular experiences of the works in question. There are certain elements which each reading will have loosely in common.

Each of the poetic works under discussion is strongly rooted in an experiential subject, taken not as a stable expressive authority but as a point of exploration. From this starting point, each recognises the individual subject as a primary site of struggle, recognising that the subject is always brought into being, subjectified, by the processes of ideology, but yet always pushing against those bounds with the multiplicity of their actual experience. Each work in some way explores the resistive potential of affective experiences which are divergent from or overspill the normative bounds of their ideological situation. This includes conventionally recognisable kinds of divergent experience, such as the experience of people whose identity is marginalised, but also stretches towards the notion of experiences that are beyond articulate recognition. The poetics of each of these works are then grounded in these kind of experiences, and in their different ways see them as sites of fracture, incoherence and instability in subjects' ongoing ideological inscription, as points of potential resistance, as ways to begin to imagine and enact new subjectivities.

As these readings go on they also accumulate an understanding of aesthetic elements of both poetic text and wider experience or perception, which aren't only reducible to clear, articulable concepts, but which operate beneath or around linguistic or semantic meaning. Through a variety of different formulations, they offer up the idea of the musical, the prosodic, the incoherent elements of poetry, or the moments where it can gesture outside of the pre-given limits of coherence, as having distinct resistive and communicative capability. These aesthetic registers – encompassing both perception and the object, or poem, perceived – are seen as operating affectively, and as having the capacity to open up or in some sense express potentially resistive moments of affective experience. These aren't distinct elements,

but intertwined ways of attempting to describe possible modes of resistance which might be called aesthetic-affective. Such a resistance starts from these unstable or unclear elements of ideologically-formed subjective perception, in the hope of re-forming from within the possibilities of being in the world.

The poetic encounters in these chapters will also build upon one another, if not strictly sequentially then cumulatively.

Sean Bonney's *Letters Against the Firmament*, as encountered in Chapter 4, faces the problems of resistance absolutely head on, and articulates them in ways which are most closely related to the initial conceptual framework of the thesis. Bonney's poetry is a ruthless dual critique of the difficulties that face any attempt for poetry or for political protest to do anything except reproduce more of the same under contemporary capitalism. Yet with hopeless defiance it still attempts to find a way to break open this reality. This chapter begins to think through the difficulty of communication under these conditions, and to re-figure it as something which doesn't centre clarity, but cares instead about partisan commonalities, solidarity, and a sharing of those experiences of pain and abjection that are caused by, and open up ruptures within, the conditions of living under contemporary capitalism. This chapter also tentatively begins to think about the relationship between these affective, experiential ruptures and the aesthetic, through Bonney's figure of "harmony" – which comes to encompass both the balance of social relations, and the musical signals which might evoke or create disruptions in that balance.

Chapter 5 finds in Lisa Robertson's *3 Summers* an iteration of the problems of ideological reproduction specifically through a dialectical experience of interpellation as a woman, and the ideological formation of possibility and desire. This interpellation is at once a constriction, painfully shaped within and by patriarchy, and yet a source of resistance, precisely because of the feminine-coded thinking-feeling which is constructed as outside of the norms of patriarchy and capital. The poems begin from the question of survival and flourishing as a woman under these circumstances, and follows this to a thinking about a more general resistance and flourishing. This chapter also outlines most directly a relationship between affective experience and aesthetics, by following the claims of Robertson's work that they are essentially the same kind of thinking-feeling. In Robertson's poetics, the poem might then become a kind of feminine-coded political decoration, which looks to those experiences and desires that are as-yet-unknowable to imagine new possibilities of collective flourishing.

In Chapter 6 I will explore the hybrid form of Bhanu Kapil's *Ban en Banlieue*, which disrupts and interrupts itself, always gesturing to an 'outside' of the text, to its failures, to what it *might* be, or to the performance-gestures that are supplementary to it. Performance actions are ways of addressing the lived reality of racist and gendered violence, where language alone is seen as unable to make a sufficient intervention against the reproduction of these conditions. In a meeting point between insights from Bonney's work about forms of aesthetic communication, and Robertson's development of the intimate relationship between the affective and the aesthetic, I will explore how Kapil's work figures the performing, sometimes nude body and the notion of colour. These come together in capacities for sending signals, for sharing, identification and touch, between subjects who refuse to be comprehensible on the oppressive terms which are given to them.

Chapter 7 uses Mendelssohn's work – older and more linguistically disruptive than the other works encountered – as a kind of test case for the thesis's claims about the resistive possibilities of disruptive and incomprehensible language. Rebarbative as they are to their readers, I find Mendelssohn's poems to nonetheless be strongly invested in finding ways to articulate experiences of pain and trauma particularly, and to have some positive notion of nurturing subjects who could live together in a different kind of world. They contain an uncompromising, damning critique of reading and writing practices which expect easy understanding, which stem from the same patterns of thought that are present in all the apparatus of the repressive state. The poems replace the wish to understand and be understood, with the wish to be believed – creating the conditions for recognition through readers' experience of struggling through the poems, rather than through a clear understanding of their articulated content. This distinction between being understood and being believed is central to the possibilities this thesis proposes for language which could begin to gesture towards positive possibilities, whilst resisting the reproductive force of ideology and its construction of the premises of linguistic coherence.

In my conclusion I will draw out and synthesise some of the common threads that emerge through these chapters. I will further articulate what I see as the possibilities of relations between subjects which are embedded in the poetics articulated in this thesis, but which remain implicit throughout.

This begins from related dialectical conceptions of communication and of the subject. The subject is seen as both collective – emerging from its ideological conditions – and individual,

solipsistic and wildly various in its actual experiences. This tension is where the grounds for subjective resistance arises. Similarly, clear, comprehensible communication reproduces the ideological conditions of its intelligibility, and yet this basis of resistance in subjective experience also makes some form of communication or mutual understanding necessary. In discussing Bonney's work, I suggest the notion of 'non-reified recognition' – a term that becomes important throughout the thesis that follows – to describe the kinds of mutual understanding to which these poems are committed. This term describes the idea of finding ways to recognise shared experiences which are marginal to the dominant ideological framework, and not yet stabilised into intelligible and ideologically reproductive form.

Mendelssohn's work most clearly articulates a desire for subjective relations which match the model of this resistive poetics, but these relations are an implicit proposition in the poetics of each of the poets in the thesis. The relationship between a critique of intelligibility in writing and the centrality of subjective experience suggests the importance of subjective relations which recognise and care for the amorphous and unintelligible in subjective experience, without requiring us to strictly understand one another in harmfully, painfully delimiting ways.

Chapter 2: Methodology

This thesis is a work of poetics, which is a form historically written by poets in verse and prose, containing critical and creative kinds of speculative proposition and formal work.

~

> Poetics are the products of the process of reflection upon writings, and upon the act of writing, gathering from the past and from others, speculatively casting into the future.
>
> (Robert Sheppard, *the necessity of poetics*, 2003, p. 2)

~

Though the tradition is much older, an understanding of poetics as a distinct genre in the contemporary moment, in the context of contemporary experimental poetry, and for the purposes of this thesis, might begin from the sequence of (non-definitive, contestable and generative) definitions offered by Robert Sheppard in *the necessity of poetics.* He calls poetics "writer-centred self-organising activity" (Sheppard, 2003, p. 2).

Poetics, in this account, is written by artistic practitioners, and whilst it may manifest itself through a multiplicity of forms far beyond the limits of a critical reflection on writing, it is focussed on an exploration of art in-the-making, with an eye towards the future possibilities of art yet to be made. Whilst I am not producing a piece of work which turns towards my own poetic writing, and thereby diverge a little from Sheppard's account, I nonetheless situate this work within the genre of poetics, since it is a constitutive element of the questions I ask and the manner of my asking and answering that I write this not just as a literary critic or scholar, but *as a poet*. I write about poetry here as a fellow practitioner, involved in the ongoing process of developing my own writing practice, in sympathy with the concerns of the poets encountered, and as part of a constellation of shared concerns within a writing community to which I belong. As a reader-poet, there is always an underlying motivation, to ask about the way these works open up possibilities for me, and for my own writing practice. It is through the lens of this personal investment that I wish not to only give a detailed account of some of the workings of poetry that already is, but to find the possibilities that work and my reading of it can suggest for poetry "speculatively casting into the future."

~

> Poetics is a prospectus of work to be done, that might involve a summary of work already done. (Sheppard, 2003, p. 3)

~

Poetics is a genre of writing which is distinct from either literary criticism or literary theory. Sheppard's account treats this as a somewhat hard distinction,[10] whereas I aim for a writing that may at times also be these things, but which differs from them by way of the positions it takes or its overarching intentions, and which writes and reads across the boundaries of poetry, criticism, and theory.

In more practical terms, this means that I will be largely engaging with the work of poet-critics whose own writing blurs these boundaries and thinks across the demarcations of these genres. I won't be using theoretical and literary-critical 'secondary reading' to establish frameworks to read poetry as primary material. Instead, the relationship between critical and poetic work will be more fluid and multi-directional; both can be treated as containing serious theoretical thinking – including but not limited to the explanatory force of its propositional content – and both can also be read closely in ways which are subjective, emotive, disavowing too strong a concern for strict semantic coherence, and doing interpretive work with the generative possibilities of their utterances.

~

> Poetics offers generative schema. (Sheppard, 2003, p. 4)

~

Criticism, theory and poetry will mutually shape the development of a schema, of a set of concepts, language, ideas, speculations and projections, about the possibilities of poetry to engage with and in resistive activity. The argument of the thesis and its theoretical and linguistic framework are reciprocally related and mutually develop throughout, neither being strictly prior to the other. Structurally, the greatest attention to theoretical texts will be in Chapter 3, in order that the poetic encounters can be closely focussed on those works themselves, on their own potentials for thinking, resonating against the generative theoretical work with which I have set the scene. The developing vocabulary of this thesis will not aim for static definitions, nor the argument for definitive conclusion. Rather, this thesis will enact a process of tentative formulation and re-formulation of fluid concepts – returned to, modified and augmented from chapter to chapter – whose value might be judged on their potential functionality in a continuation of that on-going process for a reader of the thesis, or as a generative intervention within a community of radically intentioned writers and readers.

[10] "A test to see if you've produced explicit poetics is to ask of your discourse about writing: is this literary theory or literary criticism? If the answer is no then it might be poetics. (If the answer is yes, it might still 'contain' poetics.)" (Sheppard, 2003, p. 7)

~

> Poetics is a way of reading or misreading texts (in the widest sense) not normally thought of as poetics: to refunction their discourses as part of its own. (Sheppard, 2003, p. 6)

~

The critical and exploratory reading practice through which this framework will be built will also be a practice of mis-reading. It will see all its critical, theoretical, poetic material as just that, *material* to be used and manipulated, without much heed to whether or not my use of a particular text, passage, or formulation bears any strong consistency with the intentions of its original use, the views of its author, the general body of their work, or even necessarily the rest of its containing text.

~

> Poetics steals from anywhere. (Sheppard, 2003, p. 6)

~

This will be an appropriative reading, open to the possibility of engaging with a kind of bad faith, to re-purpose, to steal. Particularly where I'm dealing with theoretical and critical work, there will be points where I find that a particular textual moment offers generative possibilities for my discussion, within a body of work which is otherwise at some odds with the premises of this project. Where such moments can be functionally repurposed in the service of a speculative poetics, the inherent flexibility of the genre allow that this disjunct is not in itself a meaningful contradiction internal to my own writing.

*

~

> Poetics is not theory in the ordinary rationalistic sense. (Sheppard, 2003, p. 2)

~

The disruption of a static, rationalist theory – towards the speculative, generative, functional – through the invocation of the conventions of poetics is also part of a drive to disrupt any sense that a useful critical writing or knowledge-production must be dispassionate or objective. Such disruption is essential if the form of my writing is to attempt some consistency with its own theoretical premises, and with the claims it makes for poetry and resistance. The necessity for such a writing practice will become ever clearer as I delineate my initial theoretical framework and context in more detail in the following chapter; these ideas, and a strong critique of the "rationalistic", will be significantly fleshed out and explored in the

chapters that follow. But for now I can begin to explain the premises that lead me to feel that I must write in this way.

In 'An Undeleter For Criticism', Simon Jarvis describes the way in which conventional expectations of critical writing, and specifically aesthetic theorising, demand "not that we merely report our own subjective experiences, but that we produce knowledge," where critics are "a kind of scientists of art" (2002, p. 3). This understanding of what constitutes knowledge – as rational, scientific, generally agreeable, never subjective – is seen as ossifying both the text and its reader, treating the former as a measurable object, and the latter as a standardised measure: "I must profess what I think it may be in my power to compel others to believe: that, for example, a certain pattern of phonemes or graphemes 'has' a certain effect upon 'the' reader" (Jarvis, 2002, p. 5). The function of this convention, as Jarvis describes it, is that critics must erase their subjectivity from the experience of a text or event, replacing it with a "dummy subject, the subject from which all singularity has been predeleted" (Jarvis, 2002, p. 12).[11]

The conventional expectations which Jarvis describes here are implicit in the practice of close reading as it still retains traces of its formulation in the practical criticism of I.A. Richards and in New Criticism; a detailed examination of the minutiae of formal and semantic features in a text is made dependant on a notion that that text is a static object independent of its context, which can produce relatively consistent, even verifiably correct, results to a competent reader, and that such results can be explicated by a suitably dispassionate examination.[12] In

[11] I have some hesitance and discomfort about the use of Jarvis's work in this thesis. In 2017, Jarvis received a suspended sentence on conviction for possession and distribution of indecent images of children. As an academic he has directly supervised friends of mine, and he was (perhaps still is) a friend and collaborator with some of the poets and critics discussed in this thesis. As such this situation is a cause of pain for many in precisely the poetic communities in which I situate my own work. I want to acknowledge this explicitly since, whilst the work of his which I discuss in this thesis has been greatly productive for me, I wish only to steal from it what can be of use, and hope that my use of it would not contribute towards laundering an academic reputation at the expense of acknowledging those harmed, or in such a way as to facilitate e.g. a return to direct undergraduate supervision.

By the same token, then, I should also acknowledge that Louis Althusser, for all his good and useful works of Marxist theory, strangled his wife Hélène Rytmann, herself a social scientist at the Research Institute for Economic and Social Development in Paris, and a communist militant, who fought with the French Resistance during the Nazi occupation of France (see Seymour, 2017). I hope that my use of his work does not serve to erase her life or minimise that act of violence.

[12] For example, Wimsatt & Beardsley's 'The Affective Fallacy', a canonical New Critical text, dismisses emotional response – "affective relativism" and "the personal" (1949, p. 39) – as a basis for criticism; they distinguish between "those who have coolly investigated what poetry does to others and those who have testified what it does to themselves", with a preference for the former, 'cool' investigation of abstracted or measurable "others" (1949, p. 41). A key criticism of affective accounts is that they are "neither anything which can be refuted nor anything which it is possible for the objective critic to take into account" (1949, p. 45). They value "translatable emotive formulas", corresponding to "classical objectivity", in a critical practice whereby an attention to that object "the poem itself" is intended to produce "an account of what the poem is likely to induce in other—sufficiently informed—readers" (1949, p. 47).

‘Necessary Business’, an early work of poetics within Linguistically Innovative poetry, originally published in 1985, Allen Fisher makes the related observation: “It is […] a common presumption that there can be a pseudo- scientific approach that could lay an analytical device upon the work that would create the work’s readability” (2016, p. 39). This pseudo-scientific stance of critical distance is a commonly assumed premise of the notion of rigour.

This version of critical knowledge, according to Jarvis, “depend[s] upon the deletion of everything idiosyncratic about my experience and, with it, upon the deletion of everything that makes that experience an experience” (2002, p. 6).

Lisa Robertson’s essay ‘Perspectors/Melancholia’ – which will later make a vital contribution to my account of the nature of unstable affective experience as a site of critique and resistance – speaks from a scepticism about the general grounds of knowledge which is similar to Jarvis’. Robertson breaks down any distinction between the subject and the world it experiences, instead seeing our relationship with the world as an unstable act of perception that extends continuously between the falsely distinguished ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ experiences: “the subject is the perceiving aperture through which the visual threads pour, in either direction” (2012, p. 49). This leads into a high level of scepticism, as expressed by Kant, which treats sensory experience as fundamentally unreliable, and can only know the world as it is refracted through the “sensual intuition” of the “occupied space”, the space of thought, affect and perception, which is the only space the existence of which admits no scepticism (Robertson, 2012, p. 52).[13]

This is not in contradiction with the Althusserian description of ideology as a process of subjectification whereby the individual subject is formed through and within the conditions of their social situation. It is also a correlative of my reading of Althusser on ideology that any resistive investigation and reframing of our ideological conditions is strongly rooted in the subject, since it is at the level of the subject that ideology acts. The subject is caught in a

Similarly, the catalogue of ‘errors’ which ends the introduction to Richards’ *Practical Criticism* supposes a set of correct responses to a poem (“a large portion of average-to-good […] readers of poetry frequently and repeatedly fail to understand it”; 1929, p. 13), where the insertion of arbitrary factors of readerly experience (“mnemonic irrelevances”; 1929; p. 15), or of excessive or inappropriate emotional response (“sentimentality” or “inhibition”; 1929, p. 16), are signs of a wrong reading.

[13] Robertson approvingly quotes Kant’s *the Critique of Pure Reason*: “Kant describes the subjective space thus: ‘if we take away by degrees from our conceptions of a body all that can be referred to experience – colour – hardness or softness, weight, even impenetrability – the body will vanish; but the space which it occupied still remains, and this is utterly impossible to annihilate in thought.’ The occupied space is sensual intuition” (2012, p. 52).

dialectic between the sociality through which it is created and situated, and the solipsism of its actual, verifiable experience; the subjective and particular basis for criticism and resistive thinking is also in a sense the most certain and reliable starting point, from which one might hope to reach out to others.

Jarvis goes on to claim that to require objectivity and see subjective experience as irrelevant to knowledge is a fundamental misunderstanding:

> Until affective impressionality is recognized as the substance that most certainly exists, it will continue to be ruled out of court as merely idiotic, as singular, as personal, as subjective, and […] the first move in any account of aesthetic experience will be to cross out, to fail accurately to listen to, the experience the inquirer has actually had, in favor of an experience she thinks she ought to have had. (2002, p. 12)

My claim, following these insights from Jarvis, Robertson and Althusser, is that the experience which underpins any criticism is always subjective, particular, varying depending on the perspectives and experiences of the individual reader, as well as the ways in which that reader is situated by the identity categories and class position they occupy within the ideological processes of the social whole. By the same token that I take the specific, individual subject, the reader of any given text, to be the primary point of action of that text, I also take the individual subject – conceived not as isolated, as individually free, but as formed and forming of the social whole, in interrelation with every other individual subject – to be a primary site of ideological struggle. The question is whether this messy reality, and the difficulties it poses for the possibility of a generalisable criticism, is dealt with head on, or whether it is erased through a critical stance of dispassionate objectivity. I choose not to erase it. This is important from the point of view of being epistemologically honest, but also from an ethics which wishes to acknowledge without universalising the partiality of my own perspective and subject-position.

Fisher's 'Necessary Business' integrates arguments about the necessary singularity of any individual's reading, and therefore of criticism, with ideas which are more central to Linguistically Innovative poetics, about readerly participation in the creation or completion of the meaning of an open and ambiguous text. He states that "it is impossible to eliminate the self from the act of interpretation" and that "reading takes place from the present, however contextualized or prepared the reader is" (Fisher, 2016, p. 39). His own critical reading, therefore, "necessarily brings another text. I would be naive to believe it was the same text as another's, or that a generalization of text […] was possible" (2016, p. 39). Fisher shows that

the radical, subjective singularity of any given reading experience is a correlative of the idea that it is a participatory, collaborative reading practice that creates a text from a poetry which itself deliberately eschews fixed and clear meaning. This idea is and has been important to the self-conception of much experimental poetry.

The disruption of any standard of objective criticism further follows from the initial premise, the Althusserian understanding of ideology as universal, which suggests that clear, objective knowledge is neither possible, nor really even a coherent aim. Theoretical or critical texts are made out of the same socially formed and always ideologically loaded language as literary texts, and speak only in and of the conditions, presuppositions and material inequalities of their ideological milieu. They can neither be read nor written only for their dispassionate, supposedly clear and objective content, within a framework that sees their ideas as abstract and defers to their authority. If all understanding is mystified by the processes that make it possible in the first place, then a language which pretends to an unmediated clarity – which believes itself able to make claims of anything more than a highly conditional and provisional use- or truth- content – is not only naïve in its denial of its own ideological nature, but in being so blithely obfuscates the ways it reproduces the ideological conditions of its legibility. The ways in which this claim is also central within the tradition of experimental poetics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries will be delineated in more detail in the following chapter.

~

> Poetics' 'answers' are provisional, its trajectory nomadic, its positions temporary and strategic. (Sheppard, 2003, p. 4)

~

This thesis will develop the idea that thinking which is resistive or divergent from processes of reproduction, which has the capacity to reach towards newness, might best be done though forms, like those of experimental poetry, whose coherence is, at most, tentative, provisional, uncertain, which eschew transparency and gesture towards kinds of cognitive content not containable within the clear language of a given ideological moment. I must take this into account in my own writing, if I am to be consistent, and to avoid an abstracted theorising that simply reproduces the forms and conditions it claims to resists.

The subjective-singular basis of any critical encounter, the conventions of innovative poetry, and my theoretical premises about the function of ideology and the subject therefore all dictate that my own critical reading and writing practice will attempt to move away from both

expectations of dispassionate, objective critical discourse, and from a stance of clarity and authority.

I include myself, not as a transparent, non-ideological, untainted and universal non-subject, but as a thinking, feeling, encountering, particular subject-critic, whose experience is the admitted basis for criticism, with all the messiness, partiality and uncertainty attendant on that. It follows that the four readings of texts by my four key poets might be referred to not as close readings but rather as encounters. These readings will begin as non-universalised, subjective encounters, which admit from the start that they are refracted not just through the concerns and questions of this thesis, but also through all the arbitrary and unrelated circumstances of my reading them – specifically me, the loosely continuous, fluctuating, tentative constellation of sensations, concerns and desires interpellated by the name Joey Frances, a man working on his PhD thesis in a rented house in Manchester, UK, a poet scribbling in the margins of some of his best-loved works of poetry, an inconsistent participant in the class war the British left are currently losing, etc.

Whilst I hope that these semi-discrete encounters, taken in isolation, might usefully describe and examine much of what is happening in the texts themselves, in what might be thought of as a more conventional literary-critical function, they will do so using my own experience of the poetry as a tentative test-case. I ask what effects the texts have or demands they make on me as a reader, and what the possibilities of thinking and being they attempt to open up in the reading-encounter itself can show me about resistance more generally.

Beyond this, I aim for a writing whose coherence is, at most, tentative, provisional, uncertain and self-doubting, which allows fracture into itself, attempting to make speculative, strategic and temporary kinds of propositions of possibility – thinking from and with the poetry and theory – rather than dispassionate claims. As the poetry, and my readings of it, rejects objectivity and over-hasty naturalisation, and embraces ambiguous, multiplicitous, uncertain, fractious kinds of reading, a reading adequate to these demands and able to account for the experience of reading this work must attempt to reach for all its absences, insufficiencies, indeterminacy, the evocation of that which feels out of reach, and must work hard not to ride over these things or render them more comprehensible than they really are. The risk of being reductive which accompanies any critical reading of poetry, and especially that which strongly resists naturalisation, becomes urgently felt, for example, in the readings of Anna Mendelssohn's work. This work explicitly rejects inquisitorial kinds of conventional

academic reading, which it derisively describes as “gradgrind rectification” (Mendelssohn, 2000, p. 31).

It follows from the need for a kind of writing which disrupts some of these conventional expectations of academic prose, in the context of the genre of poetics, that this thesis will also include what might be thought of as some minor more ‘creative’ elements, of formal and tonal shifts towards the ambiguous, the impressionistic, away from a claim to the stable authority of the rational, dispassionate and clearly explicable dissection of texts or ideas. One such manoeuvre that I have already employed is the use of interruptive, unremarked quotations, scattered throughout the previous chapter, and to a lesser extent in this one. These quotations aim to have an illustrative relationship to the arguments and ideas that surround them, or to expand on those ideas through a kind of poetic meaning, in an oblique relationship that relies on and necessitates a degree of readerly interpretation, rather than requiring the stabilising action of my own explication, which I have deliberately omitted. This is something I will do occasionally throughout the thesis.

*

One further reason for this subjective, provisional, destabilising drive in my own writing, briefly alluded to above, is that the uncertainty which underpins attempts to create a general certain knowledge also negates the real experiences of marginalised subjects. Whilst universal ideology undermines any notion of objective, rationalist knowledge, there is a more specific criticism that can be made here: discourses which purport to this kind of generality, in deleting the actual, partial subjective experience of the individual, project an alternative experience onto it – “an experience she thinks she ought to have had”, in Jarvis’s terms. The standards of generality to which this projected experience will tend to conform are dictated by the experience of those subjects who occupy more privileged or dominant identity categories, and so will further reinforce already dominant understandings and relations. Where an individual critic occupies hegemonic subject positions, but treats their subjective experience of a text as authoritative and universal without any interrogation – were I, as a straight, white, cis man born in the UK, and in the midst of a highly privileged education, to attempt to write with unchecked authority – it would be to continue a long intellectual legacy of claiming perspectives like mine to be the standard by which knowledge is established and (oftentimes violently) enforced. Such discourses entrench the most hegemonic understandings of collective subjectivity by treating them as neutral, and erase possibilities for deviation.

My writing from a self-acknowledged position of partial subjectivity doesn't solve these problems, but is the very least I can do, as part of an attempt to write in a way which is tentative, open, available for interrogation, challenge, change, and which is focussed around listening to, reading and learning from the work of those who know and understand what I simply cannot by virtue of different experiences and subject positions. Acknowledging that I come to these works through my own constellation of concerns, each encounter will pull together, from all the potentialities and dis-jointed elements of each text, the possibility of an intelligibility within a thought-world that they help me to form, as they push generatively towards the conception of an argument, as a resistive poetics. This is offered forth not as solid knowledge, but as a series of tentative gestures, which hope to be found useful in our general struggle.

This opens up the problem, however, that my own subject position comes with its own epistemological and conceptual biases and barriers to understanding. This is less obviously relevant to my encounter with Sean Bonney's work, but the chapters that follow raise some clear issues in this regard. Robertson's work very explicitly builds up an argument for a feminine mode of thought which emerges from the experience of being interpellated into the social norms of womanhood; Kapil's work aims for an identification across experiences of racial, gendered and sexual violence; Mendelssohn's work deals with traumatic and oppressive experiences as a woman and a mother, as well as thinking about experiences of antisemitism, and widely condemns the modes of thinking which link these and other forms of domination and violence. As a white man, ongoingly interpellated into masculine thinking, with little to no direct, or indirect, experience of racial or gendered violence, I am not the person with whom these texts most wish to connect – though I may be the object of some of their harshest challenges – and my experiences and knowledge poorly equip me to understand some of their central matters.

I don't admit these positions and their potential biases and barriers as a manoeuvre to shake them off, but to point out their specifics, where all readings and experience unavoidably have their own particular subjective positionings. As these are often obscured by claims to a more dispassionate reading, I admit them freely in order to open my work up to (self) critique, and to accept the rebuttals of these texts. These readings will be failing and non-definitive, they will miss things that might be rightly central or obvious to another reader – but yet I hope that the process of working through these texts can teach me something, that a faltering but sympathetic engagement might open myself and my readers up to that which we don't yet

know, and that the witness to that working-through can be of use to others in drawing out some of what is most vitally resistive in the poems.

*

~

> The aim of literary criticism, to parody Marx, is to describe writing; the purpose of poetics is to change it. (Sheppard, 2003, p. 3)

~

Whilst my poetic encounters are partially discrete, at the same time they are intended to work cumulatively, to build a long-form argument which is not strictly about these texts but is of and through them. These encounters might contain open questions, or moments of inconsistency from one to the other, since the argument is not strict and sequential, but is made through the totality of the four readings taken together. The final goal of that argument is not to illuminate what those poems are as such, but to give an account of what they suggest and show about the possibilities of what a poetry could be, in answer to the problems of ideology and resistance (in (poetic) language). The accounts of contemporary poetry will then be exploratory, looking at both what the poems do and the potential arguments for possibility which they advance in their doing.

Since the questions I am asking of poetry – how can poetry which finds its material conditions oppressive contribute towards resistance through the language of those conditions? – are concomitant with wider questions of being and resisting in the world – how we can act to consciously imagine and bring about less oppressive conditions from inside the ideologically and materially forming limits of those conditions? – these acts of speculatively casting into the future of writing might hope also to, tentatively and uncertainly, speculatively cast into the future possibilities of being, together, of new relations, of possible action. I take this too to be a central dual wish of the poetry which I'm reading in this thesis.

In *The Poethical Wager,* Joan Retallack explains her coinage of the term "poethics", which signifies how the premises of any poetics are also always implicitly a set of ideas about the world that can be seen to have an ethical dimension. She states: "Every poetics is a consequential form of life. Any making of forms out of language (poesis) is a practice with a discernible character (ethos)" (Retallack, 2003, p. 11), and later, "Every form, old or new, has its poethical matrices and consequences. We can ask—after or while locating our questions within a value context—What are they? Are they useful to us?" (2003, p. 43). These claims

bring to my mind similar formulations of Frederic Jameson's, from *The Political Unconscious*: "every form of practice, including the literary-critical kind, implies and presupposes a form of theory"; "the working theoretical framework or presuppositions of a given method are in general the ideology which that method seeks to perpetuate" (2002, p. 58).

Within a highly politicised poetic tradition, the questions of poetry's possibility has always been tied up with working through questions of political struggle, and the demands made upon my poetics, or which lead me to it, are also already ethical demands. This is a vital function of the form of poetics as I am deploying it here. As I delineate a poetics which deals in the possibility of resistance, I will be also always alert to the ideological and political consequences of this framework, to the forms of life embedded or longed for in the forms of writing and thinking which this work examines or proposes.

Chapter 3: Some generative schemas

Against known reality

A critique of "transparency" (Bernstein, 1992, p. 26; Silliman et al, 1988, p. 268), "realism" (Bernstein, 1992, pp. 9/26; Sutherland, 2011, p. 57; Bonney, 2015, pp. 27/142; Lake, 1995, [p. 12]) "empirical lyricism" (Sheppard, 2005, p. 2; Crozier, 1983), forms of language that convey thoughts, feelings, messages – even politically radical ones – in forms which can be readily recognised and understood without challenging the basis of that recognition or understanding, is a central basis of the traditions of radically intentioned innovative poetry in which this thesis situates itself. This critique, in its various forms, often employs ideas that are closely related to my Althusserian understanding of the problem of universal ideology, reproduction and resistance, to suggest that more mainstream forms of poetry which employ these modes are inherently conservative at a formal level, if not at the level of authorial intention or articulate subject matter. The idea of disrupting this conservative function, and writing a poetry which is capable of having a more critical relation to its ideological conditions as they exist in language – even a poetry that might push towards something new – is a consistently attributed motivation for the use of formally disruptive techniques and the move away from conventional comprehensibility in this poetry.

A key theoretical influence on this kind of thinking within the poetic traditions in which my project is working is Theodor Adorno. His essay 'Commitment', first published in English in 1974, discusses the almost intractable problems of ideological complicity for any literature which wishes to be politically resistive, from the point of view of Marxist criticism, using terms that are familiar to discussions of innovative poetry. The piece responds to Jean-Paul Sartre's emphasis on political commitment in literature (specifically in his *What is Literature?*) by dismantling a distinction between 'autonomous' and 'committed' works of art (in very simple terms, a distinction between 'art for art's sake', which values aesthetic freedom and repudiates social or political instrumentality, and art which aims to have a recognisable social message or action). Adorno argues that both modes can be reactionary, complicit in the reproduction of their social (pre)conditions, can constitute a refusal to face up to the extent to which we are all inside the reality of the conditions that impoverish us.

This is underpinned by an understanding that "the surface of social life, the sphere of consumption, which includes the psychologically motivated actions of individuals, occludes the essence of society—which, as the law of exchange, is itself abstract" (Adorno, 1974, p.

80); the conditions of our living and the social processes by which they reproduce themselves are rendered invisible and natural, from our inescapable position within them. This chimes with my understanding of ideology; I take it as similar, for example, to Althusser's claim that "the tenacious obviousness […] of the point of view of production alone […] are so integrated into everyday 'consciousness' that it is extremely hard, not to say almost impossible, to raise oneself to the *point of view of reproduction*" (1971, p. 132). Art too, is always caught within these same processes:

> Works of art that react against empirical reality obey the forces of that reality [...] There is no material content, no formal category of an artistic creation, however mysteriously changed and unknown to itself, which did not originate in the empirical reality from which it breaks free. (Adorno, 1974, p. 86)

Adorno argues that 'committed' works which push a particular intelligible agenda within the confines of acceptable realism acquiesce in a notion of reality which doesn't recognise the ways individuals are shaped and limited by the situations in which they live – doesn't recognise that the bounds of intelligibility are themselves part of ideological formation – but which believes in a liberal idea that we can simply change our situation through self-will. Supposedly autonomous works, whilst less bound by the limits of intelligible message, can be apolitical, can refuse to engage with the social world at all, in a kind of complacent aesthetic play which is inherently conservative. They fail to acknowledge that they are still rooted in the particular conditions of their emergent situation, and so can also imply a false liberal freedom.

The dichotomy between autonomous and committed works is folded into a dialectical criticism whereby "each of the two alternatives negates itself with the other" (Adorno, 1974, p. 76). They cease to be opposites since each is made necessary by the criticism of the other, within the same web of complicity in their conditions. Adorno's essay tells us that all works depend, for any function at all, on a partial submission to the intelligibility of current constraints, no matter how much it rejects them:

> Works of art which by their existence take the side of the victims of a rationality that subjugates nature, are even in their protest constitutively implicated in the process of rationalization itself. Were they to try to disown it, they would become both aesthetically and socially powerless: mere clay. (1974, p. 87)

Adorno argues for a politicised autonomy which is non-realist, non-programmatic, difficult, using language in unconventional and formally involved ways. This, he says, makes an active refusal of the notion that empirical reality is a true presence and that there could be no other

than the parameters of what appears to us in the given moment. Against realist committed texts, Adorno suggests "a text whose language jolts signification and by its very distance from 'meaning' revolts in advance against positivist subordination of meaning," advocating the importance of "what the shock of the unintelligible can communicate" (1974, p. 77). Both this logic and the characteristics of its proposed texts might readily speak of characteristic principles of innovative poetry.

However, this final turn towards autonomy belies the most interesting and vital parts of the essay, its most dialectical moments of criticism of the dichotomy between autonomy and commitment, and suggests despite itself that unintelligibility and revolt from meaning can in themselves have some resistive efficacy. I want to maintain the critical position whereby all forms are seen as tending primarily towards complicity in the terms of their given reality, and not to pick autonomy as one option in this dialectic, but to move through it to a re-assessment of what political commitment might usefully look like. (This wish, to find the as-yet-invisible through-way between the intractable complicity of presented options, to dissolve restrictive binaries, will be a recurrent method of thought in this thesis). This is not a radical divergence from Adorno so much as a re-emphasis, more towards something like a non-realist commitment, which uses the kind of shocks Adorno advocates to disrupt from the inside the realism of its oppressive conditions, whilst still having some hope for specific, if not readily recognisable, political aims.

~

Poems teach one that much:
To expect no answer.

(Veronica Forrest-Thomson, 'S/Z', *Collected Poems,* 2008, p. 161)

~

One early and highly influential work which expounds these kinds of ideas as integral to an innovative poetics is poet and critic Veronica Forrest-Thomson's *Poetic Artifice*. The book, first published in 1978, uses contemporary post-structuralist thinking in a defence of artifice in poetry – all poetry's formal, prosodic, organisational or aesthetic qualities – which casts itself in opposition to perceived orthodoxies of poetry and criticism. Forrest-Thomson criticises over-hasty "naturalisation", which she defines as "an attempt to reduce the strangeness of poetic language and poetic organisation by making it intelligible", reducing it to "an external thematic statement about the already-known world" (2016, p. 36). "Already-known" is a key term here; it reflects Forrest-Thomson's claim that poetry which makes

claims about the world in recognisable, intelligible language colludes in the terms of that intelligibility, and re-presents the world as it is currently recognisable, which is to say, perpetuates an idea of the world as it already exists. Poetry seen as a "'comment on life'" makes

> art subservient to life as we know it rather than a subversion and reinvention of that life through artifice; it makes us ignore mediation and take the 'reality' given us by ordinary language as the final court of appeal. (Forrest-Thomson, 2016, p. 71).

"Mediation" here can be taken as analogous to ideology, the overall collective conceptual framework which forms the conditions of possibility of understanding, and through which all possible perception of 'reality' is seen: "We have been taught by Marx, Freud [etc] […] that the human consciousness cannot get at reality itself without mediation" (Forrest-Thomson, 2016, p. 71).

Alluding to the possibility for a critical relation to this mediation, for something like the "internal distance" posited by Althusser, Forrest-Thomson quotes Paul de Man: "literature, unlike everyday language, begins on the far side of knowledge; it is the only form of language free from the fallacy of unmediated expression" (Forrest-Thomson, 2016, p. 72). It is taken as a given here that literary uses of language dispense with the sometimes necessary pretence to such clarity, and can recognise that the language of which they are made is opaque, pre-loaded with all sorts of socially formed contents.[14]

By contrast to practices of reading and writing poetry which ignore mediation and turn towards easy naturalisation and formal transparency, squandering poetry's critical and artistic potential and "puchas[ing] intelligibility at the cost of blindness", Forrest-Thomson claims

> it is only through artifice that poetry can challenge our ordinary linguistic orderings of the world, make us question the way in which we make sense of things, and induce us to consider its alternative linguistic orders as a new way of viewing the world. (2016, p. 36)

This is articulated primarily as an ambition, or a wish, rather than a fleshed-out poetics of subversion and reinvention. Nonetheless, Forrest-Thomson's more developed critique of the conservative function of easy naturalisation directly leads to the influential notion that a politically resistive poetics might deliberately utilise foregrounded artifice which cannot be

[14] Distinguishing between the workings of poetry and more common utilitarian functions of language, Forrest-Thomson points to Wittgenstein's aphorism that "a poem, even though it is composed in that language of giving information is not used in the language-game of giving information" (2016, p. 34; quoting Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel,* trans. G.E.M. Anscombe & G.H. von Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), p. 160)

easily naturalised to disrupt the processes of reproduction and attempt to reach for alternative conceptions of the world.

~

As soon as I write “the world”,
It doesn’t invert.

(Robert Sheppard, ‘Internal Exile 1’, *The Flashlight Sonata,* 1993, p. 32)

~

More recently, poet and critic Robert Sheppard has delineated much of the history, development, thinking and common features of British Innovative poetics, first in *Far Language* (1999), and later in his three books *The Poetry of Saying* (2005), *When Bad Times Made for Good Poetry* (2011) and *The Meaning of Form in Contemporary Innovative Poetry* (2016). These accounts are informed by Sheppard’s own central involvement in the activities and conversations that formed themselves under the banner of Linguistically Innovative Poetry. I will be focussing on *The Poetry of Saying* here, in which, through the lens of his own interpretive readings, Sheppard describes a poetics in which these questions about ideology, resistance, reproduction, and their relation to poetic form play a central role.

Sheppard criticises what he calls the “Movement Orthodoxy”,[15] a mainstream poetry with a normative convention of “empirical lyricism” (2005, p. 2).[16] The Movement Orthodoxy “privileges a poetry of closure, narrative coherence and grammatical and syntactic cohesion, which colludes with the process of naturalisation” (Sheppard, 2005, p. 2) (note the use of terminology which is key to Forrest-Thomson’s *Poetic Artifice* here, demonstrating its acknowledged influence on Sheppard’s work[17]).

By contrast, Sheppard posits something of an alternative foundational position in Jean-Francois Lyotard’s notion of a post-modern art “producing not the known but the unknown” (Sheppard, 2005, p. 3). He states his own position: “Writing’s only possible state is one of change and development, a process of working towards new meanings hitherto unuttered, not the formulation of a product from prior assumptions of meaning” (Sheppard, 1999, p. 24).

[15] So named after the persistence in mainstream British poetry of some version of the poetic values of the ‘Movement poets’, a grouping from the 1950s, exemplified in Sheppard’s account by Philip Larkin.
[16] This term was originally coined by Andrew Crozier in his 1983 essay ‘Thrills and Frills: poetry as figures of empirical lyricism’.
[17] Sheppard reviewed *Poetic Artifice* in 1979 (Sheppard, 1999, pp. 9-11). It comes up many times in *The Poetry of Saying*, e.g.: (Sheppard, 2005, pp. 6, 68, 153)

Sheppard suggests mainstream, empirical, closed forms acquiesce in the status quo even when they oppose it; a poetry of empiricism tends particularly strongly towards reproduction of "the known", is wrought at a basic level out of "prior assumptions of meaning". Once again, clear propositions are seen as partly complicit in their ideological situation at the level of form, by dint of their conformity to ideologically enforced and enforcing standards of legibility. He sees the formal techniques of Innovative poetry, oppositional to the Movement Orthodoxy, as using open forms which disrupt or resist conventional, empirical kinds of coherence, to create previously unrecognisable possible meanings, as a critique of the status quo.

Poet and critic Charles Bernstein's verse essay 'Artifice of Absorption' is another key account which demonstrates some related thinking about poetics and resistance to structures of ideological formation, constraint and reproduction, from within the parallel and overlapping Language Poetry tradition in the US.

> ~
>
> the power of poetry to reconnect us
> with modes of meaning given in language
> but precluded by the hegemony of restricted
> epistemological economies
>
> (Charles Bernstein, 'Artifice of Absorption', *A Poetics,* 1992, p. 18)
>
> ~

The essay focusses initially on a distinction between the concepts of "absorption" and "impermeability". The two concepts are deliberately left hazy, but loosely speaking "absorption" is that which engrosses a reader, which lets them in, whereas "impermeability" is associated with difficulty, struggle, uncertainty. Initially, a vulgar absorption is aligned with realisms that acquiesce in, are absorbed by, absorb the reader in, accepted versions of reality and their concomitant modes of expression; "transparency is a central technique | of absorptive realisms" (Bernstein, 1992, p. 26). Anti-absorptive techniques, which emphasise rather than hide their artifice, create impermeability, beginning to resist the acquiescence of realist absorption and critique the modes of expression through which our perceptions are established. Bernstein explains by reference to *Poetic Artifice:* "'artifice' is the contradiction of 'realism', with | its insistence on presenting an unmediated | (immediate) experience of fact" (1992, p. 9); "absorptive & antiabsorptive elements both require | artifice, but the former may hide | this while the latter may flaunt | it" (1992, p. 30). Bernstein claims that encountering and working through difficult poetic texts which focus on the materiality of

language involves an examination of the linguistic structures through which our understanding of the world is constantly produced and reproduced.

These few examples are by no means a comprehensive sweep of the history or theoretical basis of ideas about linguistic disruption and ideological resistance in Anglophone radical poetics; nor do I make a claim that they are in some way definitive or representative of an uncontested or monadic shared poetics across these connected but wide traditions. However, these are important and influential texts, whose ideas communicate closely with one another, as most obviously shown by the direct use of Forrest-Thomson by both Sheppard and Bernstein. They demonstrate an interrelated web of thinking that runs through much of the innovative poetic tradition whereby linguistically disruptive formal techniques – "artifice", "the shock of the unintelligible" – are seen as capable of challenging the "already-known", "prior assumptions of meaning"; whereas language which is easily naturalisable, claims transparency, which operates through "absorptive realisms", is seen as acquiescing in those assumptions, in the "positivist subordination of meaning", to reproduce the known world, to naturalise existing relations. This provides a conceptual starting point and the beginnings of a vocabulary for launching my own investigation into the possibilities of poetic resistance to the processes of ideological reproduction in – and out of – language.[18]

Defamiliarisation and newness

These texts also demonstrate what I see as some major divergences between some dominant elements of radical poetic thinking as it has been hitherto articulated and the poetics I wish to work through here, showing the space in which this thesis hopes to develop.

[18] I will often use the term 'realism', with occasional and various qualifications, throughout this thesis. This follows the use of "realism" and "reality" in Adorno, Forrest-Thomson and Bernstein here, to operate as a shorthand for the particular kind of realism which suggests that a certain set of conditions and relations are 'real', in a way that naturalises and reifies those conditions and sets all that isn't cast as 'real', that is outside this realism's descriptive capacity, as also outside of conceivable possibility. This also implicitly extends to a language which, through transparency, empirical lyricism, a commitment to an already-intelligible description of an already-known world, commits itself to the unchallengeable reality of its prior conditions. A belief that one can neutrally depict what is real reifies that version of reality, and entails the normative enforcement of the currently real, its stasis. As this understanding of realism is modified as "absorptive realism" in Bernstein above, it later will be specified as "bourgeois realism" by Keston Sutherland (2011, p. 57), and as "police realism" by Sean Bonney (2015, p. 142). By situating my use of this term in this context, I would distinguish it from the more general meaning – as in, accurately describing things as they are – since the thesis questions this as a possibility, and will, as it develops, come to find that "non-realist" forms of writing might come closer to depicting actual experience in all its fracture and messiness.

Bernstein's thinking often relies on an account of ideology as “a particular and restricted point of view” (1992, p. 2), which focusses on the specific mystifications of late capitalism. The role he gives for poetry is then to do with ridding language of this ideological baggage, attempting to use disruptive techniques which might create conditions for a clearer perception: “the word, | & world, made opaque that it may be apprehended” (1992, p. 83). This is at odds with my own account after Althusser, in which ideology is universal and perception never clear. Whilst acknowledging the constructive function of language within ideology, Bernstein’s Language Poetry contemporaries use language with similar implications: “In order to lay bare language's inherent capacity to construct belief, it is necessary at times to disrupt its convention as communicative transparency” (Silliman et al, 1988, p. 268). It is the idea of “laying bare” as the function of formal disruption which causes problems here, just as they hope to “recharge this neurological scar tissue with some new synapses” (Silliman et al, 1988, p. 266), to revivify the possibilities of a damaged language. I contend that ideological construction can never be laid bare, nor language in this sense recharged.

Sheppard introduces a number of key terms for common techniques of innovative poetry: “indeterminacy and discontinuity” (2005, p. 142); “broken utterance and syntactic rupture” (2005, p. 103); “defamiliarisation” and “de-automatising” (2005, p. 92). These techniques, in common with Bernstein’s critical impermeability, are all geared, in Sheppard’s analysis, towards de-seating or destabilising readers’ (and writers’) relationship with their ideological conditions, their internalised perception of social reality. Even “creative linkage,” a key concept of Sheppard's with a more positive implication – in which formally and conceptually disjunctive combinations, of contents that aren't rationally connected, create new conceptions – is attributed the ultimate aim of “counter[ing] absoluteness with plurality” (2005, p. 207). At the last, Sheppard’s account of this technique defaults to a generalised destabilisation of meaning, falling short of any suggestion of serious positive propositional or imaginative capacity.

The central thesis of *The Poetry of Saying*, and its analysis of the distinct characteristics of Innovative poetics, focusses on the distinction between "said" and "saying", which Sheppard derives from the work of Emmanuel Levinas: “Language as saying is an ethical openness to the other; as that which is said – reduced to a fixed identity or synchronized presence – it is an ontological closure of the other” (Sheppard, 2005, p. 189). Sheppard contrasts the “said”, a language of closed statement, of realist intelligibility, with this language of “saying”, in which

formal openness – ambiguity or plurality of meaning – is seen as directly entailing an ethical kind of "openness to the other", to the unfamiliar subject or concept.

This is related to the description Allen Fisher gives in 'Necessary Business' – through readings of cris cheek, Eric Mottram and J.H. Prynne – of the then emergent poetic tradition of the British Poetry Revival and Linguistically Innovative Poetry, which he calls "new pertinence" (2016, p. 37). Whilst there is a sense throughout that the aesthetic principles of this poetry are undergirded by a resistive drive, by a wish to undermine cultural norms, Fisher's analysis ultimately turns towards freedom, or openness:

> If nothing else, the work reveals the possibility of a freedom. In Heidegger's terms, it reveals that open region within which the participator, with regard to what they are and how they are, can properly take their stand and become capable of being said. (2016, p. 75)

The function of the complex vocabulary and cultivation of high levels of reader involvement in the texts under discussion

> is to cultivate a plurivocity and thus ensure for the language its meaningfulness, its avoidance of co-option by the State. Distinct from the intentions of a possible future, their poetry approaches evocations of vision. It dissuades from the competence of eidetics and empirics by bringing toward production a relativistic phenomenology of vision. (2016, p. 76)

This is difficult to parse, in the midst of a highly involved and somewhat oblique discussion, but I wish to note the emphasis on "freedom", the "open region", "a relativistic phenomenology of vision", and the idea that "plurivocity" might in and of itself be anti-State. Like Sheppard and Bernstein, Fisher emphasises a destabilisation that leads to openness as an end point in itself, as inherently resistive. His poetics seems to believe in the possibility of an open, democratic space for new meaning which is in some sense outside of the veil of ideology. I think Althusser convincingly shows that such a space is fundamentally not a meaningful possibility. Further, it is now perhaps more clear than it was in 1985 that there is no contradiction at all between plurivocity and the capitalist state; a superficial plurality of voices, the presence of de-natured forms of dissent as protest-spectacle, and an openness to supposedly free discussion, is a key logic of the contemporary liberal state and its apparatus. This demonstrates that openness is not in fact meaningfully open to alternative possibility, but as deeply ideological as all else.

Another, more recent, and more extreme example of a related thinking is in Keston Sutherland's account of the late work of J.H. Prynne, in *Hix Eros 4* (2014). In Sutherland's

analysis, late Prynne sees the idioms of everyday speech as "almost pure cant", and thus "it is only after the language of ordinary subjectivity (tout court an 'idiom') has been exceeded and ruptured at its furthest edge that poetic thought can appear" (Sutherland, 2014, p. 10). Sutherland reads this poetics as one very explicitly about cleansing the language, based on a disruptive use of language that removes the vestiges of a general subjectivity which it sees as completely complicit in the unthinking instrumentalization of everyday language by dominant ideology.

The common ground between these various positions – as it is characteristic of their thinking about the resistive capacity of innovative poetics – is one of the key areas in which I find these poetics to deal insufficiently with the problems of universal ideology, and to leave space for the argument of this thesis. The holding up of "openness" as the end point of an ethical poetics, the lauding of values of ambiguity, "plurality", and the effects of "defamiliarisation", the notion of clearing out ideological baggage – all this proposes a commitment to formal work conceived as having a resistive capacity primarily based on ideological disruption.

Just as Adorno's turn towards autonomy, discussed earlier in this chapter, gives only half an answer to its own problems, turning towards disruption and revolt against meaning whilst abandoning the possibility of some re-figured commitment, this destabilisation, de-seating or defamiliarization too only takes us so far. It is an important element of any ideological resistance, but stops a little short of theorising how poetry might attempt any positive articulation or gesture towards alternative conceptions and relations, how it might specifically name the harms of a given situation or experience, or contribute to the active production of alternative possibilities in the language of the conditions it opposes. Such defamiliarisation responds to the ideological complicity of realist language by using ambiguity, artifice, formal disruption, to create interrogatory critical distance from the content of the language, to render it uncertain, opening up what ideology closes down. Yet, if ideology is eternal, the ground can't be cleared, and defamiliarisation or uncertainty is not enough. Resistance must be not just about disruptive criticism, but also about finding ways to use the formal arsenal of this poetry for more positive gestures towards reconfiguration, towards the tentative articulation, despite the almost inescapable complicity of our language, of situations which are no less ideologically muddied, but are less oppressive, more conducive to general flourishing; this is one of the primary contentions of this thesis.

In *Women's Experimental Poetry in Britain 1970-2010,* David Kennedy and Christine Kennedy relate the dominance of these positions which over-emphasise defamiliarisation as an end in itself to the enduring high levels of dominance of male voices within the British experimental poetic tradition up until at least the early twenty-first century. They characterise the dominant strain of masculine experimental poetry as interested in "meta-linguistic and meta-poetic" disruption, "concerned with writing and systems of representation" and the formation of the social subject, politicised through disrupting processes of meaning itself. This "'meta-' approach", they worry, "has often made experimental poetry appear isolated from, or not interested in, the energetic contestations of normativities of class, gender, nation, race and religion" and "risks ignoring what women experimental poets in Britain are saying and talking about in their poetries" (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2013, p. 41).

A poetry which privileges the resistive possibilities of disruption and openness at the expense of the harder task of attempts – in the face of the problems posed by universal ideology – to make more positive kinds of propositional or diagnostic articulations is seen here to be a poetry more easily favoured by people who occupy more hegemonic subject positions; its insufficiencies are made more palpably obvious to those whose oppositional politics emerges from or is supplemented by a lived experience of oppression and marginalisation.

Kennedy & Kennedy expand on this criticism in a way which neatly sums up some of my own scepticism about the limits of this kind of resistive poetics as an end point:

> The materiality/disruption argument becomes even more problematic when one attempts to attach it to ideas of revolutionary agency. How can something that can only be experienced and identified as disruption of an established order be the starting point for a radically different system? (2013, p. 42)

This hints at the problem I've been getting at, and places it specifically in this context of women's experimental poetry, that a radical poetry needs not just to be premised on disruption, but needs also to find a way through the problems that need disrupting, towards some proposition of the new, the alternative.

It is precisely the aim of my project to think about how the disruptive and critical action of works which break away from the reproductive function of realist, empirical, easily naturalised language, can attempt to contribute to the imagination – and in some small way, to the realisation – of radically different systems. I also wish to think about how such a poetry can address itself to specific instances of oppression, and oppressive ideological formations, can engage in specific critiques and attempt to point to the direction out of those problems,

without falling back into the problems of vulgar realist commitment. If conventionally intelligible language reproduces the world from which it emerges, then poetry that wishes to be resistive in this way cannot make programmatic political propositions for alternative ways of being, thinking, acting. So, accepting that any resistance to the ideological conditions in which our subjectivities, our language, our entire framework for thinking and action are formed must begin through forms which resist intelligibility on the terms of preceding ideological conditions, I yet wish to examine how poetry uses such forms to gesture towards some alternative in a way that is not just completely abstract. I see this resistive work of poetry as a purposive reworking of the constraining ideological conditions through which it emerges – knowing that the attempt is a slow one even at its most urgent, that the gesture to other possible worlds is so easily folded in to safe comprehension under the logics of our time.

In keeping with this commitment, the poetry under examination in the following chapters may not appear as 'difficult' or linguistically disruptive as the above critique of 'realist' forms might lead one to expect. They will be hard to pin down, will resist ready naturalisation, slip away from static meanings, build up through contradictions, form possibilities of thinking on the hoof, but they will also do so in language which is often readily 'readable', which pushes towards the possibility of an intelligibility just over the horizon, which builds towards that which we don't yet know, from specific critiques and attacks on that which is already-known. Their difficulty and resistance to prior forms of intelligibility operates on a variety of levels, in the twists of an apparent argument, the balance of phrases, some confounding structure in a work as a whole, and not only in the more immediately visible difficulty of, for instance, the syntactically disrupted line.

This move towards a resistance which, having learnt from the foundational critiques that underlie the formal disruptions of the experimental poetic traditions, yet wishes to turn away from the valorisation of open, ambiguous, plural kinds of meaning as ends in themselves, is in concert with similar drives in recent generations of poets working in this context. I see younger, more contemporary poets as turning towards a poetics of more direct engagement and intervention, where an interest in concrete political action contrasts with the more aestheticised political poetics of defamiliarisation.

As an example, *Towards. Some. Air.*, an anthology of interviews, articles, poems and poetic statements, published in Canada in 2015 and edited by Canadian poet Fred Wah and British

poet Amy De'Ath, is one of the most concerted efforts in recent years at articulating the poetics of the contemporary experimental poetry milieu in the UK and North America, in both its diversity and its elements of collectivity. The book links its poets together into a wide web of interconnection, interaction and shared concern across difference and distance, including tracing connections back through the lineage of the trans-Atlantic innovative tradition. It contains pieces from two of the poets I will be discussing in this thesis, Sean Bonney (who elsewhere has written on Anna Mendelssohn) and Lisa Robertson, as well as a large number of their contemporaries of both young and older poets from the UK, Canada and the US, a number of whom will come up in the course of this thesis: Andrea Brady writing on Denise Riley, Caroline Bergvall, cris cheek, Fred Moten, Keston Sutherland, Keith Tuma writing on Tom Raworth, Amy De'Ath (who elsewhere has written on Bhanu Kapil) interviewing Juliana Spahr.[19]

De'Ath writes that the work collected is "a testament to a widespread interest in the relation between poetry and social change, or between poetry and revolution" (De'Ath & Wah, 2015, p. x). This interest in the relationship between art and social change is in itself a modest claim, and one which is enduring across time and tradition; to the additionally emphatic reference to specifically the radical social change of revolution, she adds that the book "implicitly turns away from" "the right to some sort of purely aesthetic form of confrontation that strives to resegregate art from other political concerns" (2015, p. x). The political drive shared by the works collected in this book is here cast as specifically opposed to the autonomy of a "purely aesthetic form of confrontation", is emphatically not only "meta-", and instead wishes to find ways to more directly address political concerns, implicitly looking to engage with specific contemporary problems, struggles and occasions.

Two conferences that took place in 2013 illustrate a particular moment of heightened radical energy, and an increased wish to think about where poetry sits in relation to specific material problems and possibilities of intervention: *Militant Politics and Poetry,* at Birkbeck, University of London on 18th May 2013, and *Poetry and/or Revolution,* across UC Santa Cruz, UC Davis and UC Berkeley on October 3-5 2013. These conferences and the

[19] In his contextual essay Peter Jaeger explicitly makes the links between this book and the interconnected traditions in which it sits: "The relationships formed among language, social activism, and politics have of course been an ongoing focus of innovative poetries in both the North American and British contexts since at least the time of the New American Poetry of the 1950s and the British Poetry Revival of the 1960s. What seems new here is a more supportive form of pluralism, which is not so much marked by a specific school or movement, but by a shared sense of cultural critique, produced in relation to formal innovation." (De'Ath & Wah, 2015, p. 2)

discussions that surrounded them speak to one another (sometimes directly, through online open letters) of the possibilities, or lack thereof, of poetry to intervene and participate in revolutionary activity and material social change, in the context of lived experience of community activism, street protest, direct actions and riots. The position of a general militancy for the readership and writership of the experimental poetry community is often taken as a given. Justin Katko writes: "Our poetry has an obvious readership in the militants with whom we have organised, demonstrated, and occupied" (Katko, 2013, para. 13). Danny Hayward asks: "Would it be useful to organise ourselves? In what way? e.g. form a faction; produce agitprop material; create a website; produce collective statements for website, perhaps weekly" (Hayward, 2013, para. 1). Will Rowe prefaces a statement about an argument among poets with "in a revolutionary epoch like our own" (Rowe, 2013, para. 5).

I would like to suggest that the emergence of this particular strain of militancy, with an enduring influence on these poetry scenes and their shared sense of identity and poetics, can be partly, tentatively, traced to a series of political events which a great many poets were involved in, some as already established writers, others at an early and formative stage. Sean Bonney describes a shift whereby his work, and his thinking on subjectivity within it, "became [even more] politicized during the brief period of insurgent struggle that took place in the UK between 2010 and 2011. I started thinking about the lyric subject as a collective" (De'Ath & Wah, 2015, p. 284). At the *Militant Politics and Poetry* conference, referring to this same period, Jennifer Cooke describes the importance of "the figures who danced down Oxford streets [sic] during the student protests" (Cooke, 2013, para. 4), as well as mentioning readings at riots, and the events at Millbank Tower in central London in November 2010, when the very first of the national student protests against the rise in tuition fees brought about by the newly elected Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition ended with the Conservative Party headquarters being occupied and trashed by protestors. David Grundy mentions the riots which happened in London and subsequently across the rest of the country in the summer of 2011, following the murder of Mark Duggan by police, as well as the street parties which accompanied the funeral of Margaret Thatcher in April 2013 (Grundy, 2013). This is all on the backdrop of the initial spur of resistance to the inauguration of an austerity-based economic policy with the election, of sorts, of the coalition government. In the American context, Chris Chen, Joshua Clover and Juliana Spahr, as well as David Buuck, write very explicitly of their involvement, and their involvement as poets, in the events of Occupy Oakland in the winter of 2011 (Chen, Clover & Spahr, 2013; Buuck, 2013).

Whilst these particular flashpoints of heightened militant political struggle, and the involvement of these poets in them, have been swept up and diffused in the ongoing movements of recent history, it is undoubtable that they have left a legacy. These collective experiences and conversations might be taken – as Bonney makes explicit for his own writing – as having an influence on the writing and thinking of many of those who were involved. In the UK, the 'student movement' involved a great many poets who were at that time based at universities, either as academics or as students, who organised and attended protests but also read at occupations, on picket lines, published pamphlets, and built personal connections within this context.

I might hypothesise, partly from my own personal experience, that this was especially formative for that generation of poets who were students during this time; as an undergraduate myself from the start of this period in 2010, just beginning to explore what a poetic community in which I could be actively involved might look like, I took part in occupations and protests alongside a number of poets, and witnessed a body of work unfolding in the context of these events from my older peers. This period has also left a trail of subsequent publications – including most notably Bonney's *Letters Against the Firmament*, which I will be discussing in this thesis, and Keston Sutherland's *Odes to TL61P*, but also, say, Danny Hayward's *People* (Mountain Press, 2013), Marianne Morris' *DSK* (Tipped Press, 2013), Timothy Thornton's *TRAILS* (Deterritorial Support Group, 2011), Lisa Jeschke and Lucy Beynon's *David Cameron: A Theatre of Knife Songs* (Shit Valley, 2015). In a US context, Juliana Spahr's *That Winter the Wolf Came* (Commune Editions, 2015) and Jackqueline Frost's *The Antidote* (Compline, 2013), for example, partly come out of the context of events in Oakland during a similar period.

This is all to say that I consider the context for this thesis, for my writing it and for the conversations to which it hopes to contribute, to include a not yet thoroughly documented move towards a greater wish for direct political address and instrumentality, of what might be seen as a more vulgarly committed kind, in contemporary experimental poetics, with more direct relations to community and street activism in which its poets are also involved. This is all on the backdrop of the well-established critiques of realist commitment and the limitations of those forms that I have already detailed; an ongoing reassessment of the problematic relationship between these conflicting drives and ideas is the conversation into which I insert my voice here.

~

At first we didn't mask up. We were poets.
Then slowly one by one we did.

(Juliana Spahr, 'Turnt', *That Winter the Wolf Came,* 2015, p. 82)

~

The conversations at the conferences mentioned above had a tendency to focus on instrumental activism, and the relatively narrow question of whether or not poetry can contribute towards street activism, conceptualised often in terms of the cataclysmic event of the riot, the protest, the insurrectionary moment. The short answer to this question can only really be 'no' – leaving these conversations a little frustrated and frustrating. I have no wish, in my exploration of the ways poetry can contribute towards the ongoing and complicated process of resistance, to posit it as in any way equivalent to more material forms of activism, community support, redistribution of resources, etc. The question itself contains a narrowness of thinking about political instrumentality, just as, I think, the claim to a poetic resistance which stops at an overly aestheticised sense of linguistic defamiliarisation is also insufficient.

An angle which more closely reflects the position I begin from and the ways this exploration will unfold is that of Amy De'ath, in an interview with Juliana Spahr:

> you agree that there's a separation between what poetry can do and what activism can do, but I'm still wondering if that relation changes if you shift to a politics and a theory that are thinking about the domestic sphere, affective labour and emotional relationships, bringing up children, things like that. Whether a politics that pays sufficient attention to those spheres would also imply that poetry might have a different use, a different function. (De'Ath & Wah, 2015, p. 306)

The work of resistance involves many reciprocal spheres. When I ask about the specific utility of experimental poetic practice, and how poetry can be actively resistive, in ways which point to specific problems and work towards positive gestures of imagination in terms of alternative ways of being and relating, this is not as or instead of activism in any simple sense. I think of the question, and the struggle for resistance, as part of the necessary attempt to re-form our relations, our sense of ourselves, our possibilities for action, at the level of the everyday also, and at the level of our thinking. If the reproduction of material relations are completely tied up to processes of ideological reproduction at the level of the subject, then ideological and more material forms of resistance are mutually necessary facets of the same struggle.

On recuperability

My criticisms and modifications of older accounts of resistive poetics are made very much in the spirit of comradely criticism, in the understanding that they are the legacy and foundation upon which I build my own poetics, and that many of the concepts and criticisms which they have hacked out ahead of me will remain indispensable. There is one conceptual distinction in Bernstein's 'Artifice of Absorption' which is particularly sharp, and which I will make significant use of as the thesis develops.

Bernstein complicates a distinction he identifies in Forrest-Thomson between the semantic and the non-semantic – a schema which sees intelligible, absorptive, semantic elements as meaningful, and foregrounded artifice, prosodic or formal elements, impermeability, as non-meaningful:

> the meaning of which I speak is not meaning as we may 'know' it, with a recuperable intention or purpose. Such a restricted sense of meaning is analogous to the restricted senses of knowledge as stipulatively definable. (1992, pp. 16-17)

Bernstein's lines propose a redefined distinction, between forms whose meaning is conventionally, easily "recuperable", and those forms of writing whose meaning is non-recuperable, which have some kind of meaning-content that cannot be readily explicated, or which emphasise through their difficulty this kind of meaning. In contrast with a vulgar, realist absorption, Bernstein suggests that it might be possible to be absorbed in something other than realism, using an analogy to the very different experience of being absorbed in a piece of music to think about the possible action of non-recuperable forms.

If ideology sets the limits of what can be coherently thought, felt, acted, then forms of recuperable meaning acquiesce in current realism and the ideological construction of intelligibility. Though still inevitably existing within this same ideological construction, non-recuperable forms of meaning, which operate through artifice, might offer a starting point for divergence from already-known, easily intelligible and explicable kinds of knowledge and statements. Such meaning-forms might gesture outside the bounds of that realism, towards experience or ideas which are currently unnameable.

That is not to say that there exists any text from which some elements of conventional semantic meaning cannot be recuperated, but rather that meaning-contents which cannot be reduced to the semantic – and which are for that reason hardest to talk about – might have a

different relation to the ideologically reproductive function of absorptive realism. I'm thinking, for example, of the 'meaning' of a formal manoeuvre,[20] an indefinable sense of tone, some non-conceptual response to a text, or the experience of holding in one's mind simultaneously suggestions and ideas which feel conceptually irreconcilable. This concept of the 'non-recuperable' will be worked at throughout this thesis; the texts I'm exploring posit such content more than I am able to show them enacting it, though how one might explicate such non-recuperable content beyond merely positing it will, I think, remain an open question.

I'm using the term "gesture" throughout this thesis – or, mostly, transitive compounds such as "gesture outside" (above), or more commonly "gesture towards" – to think about the action of this poetry in relation to possibilities of resistive action, and of the function of non-recuperable elements within a poetry whose imaginative capacity exceeds that which can be articulated in pre-figured realist modes. I turn to this bodily metaphor as a way to think through my wish for a writing which takes into account all of the essential critiques of the reproductive function of recuperable, 'realist' writing forms, and which yet can positively imagine. Following the relatively narrow communicative sense of "gesture", I imagine the poem as a body, waving its arms vaguely in the direction of the horizon over which some as-yet-unknown form of living is possible and known. Since these resistive possibilities cannot be simple delineated in clear language, the gesture offers a figure for the idea that that which can't quite be pinned down in the experience of reading a poem can begin to evoke in necessarily unclear terms the possible shapes of ideas, subjects, and modes of living which aren't yet amenable to more concrete description, and may remain so until such time as they are more materially realised through more corporeal action.

There is a complex recent history of theorisation around the idea of the gesture. Whilst I don't intend to go into this in detail, some remarks from Carrie Noland open up the possibilities of these non-recuperable forms of bodily signifying and action – which she sees as at once socially pre-figured in their meanings, and always also exceeding that pre-figuration – as a figure for the poem's work. "Gestures are a type of inscription, a parsing of the body into signifying or operational unit" Noland writes. "At the same time, gestures clearly belong to the domain of movement; they provide kinesthetic sensations that remain in excess of what the gestures themselves might signify or accomplish within that culture." And later:

[20] Robert Sheppard explores this idea, and its place in the practice and thinking of experimental poetry, in more detail in *The Meaning of Form in Contemporary Innovative Poetry* (2016), using a series of case studies of different formal manoeuvres and practices.

"Performing gestures can generate sensations that are not-yet marked, not-yet-meaningful. These sensations exact change; they may be productive of new movements, new meanings" (Noland, 2009, pp. 2/17). This is how I am beginning here to conceive of the possibilities of the non-recuperable in poetry, involved as it is in ideologically-formed signifying systems, and yet producing also the possibility as we move through them for the formation of new meanings. As this thesis goes along, this simple bodily metaphor – the idea that the poem waves, points, or paints shapes in the air, achieving effects similar to such movements – will become somewhat less metaphorical, as I trace the figuration of the relationship between aesthetic perception, poetic form, and the thinking-feeling body, and the presence of non-recuperable bodily performance-actions in the work of Bhanu Kapil in particular.

Agency and construction

One of the modifications I want to make to many of these accounts of resistive poetic possibility that precede me is to do with the seriousness with which I take the problems posed by Althusser's notion of universal ideology. To reiterate: any resistance must contend with the fact that we are inside ideology, at the levels of our possible concepts, our subjectivities, our actions, our language, and that this is a process that functions to reproduce its currently dominant forms. If this means that any claim to resistance through activity which destabilises language and concepts – which contains some implicit idea of 'clearing out' the language – is insufficient, it also means that the possibility of any more positive resistive acts which posit even the imaginative possibility of a radically different set of relations seems near impossible. As discussed in Chapter One, one potential problem with the Athusserian account of ideology as universal and fundamental to subjectification is that it seems to cast subjectivity as deterministic, leaving too little space for any kind of agency by which subjects might bring about the resistance and change that manifestly does occurs. Indeed, it is a premise of this work that meaningful resistance is near impossible, that all actions tend towards the reproduction of the ideological and material conditions from which they emerge.

~

> Are these, then, our only choices: to slip away into oblivion, or to be left behind, clinging to dirty ghosts? We must assume otherwise.
>
> (Lisa Robertson, *XEclogue,* 1999, unpaginated [p. 89])

~

To begin to find some way out of the near intractability of this problem – to conceptualise a resistance which isn't framed in terms of revealing, de-familiarising, or opening up, but can form resistive critique and possibility from always inside its ideological conditions – I need to step back to look at the theoretical basis for the possibility of such resistance. This also provides a clearer starting point for thinking about what a poetry might look like which steps up to that possibility.

If resistance is to be found within a seemingly total concept of universal ideology, then the process of ideology must first be recognised not as an imposition which comes to 'us' as pre-existing subjects, from some external place, figure or abstract agent (e.g. capitalism), but as a social process which both involves and constitutes us, which is the condition of our very possibility.

I have already mentioned a direct response of Judith Butler's to this problem; I further find Butler's account of construction and agency in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter* – specifically in relation to construction of subjects as gendered – particularly useful for thinking about ideology in this way: "Construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible" (1999, p. 187). Butler emphasises the way in which the process of construction, or ideological subjectification, is not a limit imposed upon subjects – as if there was a coherent subject preceding this process – but is the "constitutive constraint" (1993, p. xi) which allows all else to occur.

Within a discussion of self-description, as a specific linguistic iteration of something like Althusserian interpellation, poet and philosopher Denise Riley posits that the idea that language or ideology is coercive, that they oppose agency, relies on a distinction between an essential interiority and a language or ideology acting from outside. She refuses this dichotomy; the idea of our language and our understanding of ourselves coming 'from the outside' becomes the notion of "outside from the start" (Riley, 2000a, p. 44), after Maurice Merleau-Ponty's formulation: "Nothing determines me from outside, not because nothing acts upon me, but on the contrary because I am, from the start outside myself and open to the world" (Riley, 2000a, p. 44, quoting Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*). This "short-circuits my convictions of my innerness" (Riley, 2000a, p. 44). The very grammar of the question that supposes a subject upon which ideology or language could act is a cause of error here: "Some 'truly psychological' element cannot be cleanly isolated

and extracted from the language, syntax and grammar of self-description" (Riley, 2000a, p. 35). Rather than being coerced by language, or ideology more generally, we are produced by it.

Ideology can then be re-envisaged as a process of inscribing repetition, performed not simply by or to individuals but at the level of the social or collective. Describing the way in which an individual's language is always ideological, Riley says: "your word is already not 'half' but wholly 'someone else's'—is already *everyone* else's" (2000a, p. 63). The formulation "already *everyone* else's" suggests the way in which the collectivity in general perpetuates the conditions of its production, whilst creating a sense of exteriority from the individual.

Butler describes this collective process of construction and reproduction as "a process of reiteration by which both 'subjects' and 'acts' come to appear at all. There is no power that acts, but only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability" (Butler, 1993, p. 9).

The reworking of the false dichotomy between the ideas of construction as inherently deterministic and of a total non-determined freedom, between external and internal agency, opens up the space for resistance, reconfiguration and agency in this instability. Butler states: "it is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm" (1993, p. 10). For example, "The injunction to be a given gender produces necessary failures, a variety of incoherent configurations that in their multiplicity exceed and defy the injunction by which they are generated" (1999, p. 185).

Riley echoes this, directly addressing the criticism of over-determinism in Althusser's theory of ideology, and further describing the way in which the failures of ideology's injunctions are felt at the level of the individual subject:

> The individual subject can't quite either be or not be in the collective category; these aren't genuinely open linguistic alternatives. Then is Althusser's idea of interpellation blind to the facts of its provisionality? No; a degree of failure is quietly built into the model. Because it announces 'you are this category', it's structured as accusing, yet as soon as it's pronounced, the way is thrown open to partly refuse it, because no one can always quite so smoothly submit to subjectification. (2000a, p. 85)

These refusals of submission arise in the cracks in the process of subjectification. For Riley they arise in response to the strictures of a pronouncement in language, though the refusal may not itself have a strictly coherent linguistic form.

We see in both of these accounts that the provisionality, the insufficiencies and cracks in ideology as a process are to do with the ways in which ideological subjectification interpellates individuals into identity categories: "it announces 'you are this category'", "the injunction to be a given gender". We are all interpellated as particular types of subjects, with all the baggage this interpellation entails about what social roles are afforded to a given subject in the overall reproduction of the ideological and material relations which make up the social whole.

Riley develops an idea that the grounds for resistance and divergence from those social categories which are felt as though coming from outside the individual originate in a kind of affectively felt uncertainty, a chafing against the strictures of these categories. She suggests that any language, built as it necessarily is from collective categories of understanding, and of subjectivity – that is, necessarily ideological – is always insufficient to describe the much more various ways in which people actually exist and experience the world. Any categorical description doesn't truly fit the self, or is a lie, because it comes from the outside (as ideological subjectification renders all individuals outside themselves), because the limits of descriptive language can be felt to only contain a rough, false, projected version of ourselves. Any language used to describe our most sincerely felt emotions in their specificity comes prepackaged, pre-used, referring only to generalities.

This inherent instability of subjectification, this source of uncertainty and the potential for change, is encountered as a feeling of "imposture", "imminently generated *as* feeling by the everyday machinations of interpellative language" (Riley, 2000a, p. 83). Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank provide a useful formulation in their 'Shame in the Cybernetic Fold': "it is the inefficiency of the fit between the affect system and the cognitive system […] that enables learning, development, continuity, differentiation" (Sedgwick & Frank, 1995, p. 511); our (ideologically constructed) conceptual basis for understanding is narrower than, and has the inherent capacity to be mismatched with, the reality of our affective experience.

~

Why shape

these sentiments, prosecution witnesses

(Denise Riley, 'Outside from the Start', *Selected Poems*, 2000b, p. 100)

~

For Riley, this affective source of uncertainty and change is evoked in the act of self-description (as a type of ideological interpellation) through a recognition that it is always false, and could be otherwise. She explicitly connects this to political change, saying that "alongside the submissive guilt that makes me walk in to an interpellation with my hands held high", there is a corresponding retort, "'actually, no, I'm not an *x* as you understand it, and I don't like your terms'". This retort, this cry of felt dissatisfaction, "makes possible, and is also produced by, those objections to collective identifications which both shape and erode political movements" (Riley, 2000a, p. 88). Whilst such collective identifications are necessary for liberation struggle – she discusses in particular the foundation of feminist struggle around tentative understandings of the category of "woman" – it is the felt dissonance with the fullest strictures of what such a categorical description might mean for the individual that produces the possibility of the struggle, and a reconfiguration of those relations. It is this felt dissonance which is the basic starting point of ideological instability, and therefore of resistance.

The specific iteration of this affective disjunction in relation to the resistive force of fractures in language Riley calls "linguistic unease", which she says is "naturally endemic to self-depiction" (2000a, p. 17). The constraints of collective language also produce the openings whereby they can be refused. This begins to offer some space for thinking about the relationship between the affective fractures in ideological subjectification and the possibilities of poetic language. One of the questions of my project is how this "unease", these affective fractures, can be articulated in the language which is itself the source and focus of that unease; how the feeling, and the internal distance it implies or provokes from the reproductive force of ideology, can be critically examined and turned towards radically divergent ways of being.

Butler offers an initial conceptualisation for how this might work, in an idea of citation. Since the mechanisms of ideological "reiteration" are already inherently unstable, containing their own inconsistencies, incoherence and failure, simple reiteration and reproduction can be disrupted, and change propagated, through "constrained appropriation of the regulatory law" (Butler, 1993, p. 12). This becomes the generative question, "What would it mean to "cite" the law to produce it differently?" (1993, p. 15). This notion of 'citation' can be seen as a reformulation of Althusser's 'internal distance'. The notion of repeating the constraint of language in modified form, gives an initial impetus for thinking about how poetry specifically might have a felicity for discovering, heightening, or putting to use the incoherencies and

failures of our ideological formation – the unease that it already generates at the level of language – to produce new possibilities.

These concepts, linguistic unease and citation, yet remain somewhat inconclusive in the resistive actions they propose for poetry; what they offer here is a way in, an opening onto the possibility of resistance in the face of its overwhelming difficulty, on which I can build.

Affective dissonances

I want to press a little harder on the notion that emerges in the above accounts, that the moment of change, the moment of "citing differently", of re-combinations or configurations which might lead to newness, is rooted in or emerges from moments of affective dissonance.

In *The Politics of Affect,* Brian Massumi further details how space opens up between the ways any given subject or subjects experience the processes of inscribing repetition which make up our existence in the social world, and between the ideologically constraining function of these repetitions.

Similarly to Butler's account of "reiteration", Massumi emphasises the way that social relations must be continually re-produced at every moment; they are maintained only through the lived repetition of their forms in 'events', instances of relation between subjects. This is a question both of collective relations, and of subjects themselves, in a sense much like the Althusserian process of ideological subjectification (though Massumi would likely protest this comparison): "What is in question is precisely the emergence of the subject, its primary constitution, or its re-emergence and reconstitution" (Massumi, 2015, p. 52). He describes this event:

> There's always an event, and the event always includes dimensions that aren't completely actualized, so it's always open to a degree, it's always dynamic in re-formation. To be in effect, ideological predeterminations have to enter the event and *take* effect […] Their effectiveness is always an accomplishment, a renewed victory, and what needs to be accomplished can fail. (2015, p. 58)

This builds on the accounts I've already given, where the idea of ideology as a process of ongoing inscription between subjects, rather than a monadic power, allows the possibility for disruption, change, and new formulations. But Massumi goes beyond the sense of unease, dissonance and refusal with being categorically or rigidly identified, describing a greater instability at the heart of each of these moments. Every moment of inscribing repetition holds

alternative potentials because, for Massumi, bodies hold a vaster array of potential ways of being than those conceivable within any codified understanding or expression, and because the moment of experience which constitutes the event occurs at the porous and unstable boundary between individuals.

To understand this, we need to explore Massumi's iteration of the concept of "affect". I have been using, and will continue to use the term in a relatively non-specialised way, as a broad term for something like feelings or sensations, felt states of 'internal' being. The term might sometimes be near-synonymous with "emotion", but is broader, less categorical; Riley's "linguistic unease", for example, is a way of attempting to describe a particular affect or set of affects. "Affective experience" might then simply refer to the experience of a subject, but with a heavy emphasis on the way in which the things that occur to that subject are felt as interior experiences and have interior effects.

The much more specialised definition which Massumi develops – not always in accord with my usage – can however add some detail to the specificity of what makes up this experience and how it operates in relation to ideology and the ongoing process of inscription.

For Massumi, affect is an inherently relational capacity, after Spinoza's definition: "the power 'to affect and be affected'" (Massumi, 2015, p. ix). It is not merely individual sensation: "Affective thinking-feeling […] pertains directly to what is passing *between* individuals" (2015, p. 94). It is the often unclear sensation of change felt in the body at any moment of interaction. Occurring at the threshold between individuals, this shared sensation involves a partial dissolution of the self as a coherent and contained entity:

> when you affect something, you are at the same time opening yourself up to being affected […] You have made a transition, however slight. You have stepped over a threshold. Affect is this passing of a threshold, seen from the point of view of the change in capacity. (2015, p. 4)

Each moment of affective interaction is for Massumi both an inscribing event for the subject, and a more significantly unstable moment than in previous accounts. Not only is interpellation fundamentally fractured, containing its own openness to failure, but the ideological subject is constitutionally unstable; it is constantly being dissolved and reformed in the process of inscribing interactions – with all of the other subjects, objects, structures and occurrences in the collective world – in a wavering field of relation.

This pushes further towards an understanding of how the instability of the subject is precisely the fracture in any initially apparent determinism of Althusser's ideology. Affect, as the dissolving sensation of the event, is "the virtual co-presence of potentials" (Massumi, 2015, p. 5). It is the overflow of potential in the interactive moment of becoming, or re-becoming, and contains in it the potential for alternatives alongside the particular relations which are actualised in any given instance: "Affect is simply a body movement looked at from the point of view of its potential" (2015, p. 7). Every moment of inscribing repetition, every meeting of subjectivities, might then produce slightly different affective results, and with them slightly different possibilities for being and acting: "There are potential alter-politics at the collectively in-braced heart of every situation" (2015, p. 57).

If each event has the potential, in instability, to open up space for newness and divergence, Lisa Robertson's essay 'Perspectors/Melancholia' can help to think about how this potential might be more actualised at specific moments, how we might find the root of resistance and change in particular kinds of affective experiences. This begins to make this whole framework more usable, in the sense that it begins to show where a resistive thinking, and a resistive poetry, might take its initial experiential basis.

I've already described this essay's sceptical understanding of sensory perception. From this point, Robertson describes the "synthetic interior space", the space which perceives, in which affect and melancholy occurs, as "the soul". She follows Robert Burton's description of this space as autonomous only through its capacity for "phantasy", which "examines images perceived by common sense and newly recombines them"; phantasy is "autonomous only in its recombinant function", through combining sensory data, rather than originating conceptions in itself (Robertson, 2012, p. 53). Robertson goes on,

> When, as in melancholy, the soul is afflicted by the black bile of the body and the socius, by bitterness, doubt, grief, injustice and loss, phantasy is dangerously more free […] Melancholic skepticism admits vulnerability as the encompassing condition of extension and change. Without edge or frame, this unstable synthetic space that melancholy is intuits propositions about change, propositions that begin from the scattering and smashing and remixing of the knowledges of the body or the *polis.* (2012, pp. 53-4)

The general premises that ideological reproduction contains the possibility of its own refusal, and that re-inscription is an ongoing process which can theoretically fail or be disrupted, tell us initially only that resistance, though difficult, is not entirely doomed. Robertson here adds the notion that the experience of the destabilising "vulnerability" of affects such a melancholy

heightens our capacity for “phantasy”, such that we are most able to find new, liberatory recombinations of our received data, to put our perceptions, actions, “knowledges” and the ideological frameworks which contain them into unstable relationships.

Robertson states, “the soul is the site where the political and the affective exchange vulnerabilities. Like a prosthesis, its autonomy is false and necessary” (2012, p. 52). If the site of subjective instability is also that of political instability, then the potential for attempts at deliberate modifications of our formation begins at points of heightened vulnerability – and this, therefore, is where a resistive writing might wish to begin.

It is important to temper the suggestion here, which runs particularly through Massumi’s account, that affective responses have some inherently resistive capacity, with a return to one of my guiding principles, that the processes of ideology mean that actions, relations and subjectivities in general have a primary tendency towards the reproduction of the conditions which enable them. That is to say, most affective responses, even at their most challenging and unstable, still tend towards reproduction of their dominant ideological and material conditions.

In her essay ‘Grief work in a war economy’, poet and critic Andrea Brady describes how, after the World Trade Centre attack, the ritual of collective public mourning was harnessed by and in the service of the ideological cause of the Bush administration, to create senses of inclusive community bound around nationalism and war. In her account this was abetted by the liberal perception of grief as privately emotional. This perception led people on the political left, including poets, to treat that grief as a space for non-contestation, and in doing so cede ground to more reactionary influence.

“Grief”, Brady says, “far from being a spontaneous and private outpouring, is a socialized response whose power in galvanizing populations has long been recognized” (2002, p. 7). Affective responses are neither privately unpolitical in the liberal sense, nor are they necessarily or simply a private source of dissonance or resistance to hegemonic forces within the collective.

Instead, as Brady emphasises, affective responses are social battlegrounds, which are easily won by hegemonic powers. Emotions are conditioned and become articulable through the social rituals and preconceived notions of their conditions, and are primarily sites of ideological inscription, even as we recognise that inscribing process to be an unstable and potentially open one.

Massumi too acknowledges, in one of the more ideologically aware moments of his text, that power and capital are structured in such a way as to fold any apparent resistances, or affective deviations, back towards their own reproduction:

> [(power) structures] are always running after different-order movements in the collective field of embodied activity in order to funnel them back into their own channels […] [This] means that they find ways to feed their own alimentary operations back into the field of emergence. They contaminate the field. They convert movements afoot in the field to their own ends. (Massumi, 2015, p. 102-3)

The variations, dissonances, potentials, transitions into otherness, produced by the unstable processes of affective experience and interaction are still, Massumi says, always "susceptible to capitalist capture" (2015, p. 108).

The pertinent question, then, is how to specifically direct the volatility of our affective experience, and the potential for re-constitution in each event; how to specifically push through this theoretical possibility for resistance, towards its actuality. What particular kinds of affective experiences, what particular elements of an experience such as melancholy, might be especially pertinent in relation to this resistive potentiality? What modes of attention, language use, representation, might have some chance of activating the possibility of difference which is inherent here?

All isn't lost for grief in Brady's account:

> Grief is never an unmediated feeling. But neither is it just a plodding through conventions, a rhetorical performance. If mortuary ritual is a communication system which uses symbols to convey information, it is subject to noise. Grief can be subversive. Ritual mourning confirms the bonds within a community; it can also vent dissent and fears of exclusion or change. (Brady, 2002, p. 12).

If we start from a pessimistic stance on the dialectical nature of emotional experience – articulable only within the bounds of its ideological situation, yet exceeding these bounds in actual experience – the concept of "noise" is the positive inverse, the excess beyond that which is articulable, the potential for resistance. As grief and melancholy remain, like all experience, primarily liable to ideological capture, yet they are most noisy experiences, which have an increased potential to destabilise us and to open us up to alternative ways of being. It is this noise, the subversive interferences that occur on the least articulable edges of these experiences, to which I wish to attend, and urge attention.

Massumi's description of affect pushes further on this idea of it as a potential for excess, for overspilling the bounds of our prescribed selves (reminiscent of Butler's formulation of the gaps in reiteration as "that which escapes or exceeds the norm"):

> You can think of affect in the broadest sense as what remains of the potential after each or every thing a body says or does – as a perpetual bodily remainder […] this perpetual remainder is an excess. It's like a reserve of potential or newness or creativity that is experienced alongside every actual production of meaning in language or in any performance of a useful function – vaguely but directly experienced, as something more, a more to come, a life overspilling. (2015, p. 8)

Since affective experience occurs at the level of felt sensation which is intertwined with but doesn't strictly map on to the conscious elements of thought – bodies and the interactions between bodies hold always a much vaster array of potential ways of being than those which can be held within any particular linguistic expression, or any codified understanding. Even within ideology, our interacting bodies latently contain the potential for all alternatives and alterations which don't actualise, or which aren't conceivable at any given time, as well as those which are most obviously written across those bodies.

I take these texts, then, as suggesting two slightly different ideas about the relationship between affective experience and ideological construction. First is the notion that our affect system, our bodily, experiencing, feeling selves, are more complicated and variable than can be contained within any codified system, within the particular social understandings and instrumentalisations into which they are put. This leads to the development that certain kinds of affective experience are of a particular nature which is de-seating, creates or amplifies an internal instability of the socially constructed self, which opens up space for new knowledge, new thinking, for the self to be constructed a little differently.

Infra-linguistic experience and non-recuperable poetic form

As these experiences express some fracture from their ideological formation, they do so in forms that necessarily begin as inarticulate; the meaning of these noisy elements of experience, I will argue, can be related to the concept, from Bernstein, of forms of meaning which are "non-recuperable". This relationship to poetics, the relationship between ideological reproduction in language and the divergent potential of moments of affective instability or dissonance, can be brought into focus and clarified through the concept of the "infra-linguistic", which I draw from Massumi as one of my key concepts.

He talks of "the myriad of sub-threshold experiences, or microperceptions, populating the body's every move" (Massumi, 2015, p. 210), naming these as "infra-" (as opposed to "pre-") linguistic, referring to "what actively lies below a certain threshold of appearance on an open-ended spectrum" (2015, p. 212). These affective experiences are felt in the body, they are experienced but are not articulable or recognisable in the language of recuperable sense, within the particular set of ideological conditions in which the feeling subject exists. I've already described an example of this kind of sensation in the feeling of "unease" named by Denise Riley, which might result in nothing more articulable than a rejection, specifically of the language that allows any description at all – it is a felt rejection of that which is above the threshold of articulable, linguistic recognition.

Robertson articulates this a little differently, positing the idea of a "listened-to body", as a basis of resistance:

> listening to one's own, impossible body is a resistance. It disarms the projections, in order to turn the girl into oneself, into the jostling variousness of one's own thinking. The listened-to body is the one that reconstitutes itself continuously in relation to conditions, material, affective, social, and historical. It resists in order to move forward. (Robertson & Walker, 2013-14, p. 22)

That which is felt in the body is seen as having the potential to open up gaps between the strictures of ideological formation and the much wider spectrum of actual affective experience, showing how subjects can deviate from any given set of ideological limits, or can move within those limits and alter them. The inarticulable or not-yet-articulable, sub-threshold, felt dissonance between the permutations of affective experience – particularly at destabilising moments of vulnerability – and those ideological 'projections' which prescribe the parameters of subjects' available identities or responses – the experience of that inherent incompleteness of strict subjectification which was described by Riley and Butler – the infra-linguistic, is the originating point of resistance.[21]

[21] From "infralinguistic", I follow an association, of sound and sense, to Marcel Duchamp's concept of "infrathin". This concept, Duchamp claims, is beyond description, and can only be defined through examples. Two such examples: "Infra thin separation between / the detonation noise of a gun / (very close) and the apparition of the bullet/ hole in the target...."; "just touching. While trying to place 1 plane surface /precisely on another plane surface / you pass through some infra thin moments—" (Perloff, 2002, pp. 101-2). Marjorie Perloff describes the infrathin as "the most minute of intervals or the slightest of differences […] to be perceived" (Perloff, 2002, p. 102). This can be brought into close relation to Massumi's concept. Erin Manning, a collaborator of Massumi, describes the infrathin as "the potentiation of a relational field that includes what cannot quite be articulated, but nonetheless can be felt" (Manning, 2017, p. 99); "the differential that marks the rhythm that is the oscillation between what is perceptible and what is imperceptible yet felt" (2017, p. 101). In Manning's account, the representation or engagement with Duchamp's infrathin in art is a way to activate the potential for change that exists in the imperceptible but felt difference, by showing that there are possibilities

This can be directly related back to the critique of realist, naturalisable, recuperable language which I delineated earlier. Massumi suggests that

> affective expressions like anger and laughter […] interrupt the flow of meaning that's taking place: the normalized interrelations and interactions that are happening and the functions that are being fulfilled. Because of that, they are irruptions of something that doesn't fit. (2015, p. 8-9)

Certain artistic language uses can create such interruptions, can "bring that inadequation between language and experience to the fore […] in a way that actually fosters new experiences" (2015, p. 13). These are described like experimental poetry: "words that burst apart and lose their conventional meaning" (2015, pp. 44-5). This bears a similarity to Adorno's claims about "the shock of the unintelligible" in "a text whose language jolts signification"; Massumi's articulation adds to the idea of shock and disruption the positive possibility of an irruption at these moments of affective extremity of some barely recognisable other – "something that doesn't fit" – from the body.

Those forms that were critiqued as most strongly and compliantly reproducing the ideological conditions which have produced them – realist, empirical, readily, clearly intelligible and recuperable, as naturalisable message on the terms of their pre-existing ideological framework – correspond and refer to those experiences which are above the threshold of that which is recognisable within that ideological framework. That is, if the bounds of intelligibility are ideological bounds, produced by and reproducing the ideological and material conditions of their possibility, then this is true not just for intelligible language per se, but also for those experiences and affects which can be intelligibly named.

I have already claimed that those elements of meanings which are "non-recuperable" hold a potential to diverge from the ideologically reproductive function of realist-intelligible language, and to gesture towards alternative ways of being in the world, towards that which is currently unnameable. I now posit that if these non-recuperable forms are to have specific faculty for moving towards positive gestures or articulation, towards newness – as opposed to previous figurations of non-recuperable forms in poetry as primarily disruptive or defamiliarising – it is through a correspondence with the affective sources of dissonance, change, and potentiality which are to be found in those experiences and disruptive capacities

which exist outside of the ones we perceive now, and also which already co-exist alongside them: "What the infrathin contributes, as a concept, is a way of thinking the both-and of double articulation. That extra patch of red does make a difference: it creates a new world. The infrathin makes felt how both worlds might briefly coexist." (Manning, 2017, p. 104)

that can be labelled as infra-linguistic. If we are to find some ways to refer to and resistively activate the potential of affective disruption, destabilisation, "something that doesn't fit", then we must work towards bringing these experiences into some form of communicable articulation, within a linguistic and ideological framework which by definition almost entirely precludes that. I again posit the non-recuperable, as the formal counterpart and potential poetic basis to the infra-linguistic, as the experiential basis, of this possible resistance and divergence; it is through non-recuperable forms that the infra-linguistic might come to be 'communicated'. As this thesis develops, and this position is taken up and explored through my close readings of poetic material in the following chapters, this relational distinction between the two will become even less obvious, as the similarities between these concepts and that which they describe become more apparent.

I might explain the potential of this relationship between the non-recuperable and the infra-linguistic by reference to John Keats' concept of "negative capability": "when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Keats, 2002, p, 61). By "non-recuperable" I don't mean a simple negative, in the sense of the impossibility of recuperating meaning, since some element of meaning can always be recuperated from a text. Rather, I posit "non-recuperable meaning" as the positive presence of a meaning-content which is a kind of negativity, which is outside of current understanding, and I urge the necessity of being, like Keats' "Man of Achievement", inside those mysteries and the possibilities they might begin to propose, if we could find a way to hear their propositions.

Language and form that utilises non-recuperable elements might allow us to attempt such an endeavour, to gesture to those experiences which are infra-linguistic, in order to make a kind of positive imaginative gesture from inside the language and forms of ideology, as we all are. Rather than folding back to proposition on the terms which are already readily complicit in that ideology, such a gesture attempts to alter the boundaries of intelligibility, as part of the ongoing struggle to alter our ideological situation, to shift the premises of being and acting in such a way that we can also simultaneously work towards altering our material conditions.

A reprise

To bring together some reiterative summary and synthesis of some of the key elements of the framework so far then:

Combining the initial position, that the primary site of ideological formation and reproduction is the subject and the process of subjectification, with the argument that resistance and its possibility emerges from the affective dissonances in this process, we come to the correlative claim that poetic resistance might root itself in an exploration of the affective subject. This is further combined with a critique of the heightened ideologically reproductive function of empirical-realist language uses which emphasise easily recuperable meaning; this critique enables the notion that forms which reach towards non-recuperable meaning can best gesture towards noisy, infra-linguistic affective experiences. Brought together, this brings me to posit that the kinds of poetry which I might best look to for possibilities of and contributions towards resistance is a poetry of *non-recuperable affective subjectivity.*

Two distinct aspects of this suggest themselves at this point. The first is the use of fracture and unintelligibility, irony, shock, and other techniques of discontinuity to provoke and emphasise the necessary instability in the process of ideological interpellation and in our language of the world – to emphasise the pre-existing unease, to create uncertainty or affective instability at the level of the response of the reader. This is closely related to the notion of destabilisation which I have already discussed.

An example of a specifically poetic evocation of these kinds of destabilising affective experiences is the 'wrongness' that Keston Sutherland describes in his essay 'Wrong Poetry'. Sutherland describes the affective experience of encountering and struggling against that which seems bad or wrong in poetry, that which isn't recuperable by prior formulations of knowledge and which produces shame or despair:

> 'Wrong poetry' means […] a trial of doubt that confounds identification, the perdition of confidence in being right, passionate unease about what will qualify or matter, a compulsion to sublate first reactions under the pressure of sheer insistence on whatever most emphatically escapes them, and irreversible resistance of whatever thought seems most nearly conclusively acceptable or is in any measure already familiar and satisfying. Unlike 'autonomous art' or 'committed art', it is a category with no fixable content. The criterion for belonging to it is to exceed it. (2011, p. 147)

In Sutherland's account, much like Robertson's account of melancholy, the force of this confrontation, and the attempt to reassert the prior stability it challenges, is a process which can produce new knowledge, radical or divergent thinking.

The second aspect goes further and is more useful to me – the question of how one might talk about those affective experiences which don't fit with our codified language. I wish to explore how poetry could attempt to use language and forms of non-recuperable meaning, and the de-

seating nature of unintelligibility and affectivity, to tentatively contribute towards altering our ideological landscape by altering the bounds of the expressible, taking our own divergent affects as the source of this newness. In this way we might hope to recombine and reconfigure the ways we are codified and limited, and the power relations whose reproduction that codification serves.

Affective-aesthetic thinking-feeling

a poem is not going to give precise answers.
you mustn't touch the hiding places.
they address a different world
where trees are decorated with diamonds

(Anna Mendelssohn, 'to any who want poems to give them answers', *Implacable Art*, 2000, p. 34)

~

I scream the colors each to each

(Bhanu Kapil, '[13 Errors for Ban]', *Ban En Banlieue*, 2015, p. 23)

~

If the non-recuperable meaning-contents of poetic work have the (at least theoretical) capacity to gesture towards infra-linguistic elements of affective experience, the question of how it is possible to talk about this kind of content, and how we might bring it into an articulation which has some active, resistive currency in the social world, or is in some sense communicable, needs further exploration. This question can be provisionally re-framed as: how might we talk about the content of the aesthetic, or the prosodic, in poetry; how can poetry reach towards aesthetic contents, feelings, experience?

In 'Why Rhyme Pleases', Simon Jarvis asks:

> Can there not be a musical or a prosodic thinking which is not simply a little picture of, nor even a counterpoint to, that more familiar kind of thinking whose medium is essentially semantic and syntactic, but whose medium, instead, is essentially prosodic: a kind of thinking in tunes? (2011, p. 24)

Jarvis relates this kind of thinking to "those features of natural-historical experience which are at once the most elusive and amongst the most important" (2011, p. 25).

I take this idea of "prosodic thinking" which can reach out to our most elusive experiences as something of a distillation of elements that have been present throughout the previous

discussion. Adorno suggests that his desired autonomous works of art are "knowledge as non-conceptual objects" (1974, p. 88), a kind of thinking which might closely resemble the thinking of prosody or music. The possibilities Veronica Forrest-Thomson posits for poetry to challenge the ways our language and perception of the world is mediated is precisely "through artifice", through the work that can be done at a formal, aesthetic, organisational level in the poem, through that which she designates non-semantic. The non-semantic becomes non-recuperable in Bernstein, who turns repeatedly to musical metaphors in order to describe its function or contents. Some version of these ideas about musical thinking have already been integral to the relation I have been attempting to forge between non-recuperable meaning and infra-linguistic affect.

My conception of non-recuperable meaning is hazily continuous with the question of aesthetic content from the start then. I mean 'aesthetic' here in a very general sense, to refer to that register of appreciation and engagement which is concerned with beauty, with artificed and formal properties, considered in terms of effects that aren't to do with their conceptual or semantic signification as such (these include those elements in poetry which I'm talking of as musical and prosodic also). The significant overlap of this with the concept of the non-recuperable as I have outlined it can function to begin a process in this thesis of re-framing and dismantling any conventional distinction between what is seen as aesthetic and what is seen as meaningful, and claiming instead that it is in these aesthetic registers of engagement where kinds of meaning-content which lie outside of current realism can be located, precisely because of their divergence from the more articulately conceptual.

Jarvis pushes further on the line of thinking which looks for 'musical' or aesthetic kinds of thinking in his two essays, 'Why Rhyme Pleases' and 'Prosody as Cognition'. He argues for the cognitive contents of the prosodic elements of poetry, and for the falsehood of any separation of cognitive content from its formal embodiment, in a way which makes this claim dependent on the ideas in 'Undeleter for Criticism' of subjective experience as the starting point of all knowledge. For Jarvis, the same move wrongly separates the idea of a scientific language – one which contains objective, verifiable, generally useful knowledge – from the formal or prosodic, and from subjective experience; it is the same move which evacuates cognition of both beauty and subjectivity:

> The notion that a scientific language, a language carrying cognition, would be, amongst other things, a language stripped of all prosody, as of its entanglement with 'merely' subjective and with intersubjective experience alike, is an idea which took

> some time to take a grip, but which has in many quarters become an article of an inexplicit, and thus all the more rigidly adhered-to, faith. (Jarvis, 1998, p. 9)

Jarvis argues that the experience of prosody is necessarily not entirely describable in the terms of dispassionate critical discourse – it is too idiosyncratic, too closely tied up with the individual experiencing subject:

> It would be possible to begin thinking about the birth of prosody only upon condition that we stopped thinking of the bodily, and of the musical, as the non-cognitive vessels for a cognitive content. (1998, p. 11)

For Jarvis, the content of prosody faces, and challenges, the difficulties of a metaphysical framework that deems knowledge to be inherently propositional – this is the same framework that limits the expressible to that which is recognisable on the terms of that which is already-known.

In 'Marx in Jargon', Keston Sutherland adds a Marxist facet to the critique of this framework. He uses a close reading of certain key terms in *Capital*, and elements of style and satire which surround their deployment, to claim that "bourgeois readers are compelled, in order to make their own kinds of sense of [a text, in this case *Capital*], to separate its contents from its style" (Sutherland, 2011, p. 50). This separation is an inherently bourgeois move, to turn all of the complicated stylistic and aesthetic elements of a text into "an array of undifferentiated concepts for theoretical consumption" (Sutherland, 2011, p. 39). Such a reading (of *Capital*, but with more general implications) "performs what Marx describes as the invariable work of bourgeois ideology: it occludes real social contradiction by reductively neutralizing satire into 'concepts'" (Sutherland, 2011, pp. 49-50).

The reduction of aesthetic, prosodic, artificed, contents merely to their most intelligible and recuperable forms, to concepts, is bourgeois in the sense not merely that I have already described it – that it neatly acquiesces in the passive reproduction of existing conditions, and is only able to address what is already known within the ideologically produced and reproducing bounds of intelligibility – but also because seeing concepts as free-floating and disembodied is related to the conception of the bourgeois subject who also claims to be disembodied, whose ideas are independent, rational, free from ideological mystification or the material contradictions of their conditions. The realism which Adorno criticised earlier becomes here specifically "bourgeois realism" (Sutherland, 2011, p. 57).

Sutherland claims that *Capital* itself is a refutation of the bourgeois form/content distinction, and a demonstration of the possibilities of the resistive content of formal work, since, despite

consistent misreading to the contrary, the "risks and failures of style are arguments in themselves, irreducible to theoretical propositions" (2011, p. 36). Sutherland gives close readings of what he mostly describes as the satirical elements often missed in the uses of the jargon words "bourgoisdom", "gallerte" and "fétischisme", to demonstrate that there are truths or thinking-content in *Capital* which can't be reduced to concepts, but which are embodied and enacted in the text and its reading.

Sutherland argues that the stylistic and formal work done in *Capital* which is irreducible to intelligible concepts under current ideological conditions is essential to its critique of capital and to its revolutionary force. Following this logic through, his essay can be taken to suggest that kinds of writing which attempt to do difficult formal work to gesture towards contents outside of the bounds describable within "bourgeois realism" are a constitutive element of Marxist writing.

The notion of the "irreducible" content of prosody, style, the aesthetic or musical elements of artistic work – as it directly relates to the singular, subjective nature of aesthetic judgement, by a subject who is nonetheless wholly within their material and ideological conditions – offers a development of the notional claim that non-recuperable contents might in some sense correspond to infra-linguistic experience. If thinking and feeling are not meaningfully separate, just as cognition is not meaningfully separate from prosody, formal work does not merely refer – albeit through different mechanisms – to sub-threshold kinds of cognitive content. Rather, aesthetic responses might be thought of as also affective ones, as a kind of thinking-feeling which is necessarily not containable within clearly recuperable language. As Lisa Robertson suggests, quoting Trish Saleh, in an interview with Charles Bernstein, "aesthetics are desire" (Robertson & Bernstein, 2016, 23 min.); the aesthetic begins to lose its distinction as a concept, and become a mode of thinking and feeling with artworks that moves fruitfully outside of the constraints of realism.

In his survey of the question of aesthetic meaning in *The Meaning of Form in Contemporary Innovative Poetry*, Robert Shepperd poses this affective singularity as a problem: "there is an incommunicable core at the centre of response" (2016, p. 20). This might be a problem for any critical endeavour (including this one); yet, in the theoretical argument it brings us back to the idea of negative capability, to suggest that it is precisely that which is unknowable or indescribable in affective-aesthetic content which might gesture to as yet mysterious new possibilities, or unarticulated ways of being.

Robertson develops further the resistive potential of the interface between affective experience and irreducible kinds of formal content in her book *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture,* through a series of studies of different kinds of material surface or adornment in the essays '*Rubus Armeniacus:* A Common Architectural Motif in the Temperate Mesophytic Region', 'How to Colour', and 'Doubt and the History of Scaffolding'.

Colour is seen as "the affective potential of the surface […] an indiscrete threshold where our bodies exchange information with an environment" (Robertson, 2011, p. 123). The coloured surface is the point at which the brute matter of buildings directly intersects with the uncertain inflecting processes of the affective, perceiving person, at which hard matter is revealed as unstable, if not inherently, then in its relation to the perceiving subject. "The affective potential of the surface" begins to articulate a very useful pivot between affect and form; the moment of affective perception, as expressed in aesthetic response, is the moment where subjective instability becomes a potential kind of objective instability.

Following the logic of colour as an affective interaction with material surface, Robertson develops an understanding of ornamentation ("style"), as a way to attack certainties and offer up new understandings, by bringing all the resistive potentials of affect to bear on the decorated object, allowing it to be felt or seen differently. Rubus Armeniacus, the Himalayan Blackberry, is "an exemplary political decoration, a nutritious ornament that clandestinely modifies infrastructural morphology. Here affect invades the centre. *Rubus* inverts and puns upon the proprietous subordination of affective expenditure to intelligence […] This is the serious calling of style" (Robertson, 2011, p. 112). "Political decoration" is then posited as a mechanism for propelling change from the basis of the uncertainty of affective experience.

'Doubt and the History of Scaffolding' has this understanding of surface speak of all actions in the world. Robertson uses scaffolding as a metaphor for the uncertain conceptual framework on which we found our lives – "we live on this temporary framework of platforms and poles" (Robertson, 2011, p. 138) – potentially analogous here with the inherent mystifications of ideology. Literal scaffolds too have a kind of metaphorical relationship to the buildings they clad: "Scaffolding is analogy. It explains what a wall is without being a wall" (2011, p. 139). The resistive explanatory possibilities of this combining image are expressed when Robertson says that scaffolding "rhythmically expresses the vulnerability of the surface by subtracting solidity from form to make something temporarily animate. It

shows us how to inhabit a surface as that surface fluctuates" (2011, p. 140). Scaffolding reveals the uncertainty and instability of the buildings it both hides and implies, in an allusion to their crumbling impermanence and to their possibility for fluctuation by conscious human action. As with the blackberry, or coloured surface, the scaffold clads the certainty of material in an uncertainty which demonstrates the interactivity of these materials with human affect. In 'How to Colour', Robertson relates this to possibilities of altering the conditions of our world: "In the tradition of meaning, if the idea of internal structure could be temporally expressed as the past perfect, the idea of the surface would be the future conditional" (2011, p. 129).

The interrelation between aesthetic contents and affective experience, as an interface through which poetry might gesture towards or bring towards articulation possible new ways of being, or productive critiques of our material and ideological conditions, will be substantially developed through the close poetic encounters which will follow, and in particular through my reading of Robertson's poetry.

On subjectivity

I'd like to briefly address directly any possibility of an emerging contradiction, between an account of ideology that holds subjectivities to be shaped by collective conditions which obfuscate their own limits – bringing the very concept of the coherent, free, integral, individual psychological interiority into question – and a focus on individual experience as our basis for criticism, resistance and knowledge.

An understanding of universal ideology does indeed contradict the predominant bourgeois-liberal understanding of individual experience as rational, free and unconstrained, as capable of some clear or objective understanding of the self and of the world around it; it puts the lie to any belief in the bourgeois individualist subject. I do not see the subject in this way at all. Instead, I see individual experience as a site of exploration precisely because, as Althusser teaches, ideology is inscribed on every one of us at the level of our individual experiencing subjectivities. Through this process, each individual subjectivity is simultaneously also collective. This is clear, for example, in Andrea Brady's account of grief after 9/11; there it was precisely the perception of grief as private, the refusal to recognise what seems private as also a space of contestation, which allowed it to most easily be ceded to the politically and ideologically dominant paradigms.

Massumi's account of affect offers further detailed ways to talk about "private emotion", solipsistic and particular sensational experience, as collective, as pertaining to the relations between people, and the way these relations influence the more or less codified understandings we have of ourselves:

> Affect is transindividual. It is ontogenetically prior to the distinction between the individual understood as separate unit and the collective understood as a molar aggregate of separate units. It is 'collective' in the sense that it expresses itself in collective individuations (emergent populations of individuals whose formation is processually correlated at a distance, across their difference). (Massumi, 2015, pp. 205-6)

Our intimate affective responses are determined by the social and conceptual frameworks in which we operate; the solipsistic, 'interior', individual experience is ideological, collective, 'outside' in its ongoing formation. Yet this determining collectivity is itself constituted by the inscribing interactions between individuals who can't ever be quite wholly contained by its determinations. The individual subject is at an intersection between the private and the social, but this cycle of mutual formation is not smooth. Tensions, fractures, uneasiness between the individual and the collective become also tensions internal to the collective-individual subject – in the relationship between their affective experience and the collectively formed limits of its articulation. The individual experiencing subject – all individual experiencing subjects – become, then, not a source of resistance inherently, but rather a key battleground upon which we resist or fail.

Whilst this is true in general, it is also the case that the individual experiencing subject is an ideological battleground particularly amenable to the resistive contributions which might be made or attempted through the writing and reading of experimental poetry. This is particularly true of a kind of resistance which attempts to make positive imaginative gestures and step beyond the bounds of critical defamiliarisation, as that which I am exploring here.

> ~
>
> I'm not interested in pushing subjectivity nor historicity out of the field that I'm working in, and I believe that our relationship to subjectivity and historicity needs to be continuously transformed and translated and renewed, & the terms need to be shifted, but that material itself, I believe, absolutely ought not to be rejected from serious thinking in poetry.
>
> (Lisa Robertson, interview with Charles Bernstein, *Close Listening,* Clocktower Radio, October 23rd 2016, 26 min.)
>
> ~

I have explained in Chapter 2 that my own method will begin from my subjective experience as reader-critic, because objectivity and generality are rendered neither possible nor desirable by the Althusserian account of ideology, and because that experience – no matter how constrained by the ideology which enables it, how partial, muddied, only tentatively articulable – is the only grounds for any knowledge whatsoever. This is knowable as lived experience, but not clearly, or outside of its formative limits; an experiential position is simultaneously our best grounds for tentative, exploratory knowledge, and no sure ground at all. Individual subjects are absorbed within their ideological situation, but, precisely because ideology acts to form the subject, any attempt at resistance must begin from the subject, on a critique and re-formation of subjectivity as it is lived and experienced.

The claim I also made in the previous chapter – that kinds of writing that attempt generality, objectivity, or a voice which is divorced from subjectivity, erase the experience of marginal subjects, and perpetuate the hegemony of dominant identity categories – has specific importance for the relationship between subjectivity and poetry. The poetry I'm reading, and much of the contemporary experimental poetry which makes up the context for this study, reacts to a perception that experimental poetry was for a long time dominated by a strongly anti-subjective strain. These anti-subjective poetries followed some of the arguments I have made or quoted above – that both our language and our experience as it is articulable in that language are complicit in and reproduce our ideological situation – to the conclusion that subjective expression in general was to be abandoned. This is a key component of what David and Christine Kennedy characterised, and heavily criticised, as a "meta-poetic" approach.

The accuracy of this account, in terms of describing the variety of things that experimental poets have actually been doing, is highly debatable, but I would argue that it does correctly characterise an influential, if not dominant, strain of the theorisation of experimental poetry and the possibilities of resistance.

Examples of this anti-subjectivist strain might include the moment in 'Necessary Business' where Allen Fisher discusses the "move against the Romantic, lyric ego":

> Such a move may well be to make concise the poetic statement without a dominating drag on the consistency of the self. There is a liberation of the self in the complex of a meaningful multiplicity, provided by the interrupting shifts of different voices, which simultaneously avoids a discarding of that integrity that the becoming of the self perpetuates. (2016, p. 56)

Or else, in ‘Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry: A Manifesto’, co-written by Language poets Ron Silliman, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Steve Benson, Bob Perelman and Barrett Watten, they discuss criticisms of their work: “The individual is seen as under attack, and this is largely true: the self as the central and final term of creative practice is being challenged and exploded in our writing” (Silliman et al, 1988, p. 263). Marjorie Perloff wrote that “One of the cardinal principles—perhaps *the* cardinal principle—of American Language poetics (as of the related current in England, usually labeled ‘linguistically innovative poetries’) has been the dismissal of ‘voice’ as the foundational principle of lyric poetry” (1999, p. 405), and goes on to argue that this position “must be understood as part of the larger poststructuralist critique of authorship and the humanist subject” (1999, p. 406-7).

It’s not my intention to discuss the pros and cons of these specific positions in their fine details. The arguments made are complex and invoke a variety of distinct terms, and the poetries of those who make them often more complex, or with a more nuanced relationship to the subject than their manifesto claims might imply. Rather, I invoke them here as illustrative examples of a strain of thought, in order to point to what is much more unarguable, which is the contemporary prevalence of poetics that directly responds to a perception of an anti-subjective dominant. A sympathetic reader might rightly point out that these older poetics are generally opposed to particular, bourgeois, configurations of the authorising expressive subject or the singular artistic genius, rather than the subject per se. Yet, contemporary responses often find (also rightly, in my view) that the various disparate cases made against versions of the poetic subject share some common problems, in practice often ceding poetic subjectivity to precisely the forces and configurations which it wishes to resist. This reaction in turn brings contemporary poets to a position which explicitly demonstrates the importance of retaining some form of subjectivity – as a matter of investigation, not as a stable authority – in poetry that wishes to be radical.

~

> I've always been interested in subjectivity, *at first* because certainly in the London avant-poetry scene, when I first showed up lyric expression was a real no-no […] dogmas against the lyric subject in poetry – from Olson on – always assume that we're talking about a middle-class, usually male, usually white subject, as if the only people who could be interested in the "avant-garde" would be white posh men. It's easy to deny subjectivity when yours is dominant. There's no need to assert it because it permeates the entire atmosphere of social reality.
>
> (Sean Bonney, from Sean Bonney & Stephen Collis, 'We are an Other: Poetry, Commons, Subjectivity', *Towards. Some. Air.*, De'Ath & Wah, 2015, pp. 283-284)

~

In David and Christine Kennedy's account, the 'meta-' approach, which focussed on language itself and was criticised as unable to make positive articulations, was also and relatedly seen as unable to deal with "the energetic contestations of normativities of class, gender, nation, race and religion" (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2013, p. 40). An unwillingness to deal with subjectivity locked it off from being able to seriously engage in the work of liberation politics which are based on experienced and enforced differences between subjects interpellated into different identity categories. Where this poetics is associated, as Bonney so bluntly puts it, with the writing of "white posh men", by contrast Kennedy & Kennedy suggest "subjectivity is a key issue for women's experimental poetry in Britain," and that the authority of the individual voice is "an important act of reclamation after centuries of denial" (2013, p. 40). They quote Caroline Bergvall's claim that "experimental poets […] have been, and still are, guilty of '[dispensing] with identity-seeking when positive female identification is still culturally and politically so vulnerable'" (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2013, p. 40).[22]

The inability of a de-subjectified poetics to deal with the necessary work of recognising differing experience and following-through that recognition towards a liberatory shift in unequal conditions is further demonstrated in some arguments which flared up about experimental poetry and race around 2015. In her essay 'Not a British Subject', poet and critic Sandeep Parmar claimed: "The so-called avant-garde poetry of the United Kingdom relies on an unstable and purposeful decontextualizing of the lyric 'I,'", which "leave[s] little room for expressions of complex identity and difference" (2015, para. 5/27). In 'Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde', Cathy Park Hong goes further (referring to an American context), saying:

[22] Quoting from Caroline Bergvall, 'No Margins to this Page: Female Experimental Poets and the Legacy of Modernism', *Fragmente 5*, 1993, (pp. 30-38), p. 33

> The avant-garde's 'delusion of whiteness' is the specious belief that renouncing subject and voice is anti-authoritarian, when in fact such wholesale pronouncements are clueless that the disenfranchised need such bourgeois niceties like *voice* to alter conditions forged in history. (2014, para. 1)

To even begin to resist the particular conditions in which certain subjects are both materially and ideologically dominant over others, these writers suggest, poetry and criticism must be able to engage with individual subjectivity, rather than obscuring it in favour of a decontextualisation which has, in practice, similar effects to claims of objectivity in criticism as discussed in Chapter 2, to obscure both marginal identities and ideological formation in general, and implicitly declare certain dominant subject-positions to be general or neutral.

Keston Sutherland's 'Theses on Antisubjectivist Dogma' adds a further element to my argument that a basis in affective subjectivity is not only non-contradictory with, but is actively necessary for, a poetry that wishes to be resistive in the face of a situation in which we each are subjectified by and within our dominant ideological conditions – specifically where these conditions are dominated by bourgeois ideology. He connects "antisubjectivist poetries" as a strain of avant-garde writing most strongly with the "so-called 'conceptual' poets" (whose influence and voice spoke more loudly in 2013, when Sutherland's piece was published, than it does today), before suggesting that:

> Capital itself is the fundamental "antisubjective" force in the world and the pattern of all the others. Marxist revolutionary theory is about restoring the subject to society and abolishing the coercion that actually and in material reality desubjectivises workers. (Sutherland, 2013, para. 10)

I wish for a poetry which can, counter to this, believe in and recognise the varying experiences, desires and affects of all subjects, without reverting to a bourgeois-liberal conception of those experiences as purely internal, apolitical, sacrosanct and free from the possibility of radical critique.

Purportedly radical dismissals of the subject in poetry must partly rely on a false dichotomy between an expressive poetry of stable, pre-established notions of the self as held in readily articulable language, and a disruptive, defamiliarising language which is therefore stripped of that subjectivity. I instead posit – as a necessity for any poetry that has the potential to make serious resistive contributions, which also include positive articulations of a situation more conducive to general, equitable and liberatory flourishing – a base in the affective, experiencing subjectivity. This can cut through that false dichotomy, and work to avoid reproducing pre-existing understandings of identity within dominant ideological formations

by beginning from an acknowledgedly unstable, incoherent, non-authoritative subject. The subjective experiences towards which such a poetry would look are those that hold the most potential to gesture towards resistive alternative ways of being, and challenge the dominant ideological situation in which they exist, precisely because they are least articulable; the language and form of this poetry would be expected, therefore, to retain much of its traditionally inherited antagonistic relationship to clear articulation.

A contemporary landscape which is highly amenable to the possibility of an avant-garde practice that folds in affective subjectivity as a problem to be explored – against the backdrop of an actual or perceived previous neglect or rejection of the subject – makes up the context for the particular version of such a poetics which I articulate in detail in this thesis. This context can be seen partly in the list of influential contemporary experimental poets enlisted in the argument above: Bonney, Robertson, Brady, Sutherland, Parmar, Park Hong, Bergvall, as well as the general thrust of the Kennedy and Kennedy account of women's experimental poetry. In his contextual essay to *Towards. Some. Air.*, Peter Jaeger also articulates this move towards the resistive capacity of the expressive subject in contemporary poetics, suggesting that "the collective desire of this anthology" might be a "desire for a return to a poetics of militant sincerity, as an affect dangerous to neoliberalism" (De'Ath & Wah, 2015, p. 8). A further example of the currency of these ideas in the current landscape would be the 2016 conference 'Contemporary Poetry: Thinking and Feeling' which took place at the University of Plymouth. As well as this conference in general speaking of a contemporary interest in a poetry that deals with the possibilities at the intersection of thinking and feeling, which are closely related to those I have explored under the notion of affect, a panel on 'Post-Confessional Poetics', for example, discussed an interest in "the subject as a body that feels" (Carbery, 2016, para. 14, quoting Kat Peddie) and the idea of "embodiment as a mode of confession" (Carbery, 2016, para. 14).

I am in this thesis attempting to theorise and examine some of the potential of this strand of tentatively feeling experimental poetry, both as they are currently suggested and actualised in existing works, and as they can, through readings of those works, be posited for a future poetry which comes out of this context.

Chapter 4: Sean Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*

> as our co-ordinates are magnetised, & as our exits have been seized
> we have vanished, we heavy stones of destruction & light
>
> (Sean Bonney, '[untitled poem]', *Happiness: Poems After Rimbaud*, 2011a, p. 21)

~

Sean Bonney was based for many years in London, and latterly in Berlin, and published poetry from the 1990s right up until his death in late 2019.[23] Esther Leslie described Bonney in 2011: "He is known as somebody who spits out his work, rages as he shouts and stammers his lines. He performs his poems in the upstairs rooms of London pubs or on the streets during anti-war demonstrations" (Leslie, 2011, p. 25). Had Leslie written even a few months later, "anti-war demonstrations" might have been lightly updated to mention readings at occupations and picket lines, in the context of the "period of insurgent struggle" around that time which I have already discussed as influential on Bonney's work – that period in which, following an initial wave of intense student activism, the despondent anti-war movement came to be replaced by broad anti-austerity politics as one of the primary fronts for politically resistive activity in the UK. The biographical note to *Happiness* states that "Bonney is in complete agreement with the surrealist poet Benjamin Peret that '*the poet of today has no other choice than to be a revolutionist or not be a poet*'" (Bonney, 2011a, p. 71). In his obituary for Bonney, Will Rowe wrote: "No other contemporary work destroys so thoroughly the universe of resurgent fascism" (Rowe, 2020, para. 1).

~

> here is a landscape
> here is 'all hell',
> the distance between each line
> some kind of 'celestial snarl'
> redistributes the city
> a strange and bitter crop
> furnace / numbers / Christians
> yeh / yeh / yeh:
>
> (Sean Bonney, 'The Commons', *Letters Against the Firmament,* 2015, p. 69)

~

[23] Major works include: *Blade Pitch Control Unit* (Salt Publishing, 2005), *Baudelaire in English* (Veer Books, 2007), *The Commons* (Openned, 2011), *Happiness (Poems After Rimbaud)* (Unkant, 2011), *Letters Against the Firmament* (Enitharmon, 2015), *Our Death* (Commune Editions, 2019)

Letters Against the Firmament (Enitharmon, 2015) brings together a selection of works previously published across multiple pamphlets, as well as long extracts from the book-length poem sequences *The Commons* (Opened, 2011) and *Happiness: Poems After Rimbaud* (Unkant, 2011). Whilst these are sequences of fractured, frantic, scattered and explosive lineated poems, the majority of the rest of the book is made up of prose 'letters' which, though drawn from a range of previous publications, function to provide the book with a structuring principle as a kind of epistolary sequence, as well as a relative consistency of tone, speaking voice, form and thematic address. Whilst there is no direct indication of speaker or addressee, there is some sense of consistency. The speaker is throughout a highly politicised poet, struggling with closely related despondencies about his writing, the political situation, and his own personal and financial difficulties. "Anyway, I've totally changed my method", opens the first letter in the book (Bonney, 2015, p. 8); "Obviously I've not been getting much writing done", Bonney writes at the beginning of the second letter, which ends, "Now send me some fucking money" (2015, pp. 10-11); "I've been thinking about the riots again lately", opens another (2015, p. 37). Given that many of these pieces first appeared on Bonney's own blog, a context which posits the voice as more straight-forwardly aligned with Bonney himself, they feel situated in a reasonably continuous poet-identified speaking subjectivity. While there is less to mark out any addressee in these pieces, they are written with a tone of familiarity, as if in an ongoing conversation – "we both know what that means", Bonney writes in that same opening letter (2015, p. 8) – with a close, politically sympathetic, if a little less radical and slightly more well-off friend or family member – they are chastised, "yours was such an obvious bourgeois response" (2015, p. 10).

Thematically, these prose letters, and through a less direct form and mode, the verse poems also, are extremely close to the concerns of this thesis: they deal directly with the difficult question of the efficacy of resistive action in the face of the seemingly intractable reproduction of the current state of things, and of poetry's role in both this resistance and this reproduction. This is situated in specific events, and through the epistolary form also in the poet-speaker's immediate experience of working through these questions in practice. This includes mention of specific contemporary events: the opening three letters are all dated August 2011 and written as if from London; a discussion of riots as political resistance in the first letter becomes more concrete in the second, due to the occurrence of the biggest riots in London for several decades, in the time between their respective dates. Similarly, the poem 'Corpus Hermeticum' specifically mentions Theresa May and David Willets (Bonney, 2015,

p. 27), who were Home Secretary and Universities Minister respectively at that time. Contemporary political references of this sort, including specific dates and occasions, are littered throughout, amongst references to more historical insurrectionary events. The book's acknowledgements further situate this poetics of political struggle in the context of actual off-the-page political activity: the list of prior places of publication includes "various flyers distributed at demonstrations and other disturbances", and the poems are dedicated to "those whom, over the past years, I have struggled and fought alongside against those dogs of hell, those vampires of capital who continue to dictate the terms of our lives" (2015, p. 144).

I read these pieces, the prose letters in particular, as hybrid forms, as a poetry which is also a political poetics. They fold specific, pointed and highly sophisticated description and analysis of events and of political or theoretical problems into a form which can hold wide-ranging kinds of contradiction, doubleness and ambiguity. The poems construct a consistently dialectical thinking in which moments of vehemence are framed in a self-negating language, or clear propositions about possibilities of resistance clash against the equal truth of some antithetical fact of impossibility, alongside wildly imaginative hyperbolic treatments of political events, grotesques of violence and destruction, and glittering cosmological metaphors.

> ~
>
> And we have no foothold, and we stumble, backward and backward, hour by hour, as stars or buildings collapsing, into the abyss, of their hearts, the inheritors of the law, and we sing there, unimagined, in the ice of our silence, falling.
>
> (Sean Bonney, 'Lamentations', *Letters Against the Firmament*, 2015, p. 17)
>
> ~

My reading is in sympathy with the hybridity of these texts: I see them as containing elements of conventionally propositional content, albeit tentative and contradictory, in the development of a series of sophisticated arguments about political poetics; yet they are also highly non-sequential, and subjectively involved, with the prose letters and the verse poems alike returning to certain concerns, concepts, and language patterns, shifting and modifying them in relation to other patterns which occur in parallel or unevenly intertwine. Despite its sometime essayistic tendency, the form of the overall work is absolutely irreducible simply to concepts, to use Sutherland's terminology; it is the effect of all these manoeuvres which is their total content. The argument that follows is one I pull out of this experience, a necessarily highly incomplete account of some of the elements that are given to me in the sum total of reading

through *Letters Against the Firmament*. If it takes on an appearance of sequential argument here it is not to suggest anything so stable in the text itself, but only to elucidate patterns of connection which arise out of the text, and to give some sense of what they produce in my own reading.

What I find in Bonney's work is the possibility of a communication which doesn't aim to be generally coherent, but is based on the attempts at articulation of specific, marginal kinds of affective experience – experiences that might fall outside of that which is recuperable within the language of current ideological conditions. Bonney's work finds moments of affective extremity to act as sites of potential ideological rupture which can activate resistance, and uses the wide ranging musical and cosmological metaphor of 'harmony' to think about how these ruptures might be recognised or created in poetry and in action.

Ideology, the law, police realism, and the failure of resistance

Within the context of his own investment in political activism and agitation, Bonney's work directly engages with the problems of the enclosing matrix of ideology, with the way systems of power reproduce themselves at every level, and with the huge problems this poses for resistance. Through all its incendiary drive, the book is highly despondent about the possibilities of protest to break out of the patterns of domination and reproduction which characterise both social existence in general and the conditions of neoliberal capitalism in which we currently live, and it is through the grim reality of this despondency that it looks towards more hopeful possibilities.

'Lamentations' develops a motif around the idea of "the law", introduced on the opening page with "The law is a mouth. | Glossolalia" (Bonney, 2015, p. 16), and then followed up a few stanzas later:

> It breathes, the law, and those it protects it sings inside, and they are like flowers, chaste and tranquil as glass.
>
> It stares at us, the music of the law, and its fingers, they pluck us, as if we were strings, golden, and we are their songs, the inhabitants of the law. (2015, p. 17)

I meet this with the context of the familiar radical critique which says that the primary role of the legal system is to violently enforce capitalist relations, with particular emphasis on the inherent racism of those relations. This is my own position, and whilst Bonney doesn't make this claim explicitly, it is strongly implicit as a basic premise; the book's strident and

abundant hatred of the police particularly, extended right through to magistrates, judges and the judicial system in general, allows me to enter the text with my sense of this as a shared understanding, as a comrade in political struggle. "Here's a statistic for you, a class metaphor" Bonney writes, "not one police officer in the UK has been convicted for a death in police custody since 1969" (2015, p. 115). The final page of 'Corpus Hermeticum' opens:

> *for 'i love you' say fuck the police, for*
> *'the fires of heaven' say fuck the police, don't say*
> *'recruitment' don't say 'trotsky' say fuck the police*
> *for 'alarm clock' say fuck the police* (Bonney, 2015, p. 29)

Building to a kind of litany over another twenty-one such lines, this piece, originally published on its own as 'ACAB: A Nursery Rhyme'[24], speaks viscerally to me, to a bodily memory, as I think perhaps it does to any of us who, for all the many possible reasons, have encountered the police directly as violent antagonists.

In this context "the law" in "the law is a mouth" already suggests a kind of enforcement that contains both violence and class antagonism – the way in which the rules by which everyone is collectively bound nonetheless serve the interests of some in the subjugation of others – and associates it with language, with acts of speaking. The second iteration expands on this antagonism: there are those who the law protects, "they", and there are those it plucks, "us"; it sings inside the former, while the latter are its songs. Their different positions in relation to the song of the law might speak of the differing relations to the benefits of the law's perpetuation. Yet the relationship to the voice of the law still shares a basic structure: the concept of "the law" in either case is further abstracted away from a direct enforcement, by some upon others, and is instead cast as a discursive force which inhabits and is inhabited, which acts through and in the very voices of its subjects. I read this as having significant similarity with the Althusserian account whereby ideology perpetuates unequal material conditions through a process of subjectification which is equally formative and mystifying for all subjects, where that ideology is also reciprocally formative of the conceptual limits of language. Following Butler's earlier use of the phrase "regulatory law", I find the law as a concept here at the intersection of ideology, discourse, material oppression and the violent state.

[24] See Bonney's blog, December 2014: http://abandonedbuildings.blogspot.com/2014/12/acab-nursery-rhyme.html; or a video recording of Bonney reading the piece at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T6Czo8TIpHM

This figuration of ideological regulation is accompanied by repeated characterisations of the way that activity which aims to resist the current conditions and dominant ideological situation has a tendency towards failure, or towards folding back into reproduction of those conditions. The very first letter states that:

> The main problem with a riot is that all too easily it flips into a kind of negative intensity, that in the very act of breaking out of our commodity form we become more profoundly frozen within it. (Bonney, 2015, p. 8)

With specific reference to the all-encompassing function of the logic of capitalist commodification, Bonney describes how dominant ideological conditions structure the forms, as well as the social function and perception, of acts of resistance. The sentence which follows details some specific aspects of that function in this instance: "Externally at least we become the price of glass, or a pig's overtime" (2015, p. 8). This is not exactly Bonney's metaphor per se, but rather points to a pre-existing metaphorical logic operating within the collective conceptualisation of these rioters, and the material structures around that conceptualisation; all action is reduced to its monetary cost and its potential for shock or disruption is absorbed through those mechanisms, re-assimilated into the logic it refuses, and rendered toothless.[25]

This exemplifies a pattern, or rather an anxiety, a dismay, which pervades these texts. Moments of rebellious possibility, of ecstatic disruption, eruptions of anger, any flashpoints which rise up with real hope of resistance and appear momentarily to produce a break in the reproduction of oppressive conditions, are seen to be almost immediately rendered imaginatively impossible, unreal, distanced from the conscious present of a quickly reasserting stability the moment they are over. 'Lamentations' speaks of "yesterday's rebellions" and asks that readers "insist that it really happened, we are not at all imaginary"

[25] I hear echoes of Marxist thinking about the alienation of human labour and creativity. Under the capitalist mode of production, this activity is reduced to a commodity, both in terms of the exchange value into which such labour can be distilled through the production of goods and services, and in terms of the necessity for each individual to sell and expend their labour in order to survive. In each case, the creative potential of this labour is effectively stolen, as it becomes only the commodity value that can be extracted from it. See, for example, the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844:* "Labor produces not only commodities; it produces itself and the worker as a commodity […] Under these economic conditions this realization of labor appears as loss of realization for the workers […] How could the worker come to face the product of his activity as a stranger, were it not that in the very act of production he was estranging himself from himself? The product is after all but the summary of the activity, of production. If then the product of labor is alienation, production itself must be active alienation, the alienation of activity, the activity of alienation. In the estrangement of the object of labor is merely summarized the estrangement, the alienation, in the activity of labor itself. […] the worker's own physical and mental energy, his personal life – for what is life but activity? – [is] an activity which is turned against him, independent of him and not belonging to him. Here we have self-estrangement, as previously we had the estrangement of the thing" (Marx, 1988, pp. 71-75). In a sense, the idea that exchange value *is labour* is itself a metaphor, but one with concrete structuring power, which imposes itself forcefully upon the worker.

(Bonney, 2015, p. 18); in one of the letters dated January 31st, [2012],[26] the week of the August 2011 riots "has been compressed, buried somewhere in the distant past" (2015, p. 37). Later, explicitly despondent on a particular recent historical moment of possibility:

> It's as if the ruling class, sheer power, whatever you want to call it, whatever it's [sic] local franchise likes to call itself, had, via some kind of sadistic alchemy, taken the moment (around 2 in the afternoon) on 27th March 2011 when the Black Bloc had gone running up Oxford Street, and had basically erased that moment, replaced it with a long and uninteresting parade of babies, flags, cupcakes, brooms, victims, mummifications, the UKBA on every street corner. (2015, p. 106)

In a pithier evocation of the same logic of capitalist capture, the revolutionary vision opened up by strikes by Walmart workers becomes a mere image: "if they are not actually won, strikes will simply take their place among the racks of DVDs" (Bonney, 2015, p. 44). This is how the structures of power, representation, collective imagination and dominant ideology function to erase or recuperate potential resistive divergences.

A later letter expresses the pervasive dismay, loss, and sense of inevitable failure of examples such as this, in the form of a general problem: "protest is useless only because it stays within the limits of the already known" (Bonney, 2015, p. 33). I recall here the "already-known world" in Forrest-Thomson, where she is specifically commenting on a poetry which makes claims about the world that take as solid the pre-existing conditions and limits of that world. Reading some conceptual continuity between these usages, I find here a suggestion that action alone, without any mechanism for critiquing the terms which make action intelligible – the conceptual limits by which certain actions become possible and others barely even thinkable at all – will always reproduce those same limits and the conditions that form them. Protest actions, the implication is here, must be non-recuperable – taking forms that are not yet known, challenging the terms by which they might be comprehended, fracturing those mechanisms of conception – as well as materially disruptive.

Yet this isn't a defence of poetry, or of esoteric thinking in general, weighed against the complicity of material kinds of political activity. Poetry is treated far more harshly by Bonney; it too is subsumed by this constant, near hopeless tendency, even at hopeful moments, towards violent ideological complicity. In 'Letter on Silence' – following a "thesis on the nature of rhythm" which describes, from the point of view of a first-person direct

[26] The date given in the text is January 31st, 2011, but since the letter is in between others dated December 16, 2011, and April 5th, 2012, and refers directly to the riots of August 2011, it seems safe to assume this is an error.

witness, the police beating someone to death, as "a fairly conventional metrical system", Bonney writes:

> Poetry transforms itself dialectically into the voice of the crowd – René Ménil made that claim way back in 1944 or something. But what if it's not true. What if all it can do is transform into the endless whacks of police clubs. (2015, p. 12)

Whilst this formulation sets up an opposition between "the voice of the crowd" and "the endless whacks of police clubs", this simple opposition – and the sense it might imply of the inherently resistive nature of "the crowd", as an abstraction for non-ruling class people activated in collective resistance – is tempered, in the context of the anxiety about the efficacy of protest, by an ambiguity as to what the voice of that crowd might be. "The crowd" is not inherently oppositional, but is itself an area of antagonism. For the most part, the processes which subjectify each person within a general collectivity recruit their voices in the perpetuation of systems which do harm to most of them; those who direct their voices against those systems do so in a pre-given language, their articulated opposition unable to save them from acting as set-pieces in the cycle of reproduction. It is not only that it is difficult for poetry to convincingly represent the side of the crowd against that of the police; the crowd's voice and the police clubs, whilst engaged in a very real antagonism in the moment of striking and being struck, might also, at a structural level, be non-contradictory facets of the social whole, and poetry's voicing can no less replicate this than the crowd itself.

At the extreme end of this despondency, Bonney moves towards the conclusion of one letter by bemoaning that "none of the above is likely to help us to understand, or break out of, or even enter, the intense surges of radio emissions we're trapped inside" (2015, p. 39). I have heard responses to this work of Bonney's which find the cumulative effect of these repeated turns towards despondency to be paralysing, too deeply involved in despair to be able to point them towards a way out;[27] my experience is rather that, coming from a shared understanding and anxiety about the extreme, almost intractable difficulty which any resistance must face, these poems are desperately motivating. "What if all it can do is transform into the endless whacks of police clubs" is then one of the animating questions of the whole collection, which is never fully resolved or turned away from, not a worry that can be fully assuaged, but which

[27] I'm thinking in particular of a paper on 'Poetry and Despair' given by Joe Luna at the *Anna Mendelssohn Symposium*, University of Sussex, February 4th 2017. The talk is since unpublished, but my own notes paraphrase Luna suggesting that *Letters Against the Firmament* goes over the edge of despair, into an anxiety and self-destruction which overwhelms it. By contrast, Luna suggests that Anna Mendelssohn's work keeps just to the other, more productive side of despair.

pushes all of Bonney's thinking towards the possibility of a poetry that can do something else. It is precisely because these poems are really unsure about the capability of themselves, or any other poems, to be anything except one cultural facet of the violence endemic to the world as it is already known, that they reach harder, and more convincingly, towards some possibility that they might not always be that.

Some avenue for hope comes where this despondent question turns into the more solid suggestion: "police violence is the content of all officially sanctioned art" (Bonney, 2015, p. 12). This is at once more strident, more definitively condemning, and also offers a clarification, in the term "officially sanctioned". There must, this formulation suggests, be some poetry, or art, that can operate in ways which aren't recuperable by official sanction, and whose content is not merely police violence. These poems are not certain that they are such a poetry – that they don't perpetuate a stable theatre of dissent and opposition – and nor, in reading them, am I, but they hope to be, and ask in the doing what that poetry might look like, as they activate me in the same asking.

The work of responding to this problem begins by embedding at the level of the form of propositions that which obsessively pervades these texts at a thematic level – that recognition of all resistance's over-arching tendency towards failure. As if always within an acute awareness of the extreme difficulty of making any positive claims against current conditions that aren't complicit in those same conditions they oppose, these texts turn their own claims against themselves, disowning them and contradicting them in the process of their being claimed.

For example, a claim that death has the capacity to "[open] up a gap in social time", "from which new understandings and arrangements of social harmony may be imagined", is immediately countered, "while I'd like that to be true, it's essentially hymn-singing" (Bonney, 2015, p. 38). Another letter begins "Thanks for your list of objections. I accept most of them" (2015, p. 43). Where the former example makes a claim and then contradicts it, the latter doesn't even need the specific positive statement to be present in the text for it to accept the logic of self-contradiction, to allow for the general rule that any given statement is at least partially a failure, and to accept objection in general.

As well as through this self-contradiction, the awareness of the complicity of simply recuperable statements manifests through claims which are made in highly provisional forms, such as when the statement "the enemy is non-material, we are not" is preceded by its own

bracketing off, or disowning as mere thought or invention, with "Think stuff up:" (Bonney, 2015, p. 18); or when the suggestion of a simple symbolically subversive artistic act – playing Leadbelly's 'The Gallis Pole' on a supermarket radio – is followed with "I mean, obviously, nothing would happen. But, I dunno, let's pretend" (2015, p. 43).

I don't read this merely as an acceptance and expression of the matrix of complicity in which these texts, like all attempts at resistive expression, find themselves caught. This is also a productive response, in creating texts which, whilst heavily engaged in a descriptive, diagnostic, propositional poetics of resistance, often dealing with concrete events in relatively comprehensible language, nonetheless attempt to shift away from the reproductive function of that language. All positions are at arms' length from any stable position of author or text, and instead are tentative, mutable, attempts at formulating imaginative possibilities without reifying those positions on the terms of the already known. The thinking is dialectical, in the sense that it allows for the possibility of statements to be both true and untrue, for a statement and its opposite to be true, for resistance to be possible and impossible, action both complicit and resistive, in a contradiction which is simply a condition of living in opposition to the conditions that form us. This thinking asks then, how these oppositions can be broken through, or how the content of a thinking which simultaneously holds these contradictions might be the tentative production, in imagination at least, of a resistance that can maintain itself before the moment of recuperation.

So far, however, this picture I have painted, the despondency of Bonney's vision of the state of things, militates most strongly towards a destructive poetics, a poetics of defamiliarisation, in the sense that it paints little available possibilities beyond doubt and shattering, a wish to tear everything down. Whilst this is one of the dominant moods which runs through this work, I yet believe it steps off from its own hopelessness, as a position from which to build:

> metallic, musical screeches as systems of thought pushing away from, and through, the imposed limits of the conventional harmonic or social systems, thus clearing some ground from where we can offer counter-proposals. (Bonney, 2015, p. 34)

This move from "clearing ground" to "counter-proposals" works as a concise formulation of my distinction between the ideologically disruptive resistive action that I have described as dominant in much experimental poetry – as a necessarily preliminary step, but one of which I am also sceptical, since the ground can never be clear – and a poetics which nonetheless attempts to make some more positive imaginative and assertive gestures towards radical

alternative possibility. These become sequential stages in a resistive thinking or artistic production.

In this work then, to briefly recap, the notion of the reproductive function of realist-intelligible, readily recuperable language, which I have delineated from the point of view of radical poetics, is followed through to a ruthless stance on the efficacy of poetry as resistance. This stance is built in to the work's formal structure in the form of pervasive tentativeness, self-doubt, contradiction and dialectical argument – and also, in the same breath and using the same language, stretched from the poetry out into a critique of the efficacy and reproductive function of protest activity.

The overlapping critique of word and action is even more closely captured in the concept of "police realism", as in: "I'd like to write a poetry that could speed up a dialectical continuity in discontinuity & thus make visible whatever is forced into invisibility by police realism" (2015, p. 142).[28] I'll return to the rest of this essential statement of purpose later – for now I want to think about how "police realism" conceptually ties together much of the project of this book, or the anxiety of inefficacy, and the urgent attempts to cut through it, which is at its centre. The term contains a strong version of the claims made in the previous chapter, that simple realism is in service of the police and all they represents about the violent state and the upholding of the inequalities of capitalism, which is to say the upholding of all that is painful about current conditions. Further, it also suggests that the question of realism is not simply one of literary or artistic representation, but of action and thinking too.

~

any plausible poetics would be shattered, like a shop window

(Sean Bonney, 'Letter Against the Firmament', *Letters Against the Firmament*, 2015, p. 113)

the protests did what in relation to Fucking realism

(Sean Bonney, 'Corpus Hermeticum', *Letters Against the Firmament*, 2015, p. 27)

~

The need to break out of the "already-known", as my reading of the failures of protest and poetry has already suggested, argues for the reciprocal necessity of both protest and writing to actively disrupt the limits of this 'realism' in their efforts at resisting the ideological and

[28] He also uses the term "police reality" as a description of poetry which is diametrically opposite to that of Anna Mendelssohn (Bonney, 2011b, p. 17)

material forces which oppress. That is, kinds of thinking which can actively disrupt the conceptual limits of police realism, as experimental poetry might hope to do, are reciprocally dependent upon the hard work of resistance 'in the streets' – of protest, riot, industrial action, community organising, direct action, etc – in crafting possibilities for resistance which intertwine the material and ideological. Bonney's work seeks protest which stretches out of the known forms, and poetry which is outside of the bounds of that which can be officially sanctioned; the two, this work demands, must be mutually informing in a project of both imagining and actualising resistive ways of acting and being that might avoid total recuperation, and in doing so have some chance of altering social relations for the better. This reciprocity is expressed in positing a poetics of riot, which is also a poetics *as* riot:

> Imagine that you had a favourite riot, one that you loved. Tottenham. Millbank. Chingford. Walthamstow. I like that last one, but only for sentimental reasons. It's a stupid question, but maybe that will help you see what I mean when I use the word 'poetics' or 'poetry'. What was Marx referring to when he was talking about the 'poetry of the future', for example? (Bonney, 2015, p. 113)

A poetry which doesn't "transform into the endless whacks of police clubs" might seek to reach towards embodiment in active forms of intervention; it is the same thinking which allows us to conceptualise the forms of transformative poetics and transformative action.

This merging can be seen in the language with which Bonney describes protest action as he might wish it to be. A liberal protest-spectacle might hope instead, at its best, to be "a fast alteration in the structural scansion at the city's core" – though this positive vision is tempered, still seen as caught in enclosing systems of power, since "the hidden contours of our songs are still a nasty little rich kid" (Bonney, 2015, p. 34). Elsewhere Bonney describes a Walmart strike in which "the structure of the supermarket is kept in place, but all of a sudden the base astrological geometry of the place is revealed as simplistic, fanatic and rectilinear" (2015, p. 44). The strike takes on an operation similar to that of Denise Riley's understanding of the exposing force of ironic repetitions in writing, which demonstrate the instability and historicity of conceptual and linguistic formulations that previously have seemed immovable or natural.

'Letter Against the Firmament' posits the possibility of a "counter rhythmic interruption", "where language folds and stumbles for a second, like a cardiac splinter or a tectonic shake. Again, a cracked metaphor, an abstraction or a counter-earth" (Bonney, 2015, p. 116). From the idea of an interruption, a splintering, a defamiliarisation, we move to the more positive

alternative possibility of a "counter-earth", with its connotations of an alternative, oppositional possible world. Bonney goes on: "that 'counter-rhythmic interruption' refers, at the same time, to a band of masked-up rioters ripping up Oxford St." (2015, p. 116). Protest action, at its best, is seen as containing moments of radical conceptual fracture and revelation, a kind of embodied revolutionary thinking, in which the act of temporarily breaking out of the routines of repetition and habitual movement or activity, breaking through the normally stable dictates of the literal law, produces a counter-analysis, opens up the imaginative possibility of alternative organisations of the social world, in the active attempt to enact or bring them about.[29]

We have seen already that these moments of radical possibility are depicted as readily recuperable, having this conceptually and materially de-stabilising force sapped from them as soon as they have subsided. Bonney here sees (his) poetry as having some capacity to enact in textual form similar conceptual fractures, or, in its descriptions and discussions of past moments of rebellion, to be able to activate or actualise these impulses and potentialities, in the experience of the reading subject. The hope is always that such poetic re-activation of these potentialities might move towards making possible further, more effective and long-lasting instances of such fracturing moments, which are both materially and conceptually disruptive:

> As if there was nothing to say about what it was in Rimbaud's work – or in avant-garde poetry in general – that could be read as the subjective counterpart to the objective upheavals of any revolutionary moment. (2015, p. 140)

Successful and meaningful revolutionary change must be both subjective and objective, in the sense of each being both ideological and material, as the two are intertwined. It is a poetry

[29] In all of this discussion, of the interrelation of protest action and art as methods of re-imagining the world, we can see the influence of Situationism on Bonney's thinking (which he has talked about repeatedly, as in e.g. bombmagazine.org/articles/sean-bonney/). See, for example, the opening of Guy Debord's 'The Situationists and the New Forms of Action in Art and Politics': "The Situationist movement can be seen as an artistic avant-garde, as an experimental investigation of possible ways for freely constructing everyday life, and as a contribution to the theoretical and practical development of a new revolutionary contestation. From now on, any fundamental cultural creation, as well as any qualitative transformation of society, is contingent on the continued development of this sort of interrelated approach" (Debord, 1963, para. 1). Or else, we can almost hear Bonney's voice here, on the matter of subverting the city: "Unitary urbanism is […] the living critique of cities by their inhabitants: the permanent qualitative transformation, made by everyone, of social space and time.[…] On an immediate practical level, experimentation with a new positive distribution of space and time cannot be dissociated from the general problems of organisation and tactics confronting us. Clearly a whole *urban guerilla* will have to be invented. We must learn to subvert existing cities, to grasp all the possible and the least expected uses of time and space they contain. Conditioning must be thrown in reverse" (Clark et al, 1967, para 19).

that can directly involve itself in this reciprocal correspondence which Bonney envisages, demands, wishes against his more hopeless impulses to see, to conjure.

~

you will have shimmering
a language of the barricades

(Sean Bonney, 'The Commons', *Letters Against the Firmament*, 2015, p. 73)

~

So Bonney's work is deeply invested in an analysis of conditions which rules out a resistive language of general coherence, a language which reproduces the already known forms of police realism; what then, might a language of the barricades look like?

To trace how Bonney's poetry works to activate the impulses to revolutionary fracture and the possibility of action, to examine what a counter-proposal looks like in this framework, I will move in turn through three key areas of conceptualisation that emerge from the book. First, its handling of the question of communication, which lays the groundwork for a discussion of the concept of harmony, and finally the operation of affective recognition in these texts.

Communication

My conception of how communication works or is envisaged to work in these texts begins with its negative expression, in a clear and pervasive sense of the extreme difficulty, or impossibility, of communication which results from inequalities of power, and the epistemological boundaries they impose: "The rioters are speaking in perfect English. It's the middle-class, the magistrates, and you, who are all talking some weird, ignorant slang" (Bonney, 2015, p. 10). This is a claim that makes incomprehensibility not a general condition but rather suggests that people with differently situated identities, experiences, class or other positions in relation to capital are rendered mutually incomprehensible to one another by their radically different perspectives and experiences of the world, and in relation to being unequally served by the reproductive function of ideology. This is then a statement of allegiance, with the voice of the crowd of rioters as directly opposed to their class antagonists. Yet this allegiance, and the collective understanding and sympathy it moves towards, relies on the conception of 'the crowd' already under suspicion, as if a rioter miraculously had access to a non-ideological view of the world.

However, Bonney is here developing a re-figuration of the concept of understanding. In 'Letter on Harmony and Sacrifice': "I was talking to a friend a couple of days ago about what 'understanding' might actually mean. 'Understanding', he said, 'is precisely what is incompatible with the bourgeois mind'" (Bonney, 2015, p. 37). This statement has more of a tone of political-theoretical diagnosis, as a kind of complementary inverse of the claim I earlier invoked from Keston Sutherland that an understanding which reduces all to mere concepts is a key characteristic of bourgeois thinking. Here the claim might be, not incompatible necessarily with Sutherland's, that the bourgeois subject – the individual subjectified under bourgeois ideology, perhaps, but also the thinking of one subjectified specifically from the dominant position within that ideology, to benefit most strongly from its being upheld – is primed to only be capable of forms of understanding that are fundamentally impoverished and reductive. The bourgeois thinking which suggests that the world can be rationally and objectively understood, by the free-thinking individual, is not understanding of any use at all to those who wish to see a more liberatory set of relations.

'Letter on Harmony and Sacrifice' follows the above lines with a digression into Lindsay Anderson's film *If,* in which a school headmaster who "thinks he's such a liberal", attempts to assuage an act of rebellion with "I understand you", and is, in response, shot in the head. Bonney parses this: "that bullet is his understanding, plain and simple" (2015, p. 37). Particular kinds of understanding, collective ideas, can themselves be violence; the bourgeois form of understanding both posits and depends upon the idea of conceptual and subjective commonality which serves the actual individualisation of the subject, by ignoring ideological formation, and naturalising the antagonisms by which the materials of life are unevenly distributed. This is what Bonney rejects when he excludes understanding from the bourgeois subject.

> ~
>
> Within this reactionary net the poem is negation, which simply means that it is false. A hopeless omen that longs to rupture the tyrannical banality of the 'true'.
>
> (Sean Bonney, 'Letter on Harmony and Crisis', *Letters Against the Firmament,* 2015, p. 45)
>
> ~

One response to the attempt to be folded into this form of understanding, recruited by the bourgeois collectivity, is violence, and Bonney's poems are by no means opposed to that. But the poems themselves make another response. Their statements of allegiance, uninterested in

claiming truth value, not only pick sides, but also make a claim for a different kind of thinking. Understanding is not completely ruled out for the bourgeois subjects to whom Bonney's poetry opposes itself. 'Letter on Riots and Doubt' asks about "the possibility of a poetry that only the enemy could understand" (Bonney, 2015, p. 8). Understanding is invoked not as a matter of clarity, of an objective truth independent of the individual mind and their own experiences, agendas, subjectivity, etc; it is a directional, always politicised battleground, a discursive weapon in a struggle for or against power. The question is not which party in a material antagonism has access to clear understanding, but who, and in whose interest, one wishes to understand.

It is in this context, of directional, partisan understanding, alongside the already established critique of reproductive realism, that I read the emphatic moment of allegiance to the necessity of some form of communication:

> For the vast majority of people, including the working class, the politicised workers and students are simply incomprehensible. Think about that when you're going on about rebarbative avant-garde language. Or this: simple anti-communication, borrowed today from Dadaism by the most reactionary champions of the established lies, is worthless in an era when the most urgent question is to create a new communication on all levels of practice. (Bonney, 2015, p. 141)

This is one of the most direct and clear statements of the book, which appears in the final letter, 'Letter on Poetics'. The placement and title of this 'letter' further emphasises the sense that its claims operate as something of a conclusion, or a synthesis of the problematics opened up in the preceding texts, and pushes the future-oriented poetics which is the culmination of the work.

Its rejection of "simple anti-communication" is couched specifically in terms of a rejection of "rebarbative avant-garde language". It characterises an anti-communicative position as both reactionary – by implication because of its fundamental, constitutional inability for oppressed people to understand and be understood – and as directly related to avant-garde practice. I might take this as an explicit rejection of those kinds of radically-intentioned poetics which respond to the impossibility of clear language that is not complicit in the ideological terms of its comprehensibility by turning towards a poetry of defamiliarisation, instability, and openness, as values in themselves.[30]

[30] Interview comments from Bonney might be taken as something of a counterpoint: "I don't think of poetry, 'difficult' or otherwise, as elitist at all. […] in Britain at least there's historically an anti-intellectualism that calls anything that's complex, or a little difficult to understand on first hearing, elitism. In the Blair era, 'elitism'

"A new communication on all levels of practice" must be a communication which isn't about stable concepts within a pre-existing framework of bourgeois recuperability. Rather, these texts suggest and attempt to open up kinds of communication based on explicitly politicised understandings and misunderstandings – understanding as solidarity. This is the basis of a communication that might actually tell us something about the world in a way which is not claiming truth, but is allowing us to make ethical and political choices about how we might live differently, or how we might shatter the condition of living, in ways which open up towards radical difference.

But still the question remains, what might a form of communication which can offer insight, diagnose social problems, push towards radical ways of being and organising, without folding instantly back into complicity with the conditions it opposes – what might this look like, how might this communication be constituted?

~

> We can still understand poetic thought, in the way I, and I hope you, work at it, as something that moves counter-clockwise to bourgeois anti-communication. Like all of it. Everything it says. We can engage with ideas that have been erased from the official account. If it's incomprehensible, well, see above. Think of an era where not only is, say, revolution impossible, but even the thought of revolution. […] But remember, most poetry is mimetic of what some square thinks is incomprehensible, rather than an engagement with it.
>
> (Sean Bonney, 'Letter on Poetics', *Letters Against the Firmament*, 2015, p. 142)

Harmony

Part of an answer to this – the possibility of a communication which is radically different from the realist, recuperable communication which directly reproduces the already known – emerges through the concept of "harmony", as it is developed in detail through the course of this book, particularly across the six 'Letters on Harmony'.

---

basically became a synonym for 'criticising the government'. It's so obviously repressive, that way of thinking, and ultimately very right wing. I read an article in a performance poetry magazine a few years back, where somebody or other was going on about how the simplistic crap they were writing was stuff that the 'working class could understand'. That's the same logic as The Sun newspaper, all the consumerist media really – clever, educated people talking down to people – they think proles are thick, basically, and they want to keep it that way. It's stupid – especially when you think about how so many of the really important avant-garde artists Britain has produced, Tom Raworth and Derek Bailey, for example, have been from the working class" (Bonney, Toda, Eltringham, McDermott, 2011, para. 25). I take Bonney's criticism of "simple anti-communication" as importantly distinct from the simple distaste for language which is 'inaccessible'.

At the centre of this concept is a double meaning, where "harmony" is taken often simultaneously or with some degree of ambiguity as referring either to the arrangement of parts in the formation of a unified whole, or to combinations of musical notes. Around this doubleness, Bonney develops a constellation of ideas which bring together thinking about the relation between ideology and what I have been thinking of as non-recuperable meaning-forms.

'First Letter on Harmony' focusses on the figure of "a judge who, every seven days, pays a prostitute to re-enact the crimes of those he has sentenced that week, while he looks on and masturbates" (Bonney, 2015, p. 32). My initial instinct is to read this as a psycho-sexual act in which the various power dynamics and social causes that produce its possibility are internalised and expressed by the judge, as one of the individuals recruited in the direct perpetuation of those conditions through the state apparatus: the relationship of the judiciary to power and capital; how that in turn, as it exists within patriarchy, produces the power/money relation to the sex worker; the place of power imbalances within heteronormative sexuality; the sadistic nature of the exercise of power and abjection over those, most often structurally disadvantaged by, for example, poverty, race or lack of access to education, who are deemed outside the law. I am forced to hold this analysis of mine as a latent presence, as Bonney interrupts that expectation with his own counter-reading of this image, not as an expression, but as a symbolic action which in itself reaches out into the social world:

> what if he was producing these emissions quite deliberately, as the source of a central vibration through which the judiciary could impose a new and extremely rigid analysis of the city, within which a sterile atmosphere could be maintained for the propagation of a limited number of official sentences (say, for example, seven) from which all possible thought could be derived. Sex magic, yeh. All of that ludicrous shit. Don't think I'm turning into one of those wankers in David Icke masks: in terms of creation myths it's a fairly traditional narrative structure. What the judge probably doesn't realise, however, is that each of his particle jets will necessarily invoke an adjunct sentence, which while in its weak form may only be manifest in certain cries of disbelief and fear, in extreme conditions may – and that's a very big 'may' – may ultimately manifest as a ring of antiprotons, otherwise known as attack dogs. (2015, p. 32)

The disparaging reference to arch-conspiracy theorist David Icke swiftly disowns the conspiratorial elements of this image, which tend towards seeing power as emanating from the specific and conscious intentions of a small cabal of rich people, as opposed to coming from diffuse structures of ideological and material reproduction which are as opaque to those

people who they benefit as the rest of us. This becomes an image instead for this diffuse way in which coercive, oppressive and unequal systems self-perpetuate, merging the material imposition of state apparatuses with the constraint and reproduction which operates at the level of discourse, in, for example, the pun on "official sentences"; as this private sexual act is an act of mimetic representation, and is in turn made into an image, or "creation myth" within this text, it also speaks of the role of cultural representations in ideological reproduction. The process of diffuse action through discourse or cultural representations is described in terms of "emissions", "vibration", "particle jets", as kinds of beam or transmission as radio or sound waves; this begins the motif that connects the musical sense of 'harmony' with the sense of harmony as the overall relation of parts, in the effect of the specific cultural event or reiteration through which the overall structure is continually re-manifested.

We also see here that ideological determination is necessarily always contested, producing its own fractures and refutations, which can be the source of resistance – just as described by Riley and Butler earlier – in the form of "cries of disbelief and fear", which rise up as the germ of resistance in response to the impositions of the judge.

'Second Letter on Harmony' develops this connection between the musical and relational sense of harmony in more detail, beginning from a reading of Pythagorean harmony, via Lenin reading Hegel. This is described as "a perfect cosmology, a hierarchy built on scalar realities that justifies social conditions on earth, where everybody is in their place, and nobody is able to question the beauty and perfection of these relationships." It goes on:

> The gravitational pull that holds the entire system together is an untruth, but an untruth with the power to kill. But if this untruth is the site of justification and corporate (i.e. ritual) slaughter it's also the site, magnetic as hell, of contention and repulsion, which can transgress its own limits until something quite different, namely, crime, or impossibility, appears. (Bonney, 2015, p. 33).

The Pythagorean system of thought becomes here an analogy for the operation of ideology on social relations, and the maintenance of harmful conditions by conceptual limits which are themselves not 'true'. That is, rather than thinking of this "untruth with the power to kill" as a simple falsehood by a verifiable objective standard, since its untruth still maintains such conceptual and material force, since it is stable within the system, I read it as more of a negative truth, belying the emptiness of any notion of that objective, verifiable truth, whilst at once operating with an effective claim to truth value. I think of these untruths as something like Althusser's ideological "obviousnesses" (1971, p. 172), or else, as intractable metaphors

which have a powerful structuring force on our lives. For example, we encountered earlier the metaphorical logic of the commodity – a rioter reduced to "the price of glass, or a pig's overtime" – which is precisely the kind of forceful untruth that routinely justifies corporate slaughter, and yet which cannot be simply denied.

This relation to Pythagorean cosmology strongly foregrounds the sense of harmony as a particular cosmological system, as the social whole conceived in relation to these kinds of transmissions and structures of signals that hold it together. As before, this structure is seen as necessarily contested, holding within itself the possibility of fracture, transgression, newness, now in the form of "crime, or impossibility", that which is rendered outside of the law, which is impossible but which yet might occasionally occur, or be glimpsed at.

If the conceptual system that holds the overall social structure together is to do with the gravitational pull of its central metaphors, then one of the forms this contestation takes in Bonney's work is through a system of counter-metaphors. Earlier we saw poetic interruption take the form of "a cracked metaphor, an abstraction or a counter-earth" (Bonney, 2015, p. 116); in 'Second Letter' Bonney proposes "poetic realities as counter-earths" (2015, p. 33). "Counter-earth" here comes directly from Pythagorean cosmology, describing a second Earth whose precisely mirroring orbit keeps it always hidden from view on the far side of the Sun; it is not then only an alternative, unknown Earth, as I read it earlier, but is also a second celestial body whose weight and mass balances against the first. It can become here then the latent presence of contestation in any ideological enforcement, the counter-balancing metaphor or untruth around which less deadly systems might be constructed, just as the symbolic and yet powerful "sex magic" act of the judge produces its "adjunct sentence", an oppositional symbolic presence.

> ~
>
> As in, metaphor as class struggle, also. As decoration for some unspeakable filth, on the one hand, or as working hypothesis on the other. A jagged rip through all pronouns. The thunder of the world, a trembling, a turbine. Cyclical desperation, clusters of walls.
>
> (Sean Bonney, 'Letter Against the Firmament', *Letters Against the Firmament*, 2015, p. 114)
>
> ~

"Harmony" itself here is precisely this kind of counter-metaphorical construction. It slips ambiguously between multiple definitions and frames which can't be reconciled within a rational, realist thinking, but which it holds together at once in my mind as I read, opening up

connections and possibilities that can become the basis for a wide-ranging new thinking about the structure of the social whole and the ways its intractably solid structuring metaphors might be broken through. This is why Bonney's use of this concept becomes so useful for me in this thesis.

From the cosmological then, harmony slips towards its musical sense with: "while we know we live within a criminal harmony, we also know we are held helplessly within it as fixed subjects, or rather as objects, even cadavers, of an alien music" (Bonney, 2015, p. 33). The slippage from "criminal harmony" to "alien music" uses the central semantic ambiguity on "harmony" to suggest that there is some close relation – already linked through the idea of transmission or vibration – between the social whole and music. The claim that the latter can act on the former becomes one of the central claims of this piece. This can be seen in a fuller look at one of the above quotations: "Music as a slicing through of harmonic hierarchies etc, poetic realities as counter-earths where we can propose a new stance in which we can see and act on what had previously been kept invisible etc. Ourselves, for one thing" (2015, p. 33); and another of the piece's clearest moments, also discussed some pages earlier, the "metallic, musical screeches as systems of thought pushing away from, and through, the imposed limits of the conventional harmonic or social systems" (2015, p. 34). There is a similar movement between scales in the account of John Coltrane's *Live in Seattle* record as "one of the sonic receptacles of a revolutionary moment that was never realised", and the specific moment where someone "blows something through a horn that forces a dimensional time-loop through the already seismic constellations set up within the music's harmonic system" (2015, p. 35). There is a slippage between "harmonic hierarchies", the "harmonic or social systems", and "music's harmonic system." The same language is used to describe the totality of social or cosmological relations, and the relations between elements in a piece of music – the musical relations become a miniature of the whole.

This linguistic mirroring, slippage and doubleness around "harmony" has embedded within it the suggestion of certain claims about the relationship between music and the social structure in general. As dissonance, disharmony and shock disrupt expectations of musical form and structure – that is, break through the limits of their harmonic system – they also create a dissonance in the harmonic, or ideological, forces which hold together and perpetuate the material relations of the social whole – or perhaps refer to pre-existing dissonances and conflicts, such as the failures of interpellation described by Denise Riley, or the inherent "contention and repulsion" which Bonney describes as produced by the processes of

ideological untruth that hold the cosmological system together. Taking a step further than the idea of counter-metaphor as a resistive force, music is proposed as a non-recuperable system of thought which is capable of disrupting imposed limits and proposing alternative positions – as a radically different kind of knowledge-transmission to the recuperable language whose coherence is formed and directly forming of its ideological limits. The last of the 'Letters on Harmony', 'Letter on Harmony and Work', describes Cecil Taylor's *Unit Structures* record as "a kind of musical analysis of bourgeois history as a network of cultural and economic unfreedom" (Bonney, 2015, p. 46). It makes musical analysis a positive counterpoint of semantic knowledge, with the implicit claim to the meaning content of the musical, in its inconclusive final remarks: "I read an interview with Cecil Taylor, and he said he didn't play notes, he played alphabets. That changes things. Fuck workfare" (2015, p. 47).

The content of these moments of musical dis-harmony is explicitly associated with the earlier idea of the latent, obfuscated or swiftly erased disruptive potential of particular events when the Coltrane piece is seen as a "sonic receptacle" of an unrealised revolutionary moment. The musical moment of fracture isn't merely analogous to the moment of potential social fracture here; the two kinds of non-recuperable content share more closely than just by analogy the subjective and affective experience of fracture.

As the vibratory emissions of the judge earlier produced counter-vibrations as "cries of disbelief and fear" – inarticulate affective responses in the moment of pain for those whom the conditions of life directly disadvantage, as the glimpse of the latent possibility of resistance – there is towards the end of the 'Second Letter' a notion of "musical emotions", as an irreverent modification of Wordsworth: "the violent conflicts of our age make it impossible to recollect musical emotions in tranquillity" (Bonney, 2015, p. 35). The suggestion then is that it is where our reactions to music operate at an emotive or pre-linguistic level that they are best able to register the feeling of dissonance with the ideological limits in which we live and are formed, or to evoke the radical shift in analysis, coherence and possibility which opens up and then quickly becomes unnameable again in the unsuccessful moment of revolutionary upheaval.

This can be read in terms of the relation I've already posited between non-recuperable, formal kinds of meaning, and the infra-linguistic affective experience. Ideological reproduction is seen as fractured through these cries, through these emotive moments that are also counter-transmissions, which is to say, through aesthetic moments also. The fractures in ideology are

affective-aesthetic, as represented specifically by the emotional response to challenging and dissonant music – the infra-linguistic response to (and content of) non-recuperable form – as moments of generative difference of feeling.

Non-reified affective recognition

The basis for a counter-proposal, then – for forms of communication which produce or refer to breaks in the binding of the system of criminal harmony that holds all of our actions and folds all towards complicity – is partly in the notion of harmony, which is to say, non-recuperable forms of content, dissonances which shatter our relations, which are radically disruptive. The focus of this on the infra-linguistic reaction, and the analogy of the musical screech to the cry of disbelief, brings me to the culmination of my sense of what the meaningful content, the propositional possibility, of such a form of communication might be, through the operation in these texts of affective recognition.

I've already described the way in which the form of these letters involves rooting them in a dramatized experience of the writer figure, and the way their theoretical and political insights are all filtered through specific subjective experience, as well as Bonney's own presence and investment in instances of contemporary political agitation. Bonney directly describes this highly subjective filtering of perspective: "I've had to filter this idea through my own position: a stereotypical amalgam of unwork, sarcasm, hunger and a spiteful radius of pure fear" (2015, p. 46). Through this basis in subjectivity, Bonney's texts portray points of affective rupture or extremity as potentially illuminating or activating moments for resistance – in a reciprocal relationship with the portrayal of moments of protest, riot or disruption as containing the capacity for affective-ideological fracture.

In 'Letter Against the Firmament', Bonney describes the radically de-stabilising shift in his perception which results from his experience of unemployment:

> I think I'm becoming slightly unwell. I've developed a real fear of the upstairs neighbours. Every morning they emit a foul stench of bitumen and bitter, moral superiority as they stomp through the corridor on their way to work. A while ago I told you I rarely leave the house, now I can't, they've spun a web of 9 to 5 self-worth across the door […] I don't know if this is normal behaviour, if anyone else feels the city as a network of claws and teeth […] I'm probably beginning to smell. In fact I know I am: a thick cloud of inaudible noises from upstairs, dank growlings from somewhere outside the ring of the city. […] Each evening I hear them, walking around, stomp-stomp-stomping, tap-tap-tapping out their version of social reality on

> their floor, on my ceiling. It's terrible. And since I can't even leave the flat anymore, the ceiling might as well be the whole of the sky, and they're tapping out new and brutal constellations. (2015, p. 108)

Here the unwellness which results from being unemployed – what might be recognised as depression and social isolation, in a situation likely to include material deprivation, alongside an abjecting antagonistic relationship to dominant social values of the relationship between wage labour and social value or self-worth – creates a new affective perception of "the city as a network of claws and teeth". The neighbours' own social reality is enforced through the harmonics of the sounds they make on the floor above, but these fail to create a mutual social reality in which Bonney's speaker can participate, becoming instead "inaudible noises" which speak of the newly revealed violence of the city and the modes of living rendered real and necessary within it, through their relation to Bonney's own state of affective instability, of pain.

This is one of the strongest moments of actual affective recognition which I feel in reading this book. During my own experience as an unemployed benefit claimant, I too felt the city to be something like "a network of claws and teeth", and people who I could observe to live their lives within the sanctioned and enforced rhythms of productivity, which I had temporarily been rendered outside of, seemed aggressively alien, incomprehensible to me. Of course, as my wellbeing depended on it and my privilege allowed it, I eventually found work, and my unstable and antagonistic relationship to the city once again became, to a large extent, stable, functional, reproductive. This yet alludes to a shared, if temporary, experience of instability in relation to the ongoing reproduction of capitalist relations.

This moment of direct affective recognition in my own reading brings into focus for me some more general claims which these texts make about the resistive illuminating and destabilising possibility of painful events and the affective responses which emerge from them. Bonney writes of "The social truths that only those who live far below the hunger line have access to" (2015, p. 40); and later

> The perceptual shifts related to hunger as a means of interpretation. Hunger as the beginning of thought […] Maybe we can use it, this hunger, this coded swarm. To get a sense of what the murderously rotational teeth of a key, for example, actually mean. To understand what eating actually is. (2015, pp. 95-6)

As well as hunger, the experience of proximity to death is described in similar terms, as having the capacity to open up the subjective relationship to dominant social and political relations in such a way as to create opportunity for fracture and difference:

> According to some cosmological systems […] when anyone dies – be that Margaret Thatcher or Mark Duggan – they take their place among what are called 'invisibles', traditionally opening up a gap in social time, a system of antimatter in which nobody can live, but from which new understandings and arrangements of social harmony may be imagined. Music, for example. (Bonney, 2015, p. 38)

I have used extracts from this quotation before, to show how it was retrospectively cancelled out, as "essentially hymn-singing". Yet even read against the likelihood that on any given occasion no revolutionary incident will arise, the articulated and implicit possibilities that the dead, or the affective presence of the dead as felt by those still living, might act on and through us, remain present as part of an ongoing conceit in these poems. These "new understandings and arrangements of social harmony", and the "gap in social time", directly cross out of the cosmological metaphor and into resistive possibilities in the experience of those who are left behind, in an account of a woman whose son has died, she believes, at the hands of the police. She speaks at a public meeting after the riots of August 2011, and Bonney's account depicts her own sense of loss, grief and anger directly translating into a contentious position of support for those riots: "her voice cracked a little and then she said 'and as for the riots, I thought they were fair enough, and I think there should be more of them, and more, and more'" (2015, p. 115.) Her own affective fracture at the loss of her son, and its circumstances – like the noisy experience of grief proposed by Andrea Brady – pushes her to a new and antagonistic relationship with her surroundings, which translates relatively simply here as the incitement to riot, and in reading this affecting moment, I feel a reaching out in empathy to the story of her loss which is also a reaching out towards her urgently fractured perception.

Hunger, unemployment, bereavement, all here become kinds of experientially based, felt critiques, of capital, of state violence, of the conditions which bring about these hurts. They are affective knowledge which opens up into an alternative relation, not out of a conceptual insight but out of an affective rupture.

The kind of emotional or affective recognition I find here is radically different from such a notion as it is more conventionally based in bourgeois-realist expressivity. I believe the latter predominantly finds its recognition through recourse to a pre-existing intelligible language of emotions which reproduces pre-existing formulations of possible emotions and their functions. Recalling the idea of "musical emotions", I would suggest that what is encountered here is rather a recognition based on divergent, incoherent or not yet coherent – sub-threshold, in Massumi's terms – affective experiences, those experiences which are marginalised within

hegemonic discourses and power relations, those affects which can be felt but not clearly recognised, which might primarily be expressed through cries of pain or disbelief, through noise, which push us towards not-yet-intelligible selves and ways of being.

I think of this distinction as being between what I might call reified and non-reified affective recognition, since the bourgeois form of recognition deals in and reproduces static, universalised, reified articulations of emotional experience. Non-reified affective recognition begins, by contrast, from a critique of the possibility of any recognition at all – and seeks a way to begin to build a basis for resistance from communication which aims towards infra-linguistic affects, as a basis for solidarity across shared marginal experience, for a resistive subjective commonality in difference, (self-)obscurity, and the unknowing of ideological mystification.

A fuller version of the quotation from which I took the concept of police realism goes:

> I'd like to write a poetry that could speed up a dialectical continuity in discontinuity & thus make visible whatever is forced into invisibility by police realism, where the lyric I – yeh, that thing – can be (1) an interrupter and (2) a collective, where direct speech and incomprehensibility are only possible as a synthesis that can bend ideas into and out of the limits of insurrectionism and illegalism. (Bonney, 2015, p. 142)

This is another key statement of poetic purpose that comes towards the end of the 'Letter on Poetics' which ends the book – I take it as summarising and containing much of what I have been trying to describe as coming from my reading of Bonney, whilst only being legible on these terms as a result of those readings which precede it.

Here, Bonney specifically states his wish to heighten existing fractures in the ongoing production of social relations – "continuity in discontinuity" – through poetry. We see "the lyric I", the specific deployment of subjectivity within the poem, as the locus for this action. This subjective basis might simultaneously represent or evoke the interruption of continuity of oppressive dominant conditions, and also reach out, past simple interruption, into the possibility of "a collective", some sense of common understanding and solidarity which is built through and on this interruption. The possibility for a collective that might hope to be founded on interruption rather than reproduction, to emphasise the continuity in discontinuity, the resistive underside or unease produced by the affective experience of rubbing up against the limits of ideological subjectification, is necessarily intertwined with the synthesis of "direct speech" and "incomprehensibility", with a speech which is both, which engages in direct communication of that which is not, or is not yet, comprehensible.

The important development here, of an aspect which has been latent in my discussion so far, is in the wish to "make visible whatever is forced into invisibility", or, to "engage with ideas that have been erased from the official account" (Bonney, 2015, p. 142); as in a quotation invoked earlier "poetic realities" analogous to music were seen as "counter-earths where we can propose a new stance in which we can see and act on what had previously been kept invisible" (2015, p. 33). The function of communication, of affective recognition built on harmonic signals, emissions which can't be reduced to pre-existing concepts, might be taken as a commitment to bringing otherwise unnameable but existing experiences into language – to recuperate the previously non-recuperable, attempting to build through it the grounds for alternative realities rather than folding it into current reality, that the landscape of intelligibility might itself be altered.

This is seen to function in contrasting ways: hopefully productive, bringing new or latent possibilities into language in order to bring about their collective existence, but also critical and revelatory, articulating oppressive ideological and material processes which exist but are hidden or obfuscated, that they might be better countered – understood, altered, destroyed. The above example is followed immediately with:

> That sounds great, absolutely fucking tip top, until you remember that, equally, the harmony of the money fetish is that of the commodity fetish only now become visible and dazzling to our eyes, i.e. we don't have any kind of monopoly on harmonic invisibility. (Bonney, 2015, p. 33)

What are invisible and incomprehensible, rendered outside the limits of legibility maintained in the processes of ideology, are both the affective divergences which offer up alternative possibilities of being, and also the actual acting assumptions of our ideological situation, the conceptions which maintain it and yet are rendered natural, obvious, indisputable. Whilst we can never clearly recognise these acting assumptions, the work of shifting them towards something better must involve an active attempt to bring them into communicable discussion alongside the work of articulating something radically different.

"Insurrectionism and illegalism" brings me, finally, back to "crime, or impossibility" as it appeared earlier. Through all of this then, Bonney turns us towards what is outside and rendered illegible by the law. The sounds, affects and forms of anger, hunger, pain, and activation in the moment of insurrection, bring in some hope – where something creeps in through what is rendered impossible as a negative, and becomes instead crime, illegalism, that which is im-possible, as a positive – by which I mean, that which takes its resistive hope, its

hope to break through the hard limits of the ideological formation of possibility, precisely by being a possibility which is outside the as-yet-recognisable limits of the possible. Bonney posits a poetry of subjective communication of the active presence in the felt experience of that which is impossible. His poetic formulations aim, like music, to both evoke, and to be, those transmissions which shift the reading subject's relationship to the world as they recognise it, if only for a moment. These affective propositions might reciprocally emerge out of, and feed into, motivate or form, actual moments of insurrectionary activity, organising, resistance. In doing so they hope to begin – or begin again, maintain and participate in – the process of proposing and enacting radically alternative ways of being with one another.

Chapter 5: Lisa Robertson, *3 Summers*

> How will I recognise you? The revolution is happening now, everywhere, in the bodies and faces that pass by in a blur. Our revolutionary potential is considerable. It has not been erased, so much as we have forgotten how to recognize it. Much works against us. A grotesquely swelling neo-liberal political economy blocks our potential to originate or to live bountiful and joyous collective change, at any scale. What does revolution look like?
>
> (Lisa Robertson & Matthew Stadler, *Revolution: A Reader*, 2015, p. iii)

~

This is how Lisa Robertson and Matthew Stadler introduce *Revolution: A Reader*, their co-edited anthology of annotated essays on revolution. Robertson is a Canadian poet, who has been writing and publishing poetry since the early nineties, first from Vancouver, where she was a collective member of the Kootenay School of Writing, and now from her home in rural France. I take these concerns – with finding ways to figure, imagine, and creatively bring forth the revolutionary potential which is suppressed in the reproduction of our current conditions, and which might hope to rise against them in the (imaginative, at first) production of new "bountiful and joyous collective" conditions and relations – to be central driving energies in all of Robertson's work, through her eight full length poetry collections, as well as her prose, art writing, critical and philosophical essays.[31] I have already discussed some of Robertson's critical writing, to draw out her thinking on the importance of unstable affective experiences as sites of resistance, and on the interface between this affective experience and aesthetic material surfaces, forms of resistive ornamentation, all pushing towards generating new conceptions of the world, contrary to current conditions of oppression and deprivation. These ideas, which we will see run through her poetry too, are formative to the whole approach of this thesis; there are already emerging analogues in Bonney's work, with the "musical emotions" of harmonic interruption and communication.

[31] Key poetry collections include: *XEclogue* (Tsunami Editions, 1993; New Star Books, 1999), *Debbie: An Epic* (New Star Books, 1997), *The Weather* (New Star Books, Reality Street Editions, 2001), *The Men* (Bookthug, 2006), *Magenta Soul Whip* (Coach House Books, 2009), *R's Boat* (University of California Press, 2010), *Cinema of the Present* (Coach House Books, 2014) & *3 Summers* (Coach house Books, 2016). Prose publications include: *Occasional Works and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture* (Coach House Books, 2003), *Nilling* (Bookthug, 2012), and a novel, *The Baudelaire Fractal* (Coach House Books, 2020)

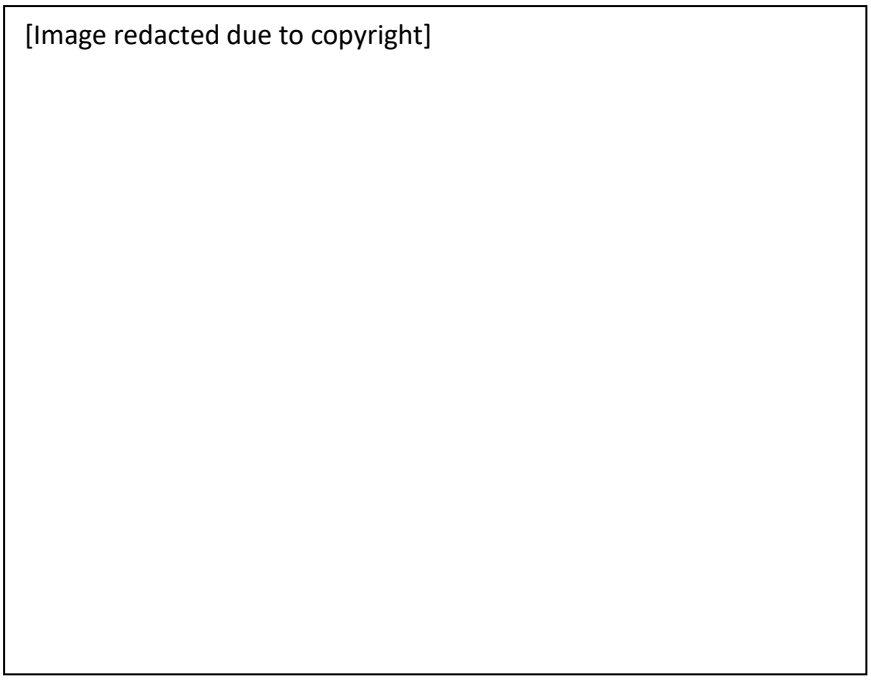
~

> I feel it is my calling to annotate the sheathed cadence of life beside power. Yet I don't mean to seem fantastic in the old sense. When I say "life beside power" I mean destruct the formal destinies, destruct the phantom body, destruct defunct ritual, unlock that paradise I mentioned earlier and give them back a renovated flower. (For whose utopia, peopled with sorrow, will annul such mollifying tokens?)
>
> (Lisa Robertson, 'Liberty', *XEclogue*, 1999 [1993], [unpaginated, p. 40])

~

I bring this background thinking to my encounter with Robertson's eighth poetry collection, *3 Summers* (Coach House Books, 2016). *3 Summers* is a collection of individual poems – lyrics, even – originating in some cases from specific and not obviously related contexts, such as commissions for magazines, exhibitions or film projects.

Before even encountering this basic structure though, I notice its insistent and striking physical and aesthetic presence, as book-object. The cover is beautiful. Designed by artists Hadley+Maxwell, with whom Robertson has an ongoing collaborative relationship, its pastel gradients of yellows, pinks and oranges, in and around the outline of a pair of sunglasses which wraps around the whole book, evoke high summer relaxation. Each poem is prefaced by a woodcut also by Hadley+Maxwell. These are amorphous, soft, smudged pseudo-organic shapes which overlay in various combinations the suggestion of skeletons, plants, bacteria, furniture, clothing, insects. As with Robertson's other books published with Coach House, the paper itself has an emphasised aesthetic and tactile presence, with its thick, textured cream pages; paratext describes the precise materials and instruments from which the book was manufactured (Robertson, 2016, p. 120).



(Robertson, 2016, cover)

These physical elements of my experience of reading *3 Summers* are the stage on which my readings are set, not passively decorating or reflecting the book's linguistic content but explicitly integrated into its conceptual and signifying framework. The cover, for example, references both the eponymous summers which crop up across many of the poems, and the rose-tinted glasses of 'Rose', the final poem, which explores the psychic, aesthetic, and conceptual power of pigment to militate towards the imagination of conditions of greater collective health and flourishing. The merging and overlay of a variety of representational suggestions in these images begins, formally, aesthetically, to make a claim for conceptual overlap which becomes important to the book's logic – both as a general principle of dissolving hard conceptual distinctions, and specifically in terms of the overlapping significances and possibilities of the body, the landscape, kinds of adornment. The foregrounded embodied presence of the book in the affective-aesthetic experience of these poems is a central feature of the mode of its thinking, which foreshadows the argument of this chapter for the vital embodiment (as physical presences, and as experienced in the body) of aesthetics, affective experience, and political resistance.

In the acknowledgements Robertson thanks the artists and editors, who have "made a group of poems into a book" (2016, p. 117). The book's unifying design elements, and their intra-poem referentiality, in tandem with that of the poems themselves, has the structural function of

arguing for the integration of those poems, though drawn from different contexts. Sina Queyras says that Robertson's work "positions lyric modes in conceptual frameworks and in so doing creates a visceral, sculptural transmission of an intimate thinking between speaker and audience, between author and reader" (Queryas, 2017, para. 3). As the book is one thought-world, it foregrounds a sense of relatively consistent subjective experience, as the basis, originary point, and necessary premise of the poems' thinking.

This "intimate thinking" is staged explicitly in the opening of *3 Summers'* first poem, 'A Seam':

> 4:16 in the afternoon in the summer of my 52nd year
> I'm lying on the bed in the heat wondering about geometry
> as the deafening, uninterrupted volume of desire
> bellows, roars mournfully, laments
> like a starling that has flown into glass. (Robertson, 2016, p. 10)

This frames the poem, and by extension the book, as directly emerging from the subjective experience – from the thoughtful and desirous preoccupations – of Robertson as poet-speaker(-body), with a high degree of situational specificity. Though without wider context to this situation and its circumstances, I as reader am thrust into a sense of this affective space, of conjuring the feeling of a thoughtfulness which is also a feeling, relaxed and contemplative, with a turbulent and overwhelming intensity. Yet what I conjure here is only an identification with the intensity and tone of this thinking-feeling, whose content is solipsistically specific to the poem's speaker. It is, though, the site from which the poems claim to come to me. This continues throughout: the following poem, 'Toxins', situates itself "Walking between the field and the last houses at 10 p.m." (Robertson, 2016, p. 21); 'Rivers' begins "In the Summer of 2014 | I'm still in this landscape of quiet poorness | everything is becoming geometry again" (2016, p. 86); the poem 'Third Summer' calls to these lines, and the book's title, to suggest a specific experience across time. When asked in an interview why she wrote the collection, Robertson answers:

> I wanted to represent the passage of time, the different qualities and textures of time in the body of the poem. This time is female. It angers and saddens me that the whole female body of time mostly passes beneath representation. My own body gives me information about this suppressed materiality; so does research, and friendship. (Robertson & All Lit Up, 2017, para. 8)

This subjective-bodily representation is complemented by the tone and style of Robertson's utterances. I hear in Jennifer Scappettone's description of the prose style of the *Office for Soft*

Architecture a sense of Robertson's style in *3 Summers*, and across her work more generally: "The unevenly deluxe phrasing (and consequential theorizing) of her idiolect foregrounds its own overreaching; as such it resists what might be confused with posturing" (Scappettone, 2006, p. 74). The lines, phrases and sentences of Robertson's writing often combine a tendency towards expositional declaration with an abstract, indeterminate phrasing, luxuriant and rich in the sense that they combine a palpable aesthetic joy in the formation of a beautiful phrase with a richness or over-fullness of potential signification. For example, reading across just the next few pages of 'The Seam', I come across such formulations as: "Now it's time to return to the sex of my thinking" (Robertson, 2016, p. 10), "There is the sense of women | As impairment's ability" (2016, p. 11), "The pronoun is gratuitous expenditure | as necessity" (2016, p. 12).

The combination of temporal and subjective specificity, an experiential grounding, with this expansively indeterminate form of poetic theorising creates poems which present their thinking as that which comes from a feeling body in time, and specifically a female embodied thinking, the thinking formed by the embodied experience of being interpellated as a woman. But the body of these poems is not one which knows itself in advance, which can be readily recognised in the pre-given, reified forms of emotive expressivity or biographical storytelling. It is a body perpetually in formation, whose most vital experiences, those which point towards the fullness of resistance and a newly flourishing collective being, are infra-linguistic, both highly specific and not readily pinned down in pre-existing language. As such, the reflections and formulations of these poems are often disjointed, non-linear, and indeterminate; the language deploys a kind of exploratory, non-realist aesthetic propositionality, asking what information is given by the experiencing body, feeling out possibilities of potential intelligibility, rather than claims which are already recuperable within current realism. The poems repeatedly ask versions of the question "What can really begin?" (Robertson, 2016, p. 57)

At the level of the organisation, form, and aesthetics, then, *3 Summers* makes some of the claims which will be central to the conceptions I pull from it of the nature of resistive possibility, stepping off from the conceptual framework already established in the early chapters of this thesis, and the thinking in Bonney's work on a poetic resistance which centres non-reified, formal, harmonic modes of communication and recognition: that subjective experience and thinking is a site of ideological inscription, a basis of (collective) knowledge,

a germinating ground for resistance, and, as a further development, that such experience is always of the physical, formal, aesthetic matter of the body and of the world.

In the rest of this chapter, I will show how, from this heavily embodied, heavily subjectified, female-thinking stylistics, *3 Summers* develops a positive poetics which responds to the problems of ideological subjectification and the possibilities of resistance and change. The work develops the already observed aesthetic-embodied poetic presentation – and the claims this makes for the signifying and affectively evocative content of the book as a material object – to a more explicit figuration of the (feminine) body as a bridge between affect and form – as the site of feeling, and as a surface, a point of contact – where form is thought of as a kind of embodiment. It makes the claim that affective experience and aesthetic perception are of the same kind, are both kinds of sensation in and of the body, of the surface, through, for instance, the sensation of touch. The two are seen as parallel and interrelated sources of potential for thinking outside of that which is assimilable under dominant models of intelligibility, and therefore for divergence from the oppressive ideological conditions which form that intelligibility.

This reading is made possible through the work's centring of its gendered experience, which includes a great deal of anxiety – about survival and flourishing, and the risks of reproducing the conditions of one's own oppression – but also newly resistive potential. *3 Summers* genders resistive aesthetic-affective thinking-feeling as feminine, as marginalised by a capitalist-imperialist patriarchal structure which privileges the rational, objective, and abstract over the emotional, experiential and bodily. As such, this is a kind of thinking which contains potentials antithetical to the reproductive action of those structures, and which can push towards experiences, relations, and subjectivities that are inconceivable and resistive to them.

Gendered interpellation and ideology

Firstly, the basis of Robertson's writing in an embodied feminine thinking, in the experience of being interpellated as a woman, of being female-identified within patriarchy, is the specific primary site of subjectification which, in these works, opens out towards the problem of resistance and disruption to the general, universal process of ideological subjectification. To expand on an earlier quotation:

> There is a sense of women
> As impairment's ability

> That's how it falls
> Perilous, unoptional
> It's difficult to sing. (Robertson, 2016, p. 11)

The contradiction in "impairment's ability" suggests gender, or the specific experience of being interpellated as a woman in patriarchal society, as involving a dialectic of constraint and resistance; it suggests both the problems and hopeful possibility for acting and speaking out through, against, and despite structures of imposition, which are also self-contradictory and internally fractured processes of subject-formation. Where singing is a well-established metaphor for the use of poetic voice, or more generally for joyous expression, it is here imperilled and limited, just as in Bonney the voice of the law sung through us, as our language is constrained to reproduce its ideological pre-conditions.

This stanza recalls Denise Riley's claims, discussed in Chapter 3, that the process of being subjectified into a particular identity category necessarily produces its own instability in the affective resistance to the rigidity of those categories. This connection follows through on the next page:

> Venus breaks a dew at the borders of everything.
> Right now when I think of her
> I have no problem with the feminine pronoun.
> I'm stupid against its animate insult
> […]
> I think of girls saying *I* in novels
> people saying *we* in plazas and restaurants
> students and cops
> […]
> The pronoun is gratuitous expenditure
> as necessity. (Robertson, 2016, p. 12)

Having made this connection to Riley's thinking, it becomes even more emphatic for me here. We have seen that Riley's discussion of the potential resistive force of the failure at the edges of categorical interpellation in *The Words of Selves* is based in an exploration of the problem of self-description, particularly in the context of the self-description "I am a woman". This dates as far back as 1988's *'Am I That Name?'*: *Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History*. Riley summarises the positions in this earlier work as they influence *The Words of Selves*:

> the category of 'women' as both an inescapably ambiguous irritant to, yet the grounds for, feminist politics and the corresponding need to tolerate and exploit this ambiguity through a tactical agility and foxiness. (Riley, 2000a, p. 21)

> in declaring myself a such-and-such, I may tacitly separate myself from the communality you had expected to inhabit with me […] in brief, 'I am an *x*' may function to exclude: 'and so you are not an *x*'. (Riley, 2000a, p. 24)

Riley cuts succinctly to the ways that the necessary occupation of a pre-existing identity category always also folds back towards the essentialising force of that category, the ways its very existence depends on its constitution as delimited and exclusionary.

When Robertson talks about the "animate insult" of the "feminine pronoun", and of "girls saying *I"*, it builds in my reading on this constellation of problems opened out by Riley's foundational account; the pronoun – the internalised claim to the category which precedes the individual, but which they live inside – is too much, is an insult, is brutal, but is inescapable.[32] Intimations of the experience of girlhood – of growing up in a certain way, as a girl, with all the expectations, impositions and resistances that comes with – places the individual "*I"* against and alongside the collective, "*we*". "Students and cops" then begins to imply a connection between the individually internalised, social formation of collective identities such as gender, and the kinds of collective identity-formation which lead to, or occur at the point of, the more visible set-piece forms of political struggle in the confrontation between protestors and the state apparatus of their repression. The poem creates a world where the problem of living in an individual subjectivity, within the confines of its pre-existing ideological and material relations, is co-extensive with the problem of a claim to collective identity in the struggle against state power; this becomes a problematic for the work as a whole. The notion of "gratuitous expenditure" pushes further on the constraint/resistance dialectic at the heart of (gendered) identity-formation, balancing the idea of the gendered pronoun as a harsh and unnecessary imposition, made necessary, with an idea of joyous overspilling (recalling Massumi or Riley's discussion of the failures and excesses of ideological formation), where some of the energy expended in that identification moves out beyond what can be rationally recognised of it.

The lines that follow further situate the poem in relation to the specific experience of being interpellated as a girl, and coming into full adult subjectivity through that experience, as one which shapes the capacity to relate to the world:

[32] Though it's not, strictly, necessary to my argument to demonstrate that there's a line of intention or authorial knowledge – so much as a line of interpretive reading – which draws these together, it is nonetheless interesting to note Robertson's familiarity with Riley's work, to add further weight to this interpretive connection. See Robertson writing on Riley here: http://lemonhound.com/2013/06/04/lisa-robertson-on-denise-riley/

I was a daughter in blouses
a sucker in stairwells
I was the only human to ever feel desire (Robertson, 2016, p. 12)

And continuing on across the following page:

– it's hard not to play this as testimony –
I was a sucker in blouses, I was the only human
to ever say *we*, I sat at frugal tables and
I undertook the ceremony of brutality
or pronouns (2016, p. 13)

These experiences become a subjective location for the poem's thinking, on which all else is dependent. It is through the experience of coming into the possibilities of personal desires, and the brutality of their proscription, that the poems think about the construction of possibility and limit generally. The meeting of an implied biographical specificity with the expansive indeterminacy of description reflects, at a formal level, the centrality of those affective experiences which are at once highly specific, and not-quite or not-yet recognisable within current realism, to push towards what I described in Bonney's work as non-reified affective recognition.

This particular subjective, experiential feminine/ist framework then allows for a specific thinking about resistance to dominant conditions of patriarchy, capital, imperialist violence, and their reproduction. For example, 'On Physically Real Being and What Happens Next' opens:

I feel ambivalent about adoring
The sex of Mars
Like America it basks
Exempt from dolorous stuff
The imperium's fucked up
How can we kiss and think? (Robertson, 2016, p. 40)

The poem dwells in a discomfort and anxiety about female heterosexual desire, in the context of patriarchy. Mars counterpoints Venus, as a symbolic representation not just of masculinity but also war. The comparison of America and "the imperium" then suggests a whole history of global military aggression. These are coded-masculine by the same patriarchal structures which form the possibilities of gender and desire. The final couplet then evocatively elides the question of how women can reckon with heterosexual desire under patriarchy with that of how joy and desire can be realised under general conditions of strife. This connection persists through the poem, which goes on to describe

> […] natality's ornate
> quiescence tied to fear's
> superb circumference at
> home in the dominant expressive (Robertson, 2016, p. 44)

"Natality's ornate quiescence" crystallises this anxiety: that the oppressive enforcements on women by patriarchal structures around love, coupling, birth and childrearing also perpetuate the general dominant ideological and material conditions; that an acquiescence into desire as it is formed within patriarchal structures is concomitant with perpetuation of the ongoing oppressive formation of our thinking and action in general, across the whole spectrum of brutalities including but not limited to this patriarchal oppression.

> ~
>
> What is it to open upwards towards the men
> hospitably to make something factless from the spurious
> craving for men
>
> (Lisa Robertson, 'Men Deft Men', *The Men*, 2006, p. 12)
>
> ~

A couple of pages later in 'On Physically Real Being', the idea of the reproductive force of conditioned desires is expanded out to a clear formulation of a general conceptual problem, of the slim possibilities of resistance to conditions which are prior to and pre-figuring of the individual subject:

> Here is Marx's big dilemma, the reason he goes to Lucretius:
> practice arises from conditions
> yet these are the conditions we must change (Robertson, 2016, p. 47)

This firmly roots the anxieties about the conflicts between the resistive and the reproductive possibilities of the affects produced by the experience of being gendered female, in a neatly all-encompassing conceptual problem which is, ultimately, the problem of resistance within ideology. Robertson figures this problem slightly differently later as "the extreme difficulty in separating out external compulsion | from the experience of desire" (Robertson, 2016, p. 65). These two quotations in combination offer a potential summary of the central problems not just of Robertson's book, but also of my own thesis (you may already have noted that, for this reason, the first of these quotations appears at the very opening of the thesis). Robertson's thinking about the specific problems of female flourishing within patriarchy offers itself up explicitly as working also through the problems of how differences of desire and of relation

can be purposively recognised and produced, from within the conditions which shape the possibility of our producing anything at all.

~

All you can usually say about a poem or a picture is, 'Look at it, listen to it.'

(Basil Bunting, *Basil Bunting on Poetry,* 1999, p. 1)

~

This reading attempts to recognise and to make wide ranging conceptual connections within and across these poems, as a way to come to understand some of the possibilities of their thought-world. Yet the forward momentum of my argument here threatens to carry the discussion too far into conceptual naturalisations of these poems, and away from my primary experience of aesthetic joy and highly generative bewilderment. These poems do not, of course, make linear arguments. It is rather from within their consistent claim to the centrality of the aesthetic, of the beautifully formed, of the experience of feeling with it, and through what I have described as a luxurious indeterminacy, that these thoughts on gender, ideology, resistance and possibility are made possible here, and continue to stretch beyond what I can coherently articulate.

I want to look again at one example to briefly show the coincidence of many of the different aspects of what I have described in the poems so far. Look at it, listen to it:

> and natality's ornate
> quiescence tied to fear's
> superb circumference at
> home in the dominant expressive (Robertson, 2016, p. 44)

Firstly, I find these lines beautiful. They show how the insistence on foregrounded formal and aesthetic presence I described earlier, starting with the design of *3 Summers*, runs through each line. I can't pin down this beauty, but can only reach towards what I think are some of its contributing factors or constituent parts. They play with patterns of sound: the shared "n" "a" and "t" sounds in "**nat**ality's or**nate**", echoed and softened later in "domi**nant**"; the internal rhymes on "quiesc**ence**" and "circumfer**ence**" and the increased heavy "s" sounds in "fear'**s** | **s**uperb **c**ircumferen**ce**", all again softly echoed in "expressive". This combines with syntactic and rhythmic effects: as well as the rhyme, the two phrases "natality's ornate | quiescence" and "fear's | superb circumference" share a grammatical structure, and some common stress patterns – I read each word in these three word phrases as containing one

strong stress – which runs across the structure of line-breaks, creating a counter-rhythm in reading.

The patterning which partly produces this aesthetic pleasure for me further produces the effect of these poems as performing a kind of live, formative thinking, the uncertain thinking-feeling of a body in time. This moment of particularly intense patterning gives these phrases a material solidity which suggests itself as also conceptual, as if each phrase describes something conceptually or experientially highly specific. As the sound patterning falls away a little in the fourth line, the phrases still ring in my mind, settling into the place they, or the feelings they name, might already have been, "at home", had I noted them.

Yet this same patterning also increases the indeterminacy of these phrases' specific meaning. For example, the "a" sounds have me initially mistaking "quiescence" for "acquiescence". This slippage emphasises the idea of ideological complicity which I have focussed on above, but another reading, more alert to "quiescence" without the "a", could equally emphasise the sense of a more peaceful quietness, without erasing the former reading; their combination might further suggest the insidiousness through which pleasures traditionally figured as feminine always also contain and perpetuate their oppressive formation within patriarchy. As these concepts seem to come into a verbal solidity, the slippage and the play of possibilities it opens up – the conflicting affective contents, between the despairing sense of ideological acquiescence, and the possibility of gentle pleasure – still maintains an expansive and indeterminate suggestion. It is as if the poems are newly coining terms for important yet previously ethereal feelings which still will not settle, as if these lines are making new sense, as if there exist further possible senses which these lines are yet to make.

The process of expansive formation continues in all directions. So for example, these four lines – just one moment in an eleven line stanza – break into a new syntax and sense in the line that follows, as "the dominant expressive | housekeeping of the street" (Robertson, 2016, p. 44). These lines re-figure what I have taken as an anxious – if beautiful – crystallisation of the difficulties of resistance, and turns them towards the possibility that those same oppressively gendered functions, of which housekeeping is emblematic, might also be a source of expression and resistance, gesturing to the classic space of protest and political discord, "the street". This gestures to the sense – which I will explore further in the following section – that the beauty and expansiveness of these formulations, and the joy of reading which is also an affective perception of that beauty, are a key part of the poems' resistive

method, through which they hope to break through the reproduction of oppressive conditions in our own desire, and to open up the possibility of new and liberatory sense.

Affective ornamentation

> Doubt, eros, melancholy: affective ornaments.
>
> (Robertson, 'Perspectors/Melancholia', *Nilling*, 2012, p. 51)

~

The work's tentative answer to its problems of reproduction, through a specifically bodily understanding of (female) affective experience, begins in 'The Seam'. The passage quoted earlier which deals in my reading with the experience of being interpellated into girlhood ends: "I shelter my lesion" (Robertson, 2016, p. 13). This fits into a wider linguistic pattern where experiential splits or breaks meet a language of bodily rupture and recombination: "her silken rupture" (2016, p. 44); the idea which "seems to crack open time" (2016, p. 105); "suture", as in, stitching together, of a wound particularly (2016, pp. 23, 32, 38, 63); the title 'The Seam' too, "suture" being to the body what "seam" is to the fabric that clads it. The catalogue of body parts which runs through 'On Form' begins with the "coronal suture" (2016, p. 32) – the joining point between bones in the skull – situating the idea of bodily rupture and reconnection in the area of the body which most obviously thinks, suggesting that affective-bodily breaks are key to the work of thinking. This through-line also connects the claim that "this experience can constitute a break" (2016, p. 37) towards the poem's close, with its final injunction, "send us action thriving foray touch | this suture right now" (2016, p. 38); experiential and bodily rupture come together here with a sense of political urgency which is physically intimate.

Returning to 'The Seam', Robertson's poet-speaker goes on to state: "Within the problem of lamentation | is my perennial resistance-sensation" (2016, p. 14). The emergence of resistance from lamentation recalls my reading in Chapter 3 of Robertson's 'Perspectors/Melancholia' essay, in which she argues that emotive states can create an instability, a process of potential break and recombination of our received data and of the ways in which our understanding is conditioned. The addition of "-sensation" here adds a certain physicality to the affect which generates or is provoked by (political) resistance, or the disrupting sense of discomfort with something in particular (as with Riley's "unease"). Reading this against the pattern of bodily metaphors, of wounds and sutures, the resistance-sensation – the moment of affective rupture

which destabilises the subject's relationship to their ongoing reproduction – is envisioned as also a feeling of physical, bodily rupture, a wounding, a break in felt sensation.

'The Seam' further develops the work's intertwining of the political potential of affective impulse and the materiality of the body – thinking specifically about how poetry can activate the disruptive and productive potentials of desire and pain – through the figure of "hormones", which becomes another key conceit of the book. Shortly following the statement that "the poem is a hormone":

> We press out these voices from the inmost parts
> to be able to start.
> Sometimes desire awakens a whole crowd
> with copious particularity
> with the urgent motions of membranes
> with the mystic dialectic of toxins and hormones (Robertson, 2016, p. 11)

This section of the poem pre-empts "people saying *we* in plazas and restaurants | students and cops" and its implication of the crowd gathered in protest on the following page. The voice of that collective "we" is juxtaposed against "the inmost parts" to suggest that at the root of any collective action, of any crowd acting together in public, there is some interface between the solipsistic experience of desire and the possibility of its social, shared understanding; this is again suggested by "copious particularity". I hear this crowd, this "we", as an echo of "the voice of the crowd" in Bonney, only here the anxiety of the reproductive force of its (singular) collective voice is replaced by a hopeful possibility, of starting, as if the individual and particular desires of its participants might, as they come together, bring about some form of resistive collective beginning. "Toxins" and "hormones" then emphasise the physiological aspect of this activation of social desire, as something which happens in the body, and in bodies coming together.

The poem ends:

> The great health is unknown gratuitous expenditure towards
> the material ideal.
> It is not a metaphor.
> From now on, everything will be called The Middle, everything
> will be called The Seam, everything will be called Toxins,
> everything will be called The Great Health.
> Everything will be a hormone. (Robertson, 2016, p. 17)

This ending casts over a sequence of titles of poems from the book, presenting itself as something of a preface, before moving into "a hormone" as the culmination of that list. It

suggests that the poems will act as "hormones", or that the figure of "hormones" – and by extension also "toxins", implicitly their more painful counterpart in the "mystic dialectic" – comes to stand for the possible action of the poems. This proposes that the poems conceive of themselves, in aim at least, as working towards an activation of desires, and of disruptive capacities of pains, as ways to generate or give voice to resistance-sensation. These resistance-sensations operate politically at the interface or "membranes" between the subjective experience of the individual body and crowd, pushing towards a change of action, relation, conception, which operates at and through these membranes. As in Bonney experiences of death or hunger might open up possible connections between the crowd whose riotous activity hopes to break out of the already-known, Robertson here expands the affective range of sensations of synthetic rupture also into the realm of desire.

This is not, however, a kind of political thinking which happens in the body *as opposed to* at the level of thought. Rather, it is a mode of bodily or embodied thinking. The following poem, 'Toxins', states: "That time we called our theory Toxins | we became adepts of its excellence" (Robertson, 2016, p. 27). These concepts negate any distinction between the intellectual and the bodily, between thought and affect, suggesting that radical thinking is that which happens of and through the desires, pains, and ruptures of the feeling body. "Hormones and toxins" then become figures which blend the linguistic, the affective, the theoretical and the bodily, representing a kind of activating signal transmitted to and between bodies – through discursive means in the poems – analogous to the figure of "harmony" in Bonney's work, but more heavily emphasising the bodily nature of this exchange of energies.

"Hormones" joins "harmony" as a closely connected key concept for this thesis. Both carry some of the most vital work of thought of their respective works, through an emblematic conceit or figure which operates both metaphorically and metonymically: "hormones" stand in for an array of exchanges of bodily, aesthetic, and political drives and affects, related to but much broader than any literal understanding of the physiological processes involved in emotive sensation, just as "harmony" suggests exchanges and transmissions of energy whose relation to the actual vibrations of sound and music shifts in and out of focus. Through the use of such figures – alongside other modes of expansiveness, contradiction and indeterminacy – rather than through more recognisably disrupted language, these poets gesture towards and conjure ideas and experiences which can't be explicated in rational, empirical, 'realist' forms of writing, but which might nonetheless be 'understood' or felt, in some sense, in the reading. "Hormones" is not just a conceptual reference to the presence of resistive infra-linguistic

affects then, but also an attempt to use the poems' expansive metaphorical framework to give such thought-sensations a presence, a provisional coherence within the poem, in unstable contention with the already-known coherence of the language outside and preceding it.[33]

The third poem, 'On Form', adds to the conception of the radical potential of embodied thinking and feeling a close relation to aesthetic form, through its attention to the feeling surfaces of the body, and those of its felt or perceived objects. This builds on the arguments from *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*, as outlined in Chapter 3, in which Robertson describes "the affective potential of the surface […] an indiscrete threshold where our bodies exchange information with an environment" (Robertson, 2011, p. 123). Physical surface is seen in that text as unstable and liable to change through its interaction with affect at the level of the perception of colour or other forms of decoration; decoration itself – or ornamentation, style – is seen as a way to create affectively-driven uncertainty in material and social structures. Where the earlier text discussed primarily the surfaces of buildings, 'On Form' focusses on the surface of the body, as its own kind of threshold.

The poem opens: "You could say that form is learning" (Robertson, 2016, p. 32), echoing the refusal of a binary between bodily sensation and cognition in 'Toxins', with a claim that the formal, aesthetic, non-semantic, also does thinking. "Form" then becomes not only aesthetic form, but also the body, or the meeting point of the two in the bodily movements of a dancer; the poem was commissioned for a documentary about dancer Jane Ellison, to whom it is dedicated, and ranges across a great many small parts of the body, examining it in great detail through a series of incongruous comparisons to animals, objects, architectural features. The

[33] In 'Concepts and Conception in Poetry', JH Prynne describes "the concept of concept", through which poems can create internal conceptual frameworks for themselves, whose mediation of our understanding of the world pushes ever further from the obfuscated ideological mediation present in more supposedly direct modes of representation. Concept "can be distinguished from a free-standing idea or moment of insight because it implies a frame or context of structure, often in relation to a scheme or system of mental procedures or representations". Rather than being concerned with observation directly, "the relational framework supervenes above the atomic content of 'making an observation of a thing or event in the world'" (Prynne, 2014, p. 13). As concepts seen this way can be deployed in poetry, "The reader is placed into temporary removal or suspension from the field of action or its direct imitation, and is invited to act as at least in part proxy to representations that are external to the reader's natural self", "sharing this intermediate framework with the poet-author as a territory of the imagination where validation rules can be reformulated or even suspended altogether" (Prynne, 2014, p. 14). As that which appears "direct" and "natural" is itself completely inside the mystified and mystifying conceptual frameworks of ideology, Prynne describes a process whereby poems might set up conceptual counter-frameworks. I see this as a work of recombination not distinct from the work of recombination which occurs through the instabilities of affective extremity; "hormones" and "harmony" are both exemplary felt-concepts which create the possibilities of new meanings through and against the ideological pre-figuration of the language in which they're written.

move which makes resistive theoretical thinking happen in the body is the same move which suggests that learning happens at the level of aesthetic form; both refuse the same false binary between the formal or embodied and the conceptual or cognitive. This false binary is the same one which Simon Jarvis refuted, in my discussion of his work in Chapter 3, where he demonstrates that the logic which separates subjectivity from knowledge is the same one that separates aesthetics from knowledge – both wrongly suggest that conceptual content is something free standing, disembodied, regardless of the body that recognises it or the form which it takes.

A page later in the poem:

> the repeat carries between bodies
> what's made in this space is theories
> and thymus a rising of beneficial
> smoke as thorax as guitar the hairs
> exact and between bodies form's
> not ever without a stupendous body
> so the repetition is never exact
> this is why form is always learning
> as it moves across surfaces as
> on the cleft above the lips (Robertson, 2016, p. 33)

In between its catalogued body parts are claims about the theoretical, thinking possibility of interacting bodies such as "the repeat carries between bodies | what's made in this space is theories". "the repetition is never exact" echos the language of the theoretical account I've laid out in chapter 3, from Massumi, Butler, and Riley, suggesting the possibility of a "learning" focussed on the body as the site of the failure of totalising ideological inscription.

In the final two lines, "surfaces" becomes not just the material objects of the world, familiar from the *Office for Soft Architecture*, but also presents the possibility of the surface of the body, the skin. The movement across surfaces suggests a tactile interaction, as fingers over skin, or as the body touching against other material surfaces – where the physical sensation of interaction with material is a point of thinking, of learning, of generating newness. As the poem focusses in on the lips at this point, it flashes up with the possibility of that movement as the amorous movement of lips on skin, or fingers on lips, adding the presence of desire into the concept of tactile, material bodily learning. This is picked up again strongly a few pages later:

> between our nerve endings and our motor units
> like the female sex that thrives behind

the earlobe there is a bony poppy
fucking wildly at the edge of capital
this experience can constitute a break (Robertson, 2016, p. 37)

Here Robertson explicitly builds the positive claim for the politically disruptive capacity of sensuous activity into her poems' thinking about the body as a subjective membrane between thinking-feeling surfaces. Specifically, those disruptive experiences are "wild" desires "at the edges of capital", suggesting that the sensuous activity which is most incomprehensible to the ideologically and materially dominant structures of capital is also that which brings us closest to the possibility of envisaging and living something different. The "break" that is constituted must then be an experiential one, from what is familiar in desire, in order to also be a political one, from the structures that create those familiar desires. If "the poem is a hormone", if "form is learning", then these poems are not merely working to activate or evoke these affective breaks from the already-known, but also wish to *be* the kind of formal objects the aesthetic perception of which is itself a point of disruptive affective learning. They wish to use their formal capacity to create sensation at the edge of what is known within the logic of current conditions.

The long central poem 'The Middle' pulls together echoes of previous poems into an increasingly entangled web of conceptual relation, interplay and recombination which makes up these poems. 'The Middle' takes a step further from the interrelated conception of the disruptive capacities of aesthetic perception and affective sensation, to the stronger claim that these are essentially *the same kind of experience*. One pivotal passage begins:

The work will be called the linguistics of the hormone.

As for the completely human and dandiacal gland, trans-corporeal
and trans-historical
it became literature
and the body is impersonal, in contradiction
which is form. (Robertson, 2016, p. 64)

The passage then suggests a cinematic panning over "poverty, illness, death and brutality | building and action interpenetrating", moving into a description of what seems like an art installation, of mirrors, flowers, light and video projections. Then, implicitly referring to this artwork or arrangement:

It is the general system of the formation and transformation of
borders.

> It is simultaneously an aesthetic of perception and an ethic of conduct, these being inseparable. (Robertson, 2016, p. 64)

Added to the notion of the body as a bridging point between affect and different kinds of form – to the vital embodiment of aesthetic, affective and intellectual activity, as deeply interconnected activities whose connection is their strongest site of potential for rupturing the reproductive force of ideological subjectification and producing the imaginative possibility of newness and transformation – is the idea of "an ethic of conduct" here. The poem moves smoothly from "the linguistics of the hormone", gesturing to the resistive capacity of affective-bodily sensation as already established in the book, to transformative ethical possibilities of aesthetic perception, with the suggestion of the art installation as somehow intervening in or disrupting the banal violence which precedes it.

This merging of aesthetic, affective, bodily, ethical, and political, locates itself on the felt surface, which, as in 'On Form', might be both the surface of the touched or feeling skin, or the surface of material objects, structures, pages, artworks – all surfaces being points of interaction. So:

> Minute perceptions speeding along a dirty surface
> will say something else
> about the way every pronoun is absurd (Robertson, 2016, p. 67)

chimes closely with

> Ceaselessly, invisibly, they unwind from things rippling and radiating towards somebody's skin. In turn, the surface of the body fountains impalpable emanations. What tininess! Excellent! Next to this riot, most human love is so wrong and stupid. (2016, p. 68)

Perception moving across the surface of an observed object, and sensations on the surface of the body are described in closely related terms. Each is an area of uncertainty, where the pre-conceived forms in which we operate – the strictures of pronouns, or our conditioned desires & narratives of love – become, or are revealed as, unstable. Aesthetic, formal perception is of a kind with those unassimilable affective experiences which show the fractures in our ideological formation – both refer to encounters between the formal, embodied and felt in the world and in our own sensations, to the elements of perception and experience which remain uncertain and irreducible to the already-known.

'A Coat' uses clothing, as another instance where aesthetic forms are embodied, on the feeling body, to culminate this merging of the potential political force of affective experience

and aesthetic perception in the notion of *political decoration*. This was an important part of the original account from *The Office for Soft Architecture*, but here operates in the new light of this conception of the aesthetic-affective thinking-feeling body.

The poem begins with references and extracts of Marx's classic example of "twenty yards of linen and one coat" (Robertson, 2016, p. 74), and surrounding passages, which he used to explain the relationship between labour, use value and exchange value in *Capital.* As the poem goes on, this meets extracts from a tailoring guide (dated to around forty years before *Capital*) meticulously detailing the acts of measuring the body, and a series of differently cut coats, emphasising in addition to the use or exchange value of the coat its aesthetic function, as an item which decorates the body.

In between these citational passages, Robertson writes:

> But I think poetry is nice
> because of my body
> the insurrection of my unplaced body I mean
> […]
> And the enjoyable gland also
> dribbles a politics (2016, p. 77)

Aesthetics, and politics, are rooted in the feelings of desire in the body, with "the enjoyable gland" gesturing towards the figure of hormones. With a sound echo across the poem, on "commodity", "commodious" and "community" – "no community is for a body" (Robertson, 2016, p. 76), "the body of a friend is commodious only | and so extinguishes all named commodities" (2016, p. 78) – the poem wonders about the interactions between the privately feeling body, the collective political sphere, and the objectifying structures of capital. As the poem moves into thinking about "a friend", by implication Robertson's deceased friend Stacey Doris to whom the poem is dedicated, it echoes the above quotation, referring to the "inevitably insurrectionary motions of specific elaborate perfumable bodies like hers" (2016, p. 82). It is as if, through the figure of clothing, and the praise of the insurrectionary power of her friend's body in sensuous and decorative terms, the poem makes the claim that the body, with its specificity and sensations, can act as a refutation of oppressive structures, if it's decorated in the right way. As this poem is 'A Coat', this seems to offer up a model, a poetics, that the radical poem might hope to be just this sort of decoration.

‘Show me something unknowable’

I hope it is relatively clear from the above discussion that the interface in Robertson’s work between aesthetics, bodily sensation, affect, and the possibilities of breaks from our prior-constituted experience and subjectivity, is a further development of what I have previously described as the relationship between non-recuperable form and infra-linguistic affects, where the former, in music, poetry, and the non-semantic elements of representation or cultural production is best able to gesture towards the latter, as it exists in actual experience. The thinking of Robertson’s poems brings even this complementary distinction into question, suggesting that aesthetic perception, affective experience, and even political and ethical thinking, are all completely interlinked. They are, these poems tell us, primarily not rational or even semantically articulable processes, but kinds of thinking-feeling which occur at the level of the feeling, desiring body interacting with the material surfaces and objects of the world.

Alongside the patterns that build up this interconnection in the poems (and the concomitant argument for their interconnection in the wider world of experience), is a focus on the idea of that which is outside knowledge, which begins to make the argument for the vital nature of the infra-linguistic in all these perceptive capacities more explicitly.

In ‘The Seam’ again, towards its conclusion:

> I start a school called how can I live.
>
> In my school called how can I live
> in my theory of appearing
> I lay out my costume.
> We don’t belong to culture. We’re sunsets.
> We simplify thought
> until it resembles
> stripes.
> I beg you – show me something unknowable.
> I don’t believe in the possibility of knowing.
> […]
> Tell me about shame and isolation
> the shame that has not even
> a vocabulary. (Robertson, 2016, pp. 16-17)

Towards the end of ‘Toxins’:

> Health is unlegislated
> it unfurls raw on the table
> the extent to which its meaning does not exist ripens

a thousand years pass.

The movement, just outside perception
traverses limbs, skin, organs, hair
as if it were the purpose of this sentiment not to be expressed. (2016, p. 29)

The first example is antagonistic to the possibility of certain knowledge, in favour of an allegiance with that which is "unknowable", and yet which, it suggests, can still be shown. This appeals to kinds of understanding or perception which aren't reducible to rational, codified knowledge. This couplet on "knowing" is preceded by hints at the possibilities of the aesthetic to do serious thinking, in the thought which "resembles stripes", and in the "costume", as a form of aesthetic adornment of the body. It is then followed by an explicit invocation of what I have been calling infra-linguistic affects, of those feelings of "shame and isolation" which are felt, but outside current language. This is expanded in the second example, which makes the claim that the conditions of our "health", our flourishing, are outside of the bounds of those expressible meanings that currently exist, "unlegislated", where legislation as a figure unites the idea of codified language and the reproduction and enforcement of current conditions (as with "the law" in Bonney). What does exist is "sentiment", a feeling here implicitly opposed to "meaning", made both bodily and imperceptible. The "school called how can I live" that precedes this then is one which replaces traditional scholastic learning with a kind of negative knowledge which emerges out of the unknowingness of aesthetic form and of inexpressible feeling.

It is important to remember here that it is a specifically female subject who speaks in these poems, who asks "how can I live", and the "shame that has not even | a vocabulary" is by implication a shame felt by women specifically. The theoretical possibility of the bodily, aesthetic and affective, to produce the possibility of subjective rupture and to reach out into collective rupture and change, is specifically from the perspective of a gendered subjectivity. The stance taken against knowledge, in favour of the "unknowable" in the aesthetic and affective is a gendered critique. These arguments are not only abstract and esoteric – as the poems go on, they directly link more specifically political critiques, of war, violence and capital, with a masculine-gendered rationalism which is opposed to these aesthetic-affective bodily modes of thinking-feeling which are gendered feminine.

I've already touched on the use of the gendered figures of Venus and Mars in 'On Physically Real Being…' to represent the relationship between the construction of gender and desire

under patriarchy, the perpetuation of the oppression of women, and imperialism and war. Later in that poem:

> I want a pause in vocation. Venus
> chatoyant in the formal dream
> please tranquilize efficient Mars and his
> efficient interest. (Robertson, 2016, p. 43)

Mars is not just imperialist warmonger, but also business owner and boss, and Venus – "chatoyant", exhibiting the cat's eye glow of a gemstone – is invoked to oppose specifically his drive to labour, and a logic of efficiency which is implicitly for his benefit alone. The extraction of value from the labour of workers under the logics of capitalist economics becomes another form of domination inextricably tied to patriarchy and war, and Robertson's aestheticised resistance is accordingly gendered.

'The Middle' picks up and develops these ideas, of the relationship between resistance to the hurts of gendered subjectification for the individual, and the wider question of resistance to this constellation of oppressive structures. It opens:

> I had thought
> to be a woman breathing
> through the door of my body
> I would begin to bark
> so as to violate my preferences.
>
> I began to bark through the door of my body.
> Its future's untenable.
> Now I have extra organs.
> I get lost here to transform myself. (Robertson, 2016, p. 54)

"To be a woman breathing" rings similarly to "how can I live", but is even more explicitly gendered. The following line brings into the whole constellation of form, body, aesthetics and desire a reminder that, historically and presently, woman as a category is more closely identified with her body, to oppressive effect, than man to his.[34] The body then becomes both the socially pre-determined space through and in which she struggles, and, in the switch from "breathing" in the first stanza to "bark" in the second, also the weapon which can be turned against its own predetermination, against the structures that hurt and limit it.

[34] In *'Am I That Name'*, Denise Riley gives a detailed account beginning before the Renaissance of how in the body/soul distinction women are conceptualised as closer to their bodies – which also means closer to nature, to animal instinct, further from mastery through a separate wilful intellect, and relates to being alternately dominated by sexual appetite, and passive sexual object (Riley, 1988, e.g. pp. 18-43)

The ongoing dialectical position on gendered interpellation as both oppressively pre-figuring and also as a source of divergence and resistance then extends out, into a wider view of resistance to oppressive structures not only limited to the axis of gender. So, following this opening, the poem speaks to "the bankers" (Robertson, 2016, p. 55):

> Cease what comes from ships
> rats, grain, hunger and death
> quite terrible partial fructifiction in armfuls cease
> the feral sorrow incubating in money
> spectral aura of booties cease
> cease eveningness and floral dandling or nibbling
> and pabulum of the love-gouged domus
> begetting begetting begetting (2016, p. 56)

Here trade, commerce and war are seen as coded-masculine antagonists to women, as all that pre-figures in opposition to the possibility of "breathing through the door of my body".

The pun on "booties", as both stolen goods and also (sexualised, women's) buttocks, makes this point forcefully, in a suggestion of the overlapping logics of capital and of female-objectification, where all is rendered an object for the extraction of different kinds of value to the masculine merchant-lover. This is accentuated by the move into a language reminiscent of the patronising harassments of one-sided love-making – "floral dandling and nibbling". The "booties" pun also adds to "ships | rats, grain, hunger and death" the shadow of a reminder that the formative history of modern capitalism includes a very literal reduction of human bodies to shipped commodities, in the form of the slave trade. This line of continuity from the logic of capital, and the dehumanisation of women's bodies and black bodies, as things which have, under different and also overlapping historical conditions, been considered ownable as property, is recalled again later in 'Party' with "a | female slave a gift a wife a girl", reminding us that the logics of capital, patriarchy, and white supremacy are deeply intertwined, and the moves which resist one must resist them all.

> ~
>
> If the proletariat was thought capable of blowing the foundations sky high, what of the shipped, what of the containerized. What could such flesh do?
>
> (Fred Moten & Stefano Harney, 'Fantasy in the Hold', *The Undercommons,* 2013, p. 93)
>
> ~

"begetting begetting begetting" brings into this question of the violence done to bodies through patriarchal-capital an implicit pun on "reproduction", as in, both sexual and

ideological. “Begetting” can mean both the procuring of goods, and procreation, seen not through the female body in which it primarily takes place, but through the agency of the male; the reproduction of the conditions of living is cast, as earlier, as something which happens through the female body, whilst simultaneously enacted violently upon it.

These moments are countered by the possibility of a different sort of thinking, gendered feminine: ‘The Middle’ proposes “perfunctory women | as the image of a new conception of language | to leverage emotion” (Robertson, 2016, p. 58), and later “some female documents” (2016, p. 64); the above lines from ‘Party’ are immediately followed by “being believed as a state of relationship” (2016, p. 92). These explicitly counter the idea of the now masculine-gendered matrix of oppressive structures with the idea of a feminine-coded discourse.

This builds on the poems’ valorisation of the unknown or unknowable in affective experience, that which arises from the body, from its sensations, from the perception of form – against that which can be known and legislated – as a basis for flourishing and resistance. As this body is always feminine in these poems, this fits into a wider history of the construction of rational, objective, logical forms of discourse as coded-masculine, and therefore superior, under and by patriarchy, against emotional, partial, subjective discourses, gendered feminine. The ‘feminine’ discourse is dismissed for being irrational and unverifiable, while appeals to emotion and experience are dismissed for being ‘feminine’, in a mutually assuring process. The notion of “being believed” brings me to the way in which this logic operates to dismiss women’s voices and accounts of their lived experience, particularly in accounts of what is done to their bodies by men. These relationships between rationalist discourse, the reproduction of gendered (and also racialised) violence and oppression, and “being believed” will be key also to the chapters which follow.

The poems at these moments directly link the claims of the potential for emotion (and a language rooted in emotion) as a positive force in the face of oppressive systems of capital and patriarchy to the nature of emotional discourse as coded-feminine. It is through a focus specifically on the marginalised experience of women, and through modes of thinking rendered feminine by patriarchy – the bodily, the emotional, the aesthetic – that these poems wish to reach outside of the bounds of current knowledge, and into the imagination of alternative possibilities of being. Yet, in Robertson’s poems, this doesn’t arise out of any ‘natural’, which is to say essentialising, condition of womanhood; she writes “to continually

explode the psyche in this excess || would include a total refusal of each existing narrative of femininity" (2016, p. 59).

Instead, the claim is that the conditions of patriarchal dominance produce and are produced by patriarchal, masculine-gendered thinking, and that modes of thinking which are marginalised and feminised by that dominance, which are rendered outside the bounds of its structures of comprehension, also contain the capacities to undo it. In so undoing, these modes of thinking might also radically undo and transform the narratives of gendering, and their oppressive action.[35]

Collective-individual flourishing

> I don't mean a fucked-up mirage of happiness as unlimited consumption. I mean the opportunity to experience living as having all dimensions. To feel the body as fully present, having a place within politics. To accept the body, its lumpy, needy, intense, aging, explosive, wayward, frictive alwaysness. Which can include illness also. I don't want to confuse flourishing with consumption and profitability, which only really diminish corporality. Capital doesn't want our bodies to flourish. It wants to define desire, circumscribe need, and oppress agency. It is capital that wants to anesthetize despair. To flourish would be to roar, to resist.
>
> (Lisa Robertson, from Ken L. Walker and Lisa Robertson, 'I Want to Reclaim Every Part of Living Including Illness and Death', *Poetry Project Newsletter*, (237), 2013-14, p. 21)

~

[35] I have been careful to make this distinction, between claiming a resistive capacity in some discourse which is inherently or 'naturally' feminine – this being a fundamentally essentialising claim that perpetuates rigid gender-roles and concomitant oppressions – and claiming a resistive capacity for discourses which are designated feminine within and by the oppressive structures of patriarchy.

I say this in the large shadow of canonical accounts of feminine writing and thinking, such as Hélène Cixous's in 'The Laugh of the Medusa'. This earlier account of the possibilities of "female-sexed texts" (Cixous, 1976, p. 887) has a large implicit presence in Robertson's writing, and is vastly important for opening up the possibilities I've described here. A passage from this text is also used as an epigraph to one of Bhanu Kapil's works, *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers.* Yet Cixous slides into precisely these problems of essentialisation, of relying on an idea of what women intrinsically are, of "her native strength" (1976, p. 880). Cixous writes, for example, "a woman is never far from "mother" […] There is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk" (1976, p. 881).

The suggestion of an essentialising element might remain in my account, or in Robertson's work, since I have often jumped fluidly from her use of the more biological term "sex" to a more social discussion of gender. As in, "the sex of my thinking". Yet even here, I think the suggestion of an essential (i.e. bodily determined) femininity begins to fall apart. This line, as these poems in general, begs the questions of the social significance of the gendered body, which is another way of looking at the role of sex in the world; the discussion of the social function of sex, or the perception and experience of being sexed, is so close as to be almost indistinguishable from a question of gender. The question of the social formation of the body then folds in both sex and gender as related areas of ideological formation.

The poetics of resistance which draws on connections between the affective, the bodily and the aesthetic, in order to suggest the disruptive possibilities of artistic forms which activate and reach towards unknowable desires – dance, tailoring, poetry – and which contradict the oppressive logics of masculine-rationalist thinking, contains its own implicit ethical positions. In particular, these poems' thinking about subjectivity, female time and experience in the world as a woman suggests a particular conception of the relationship between individual subjective experience, irrational and uncertain as it by necessity must be, and the collective. Just as resistance in the poem arises from the experiencing subject, the possibilities of general collective flourishing arise from the point of individual survival.

To re-examine a key moment in the making of the argument as I have built it so far then: recall that an avowal of the "unknowable" in 'The Seam' begins from "a school called how can I live", in a poem which deals with the pains, oppressions, joys and desires of being interpellated as a woman, and explores the relationship between individual subjectification and desire and the political force of collective desires. The poem makes its claims about the force of the non-recuperable and infra-linguistic specifically through the frame of the problem of survival and flourishing in the world as a woman, and also, as a particular "I" within the limits of the collective. As "how can I live" becomes "the great health" which is "unknown gratuitous expenditure towards the material ideal", on the following page (Robertson, 2016, p. 17), and as this question of individual survival is envisaged in the setting of a school, the poem claims that subjective experience of personalised resistance to painful conditions can be generously offered as tool for a more general, social reassessment of possibility.

This is developed in 'An Awning'. The poem was commissioned to accompany an art exhibition, and begins with the suggestion of walking through a shimmering, brightly coloured space, as "women who undertake experimental meta- | physics while walking in gardens" (Robertson, 2016, p. 105). Then, in a later passage:

> in an economy withheld from duration
> […]
> we think in the car
> with the grace of these assistants
> to live as freely as possible.
> The flat warehouses extend forever
> (warehouses made of cinderblocks, containing cinderblocks)
> Let's decorate their warehouses
> with our anciently scorned thinking. (2016, p. 108)

This makes a bold and explicit call for a gendered aesthetic thinking (recalling "the sex of my thinking" at the very start of the book), as a way to decorate and re-figure the banal logistical landscape of capital. Yet it also comes from the question of how, or the desire, "to live as freely as possible." The next and final poem, 'Rose', follows this pattern, giving a more concrete articulation to "the great health", as a reference to Nietzsche: "stronger, more seasoned, tougher, more audacious, and gayer than any previous health" (Robertson, 2016, p. 114). Robertson's poems envisage the possibility that a basis in subjective struggle, in the struggle to survive and flourish on an individual level, to activate and reach towards one's not-yet-knowable desires, is our most hopeful starting point for envisaging a collective situation in which we might engage in more generally socially disruptive activity together. The desire to live freely is not an individualist desire, because the affective-aesthetic capacities deployed in and through that desire are always also offered as resources of solidarity and general disruption, and a more general flourishing.

"Let's decorate their warehouses | with our anciently scorned thinking" is a rallying cry, for the specific form of feminine political decoration which these poems not only theorise as the kind of aesthetic resistance that they desire, but which they also aim to model and enact. The idea of feminine decoration contextualises my original claims about the relationship between infra-linguistic experiences and non-recuperable meaning-forms, within the particular structures of domination and oppression currently existing. Subjective, non-realist modes of writing and thinking have particular resistive efficacy because they are at once antithetical to the dominant rational-realist modes of patriarchal capital, and can speak of experiences which are marginalised within that same structure.

One particularly striking passage in 'Third Summer' becomes for me something of a manifesto for the work as a whole, in that it brings together a culmination of a great many elements of the work in a short space, to re-iterate the kind of political-aesthetic thinking that it calls for. The poem tells us enigmatically "the part of desire framed by the window | is my entire concept", "in the fashion-nature dialectic | I've positioned myself as the custodian of the inauthentic" (Robertson, 2016, p. 99). It goes on:

> what are anybody's elements? Or
> the base data of a lark? Or
>
> what if we've made the wrong use of the joy of our bodies? what if
> we're to be formal translators of bird cries

> in the aesthetic-politics binary
> and the material of poetry is also the immaterial movement of history […]
>
> there is actually no binary – just the juiciness and joy of form
> otherwise known as hormones (2016, p. 100)

The whole book has dealt in the bringing together or dissolving of binaries which exist on a continuum of conceptual relation: mind and body, thinking and feeling, the aesthetic and the meaningful, decorative and functional, the embodied and the abstract, the bodily and the ideological, the individual and the social. These binaries all form part of the same conceptual framework at the centre of which is the notion of the free, self-determining, rational subject and their ability to exercise their clear, expressive will over the matter of the world, seen as inert and evacuated of content. This is a framework that makes no sense to ideas of ideological subject formation, and its consequences for resistance, expression, action in general – to the questions of conditions, of flourishing within marginalised identities, of the hurt of capital, which Robertson addresses.

At this locus in which all of these binaries collapse, we have the act of unintelligible, aesthetic communication – "bird cries" – seen as political, as offering some answer to the equivocal force of the body and its joys as both conditioned and potentially resistive. The question is how to use our joy in the right way; "the joy of form" encapsulates the way the turn towards the aesthetic, towards decoration as itself affective, is envisaged as a kind of solution, a way to think about how our longing for joy and beauty, our response to pain, might be harnessed in resistance to the ideologies which form and hurt us.

In 'Rose', which makes this question of colour and adornment literal, in a document of the thoughts and perceptual changes that arise from wearing actual rose-tinted glasses, Robertson asks: "What if the rosiness did not actually have to do with desire in the standard sense of the marketers? Imagine a good experience of the body that isn't necessarily or merely sexual or erotic, that isn't limited by skin" (2016, p. 114).

These poems attempt themselves to be something like the "bird cries", or their formal translations. Through their use of a luscious beauty, a conceptual expansiveness, a shimmering array of conceptual interrelation that can't be captured and summarised into mere concepts, these poems try to conjure a bodily joy which is a thinking, a set of uncertainly felt ideas, counter to the thinking of our current conditions and the structures by which they reproduce oppression and domination. In this thorough intertwining of conceptual and

aesthetic work, bringing together the unreachable subjective experiences from which the poems emerge, and the subjective experience of aesthetic desires and joys in reading, they open the way for some possibility of a shared perception of new ways of being together, and for a transformation of our individual-collective selves.

Chapter 6: Bhanu Kapil, *Ban en Banlieue*

> I wanted to write a novel but instead I wrote this.
>
> (Bhanu Kapil, '[13 Errors for Ban]', *Ban en Banlieue*, 2015, p. 19)
>
> ~
>
> "What is Ban?" I began to answer his question and in doing so came to my politics. How does the Far Right organise and come to be, in a post-war society (1965-1983). And how do you track a parallel rise in ethnic (British Asian) fundamentalism within a citizenry? Ban is a set of pre-conditions, the most basic of premonitions, and so perhaps I also want to say that this feels linked: to the domestic (gender) violence, alcoholism and sexual abuse that unfold at home.
>
> (Bhanu Kapil, 'End-Notes', *Ban en Banlieue*, 2015, p. 96)
>
> ~

The paratextual material of Bhanu Kapil's *Ban en Banlieue* situates her as "a British-Indian emigrant to the United States" (Kapil, 2015, back cover). She grew up in the London suburbs, but now lives in Colorado; all of her six poetry collections, except for the most recent, have been published from the United States, the earliest in 2001.[36] Kapil's practice extends out of poetic writing, as her staff profile on the Naropa University website once stated: "Her work unfolds at the intersection of performance, prose and bodywork (questions of embodiment, memory and trauma)."[37] Kapil folds these other practices – of performance, and therapeutic practice with the body – into hybrid prose-poetry book-projects. Her oeuvre is an ongoing exploration of racialised and gendered violence, through specific thinking about the ongoing history and trauma of colonialism, and Kapil's own family history of immigration to the UK in the context of Partition, and her later move to the US. These areas are by no means the limits of Kapil's work, but are recurring and central areas of attention that make up the locus around which the work overspills.

In an essay introducing Kapil's work, Eunsong Kim describes it as "the 'performance of no' through the labor of perpetual writing" (Kim, 2018, p. 251). When I invited Kapil to contribute a piece of work to a poetry festival I co-organised in late 2018,[38] she quoted Kim's words to me via email, accompanying a remote performance work: a set of instructions to its

---

[36] *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers* (Kelsey Street Press, 2001), *Incubation: a space for monsters* (Leon Works, 2006), *humanimal [a project for future children]* (Kelsey Street Press, 2009), *Schizophrene* (Nightboat, 2011), *Ban en Banlieue* (Nightboat, 2015) and *How to Wash A Heart* (Pavilion, 2020).

[37] https://www.naropa.edu/faculty/bhanu-kapil.php [Accessed September 2019, viewable at https://web.archive.org/web/20190909205301/https://www.naropa.edu/faculty/bhanu-kapil.php]

[38] *Poetry Emergency* took place at The University of Salford, and Manchester Metropolitan University, on 23rd & 24th November 2018. See: https://poetryemergency.wordpress.com/

participant-audience to cut out one of a long series of "No"s which were printed on paper hanging from the walls, and to deploy them as they saw fit. I duly obliged, and this experience distilled for me a sense of Kapil's work as concerned with refusal of the world as it is and its unjust demands, and also with the possibility of an intervention which recruits the reader and their body into a somatic realisation that, as we are formed in this world, we might also be formed together differently.

~

> The *no* of the poet is so often a *yes* in the carapace of *no*. The *no* of a poet is sometimes but rarely a *no* to a poem itself, but more usually a *no* to all the dismal aggregations and landscapes outside of the poem.
>
> (Anne Boyer, 'No', *A Handbook of Disappointed Fate*, 2018, p. 13)

~

The latest of these works, *Ban en Banlieue,* folds into itself and dramatizes Kapil's biography, her intertwining creative practices, and a continuation of the broad concerns which animate her work as a whole. This is a book of prose poetry, and it is "Notes for a novel never written" (Kapil, 2015, pp. 20/44), and it is also a document of a series of performances, or of performative actions of writing. *Ban* is made up of five sections, each broken up into sub-sections of fragmentary, digressional writing. It is dominated by the twenty-three passages – loosely connected, non-sequential in their occasional narrative – which make up the central section, 'Auto-sacrifice (Notes)'. The work spins around a series of autobiographical events, primarily drawn from Kapil's own childhood, but moves out from these to vast political contexts which form those experiences; to vivid descriptions of places, lives, mythologies; to performances, rituals and processual actions which contribute to or constitute the work; and to discussions and speculations on writing this work, writing in general, and on survival.

Another version of a summary of the text might begin with its own self-statements, from a section entitled, 'What is Ban?':

> To summarize, she is the parts of something re-mixed as air: integral, rigid air, circa 1972-1979. She's a girl. A black girl in an era when, in solidarity, Caribbean and Asian Brits self-defined as black. A black (brown) girl encountered in the earliest hour of a race riot, or what will become one by nightfall.
>
> April 23rd, 1979: by morning, anti-Nazi campaigner, Blair Peach, will be dead.
>
> It is, in this sense, a real day: though Ban is unreal. […]
>
> […]

> Ban is a girl walking home from school just as a protest starts to escalate. Pausing at the corner of the Uxbridge Road, she hears something: the far-off sound of breaking glass. Is it coming from her home or is it coming from the street's distant clamor? Faced with these two sources of a sound she instinctively links to violence, the potential for violent acts, Ban lies down. She folds to the ground. This is syntax.
>
> […]
>
> I want to lie down in the place I am from: on the street I am from.
>
> In the rain. Next to the ivy. As I did, on the border of Pakistan and India: the two Punjabs. Nobody sees someone do this. I want to feel it in my body—the root cause. (Kapil, 2015, pp. 30-31)

This passage is one of the earliest points – thirty pages in – when the work comes into focus, situates itself with a particular specificity and clarity which is uncharacteristic of its associative leaps, its clashes of images, thoughts, anecdotes. It gives us a concrete version of some of the motifs that the text spins around, that recur in different shapes throughout, and situates them within a time and place which looms over the whole text:

Ban: is a young girl who drifts in and out of fiction, a figure overlapping or semi-continuous with her half-namesake Bhanu, sharing aspects of her biography. The text flags this through shifts into a first-person author voice, as in the "I want…" at the end of this passage, or elsewhere: "In April 1979, I was ten years old" (Kapil, 2015, p. 37). Ban also spills out of the boundaries of this representation, constantly transforms; we see her enter this passage vague and unformed, as "parts of something", "air", before she solidifies as a girl.

Ban lies down: the image of a girl lying down, on the night of this particular riot, recurs and spills out of itself also, into Kapil's own life, and into identification with others. It does this first through its situation in the real historical riot in which, as the dedication to him tells us, anti-racist campaigner Blair Peach was killed by police while protesting against the National Front. This riot occurs in "an immigrant suburb of West London—the *banlieue* of the title" (Kapil, 2015, p. 14), the area where Kapil and Ban both grew up. (I see this as the inverse of Bonney's ideal riot – the National Front, as with all racist street movements, are a crowd whose voice speaks out in defence of the ongoing violence of conditions as they are.) The identificatory expansion of this central image happens also through a series of reported performance-gestures – such as the act of lying down at the end of this passage, reaching into Kapil's familial past, and to the memory and violence of Partition, connecting it by the thread of this act to the lives of those who left – and through anecdotes of Ban's childhood. From the cover itself, picturing an adult woman lying naked on bare earth, amongst twigs and bushes,

the image of this act is the text's dominant figure. In an earlier instance, this act of lying down reaches towards the second of two figures, alongside Peach, who are mostly absent central presences in the text:

> Body outline on the ground ringed by candles/flowers at the site where Jyoti Singh Pandey lay for 40 minutes in December 2012, raped then thrown from the bus and gutted with a steel pipe. […] The anti-rape protesters make a circle around my body when I lie down (Kapil, 2015, p. 16).

Through these figures we can see how this central image reaches towards an array of issues and experiences, so important to Kapil's work in general, of racialised and gendered violence. Kapil deals with these experiences on both intimate and structural scales, just as in the above passage, the fear of the violence of the race riot and the violence of the home are intermingled.

Ban en Banlieue takes an approach which reaches out to the other works and concerns of this thesis then. As I will explore in detail in this chapter, it figures critiques and resistances to the conditions of the world it finds itself in – to the interrelated structures of patriarchy, racism and capital particularly – beginning from the subjective experience of the traumas and pains brought about by those structures. The attention to racial violence and racialised trauma intersects with and builds on much of what has gone before in this thesis, in the development of a gendered thinking from the question of survival within patriarchy in Robertson's work. Thinking about the pains and possibilities of the raced and gendered body plays a central role in *Ban en Banlieue,* in a development of the figuration of the body as a point of aesthetic-affective sensation. Ideas of colour and of touch – ways of signalling to, of and between bodies – bring the thesis' thinking to bear on processes of identification, of resistive and non-recuperable modes of communication which are also ways of being, and of being together.

The work of Ban

This reading – or even just the basic situation and thematics of the text – comes into focus only gradually, through images and ideas which recur and spin back on one another. I want to begin as the text does, and with my initial impressions of it, my experience of its formal fracturing, its hybridity, its uncertainty.

The first thing I encounter reading *Ban en Banlieue* – after a photograph of a wall of ivy, captioned "Hayes, Middlesex, 2012" (Kapil, 2015, p. 6) – is an augmented 'Contents' section,

with each named and numbered entry operating as its own subsection of prose passages. I flick through the book to get a grip on the relational status of these passages, and find that the sequence of its entries only roughly corresponds to the subsequent sections of the book.

Instead they circle round what Kapil calls "the work of Ban" (2015, p. 11) – its failures and frustrations, that which wasn't or couldn't be written – inserted here as absence, struggle, paraphrase. The opening passage, '1. [13 Errors for Ban]:' (pointing obliquely towards the later section of that name) promises "a scene from Ban", but instead begins in the middle of something like dance or movement practice, before interrupting itself in firm authorial voice: "At that moment, I realize I have not written the part of Ban that is about sex—the bad sex of the riot. Two weeks later, exhausted, trying to write [re-write] Ban, as I do every day […]" (2015, p. 7). Two pages later, in '3. Stories' (which has no corresponding later section), Kapil tells us: "I wrote a companion series or sequence of childhood stories to lie next to Ban, but when it was time to publish them, here (in section 3), I pressed the delete button and stored them in another file" (2015, p. 9). These accounts of the failure of writing are interspersed within descriptions of ritual acts through which the work is composed, accidents that intrude into it, and encounters with other writers or their works. These also shift and digress into only obliquely related reflections and anecdotes – a trip to a chimp sanctuary, for example (2015, p. 8) – or into surreal myth imagery. In this last instance – "I didn't get to the part with Kapil Muni" (2015, p. 10) – a vivid evocation of a piece of Hindu mythology which is referenced and echoed later in the book appears here as a failure or absence.[39]

The final sub-section of the contents, '8. Installations and Performances:' catalogues twelve such pieces. In doing so, it goes further into detail and reflection than one might expect from a merely paratextual listing, introducing the first glimpses of many of the image-gestures and thematics of the text. These include the primary accounts in two performance-rituals of the death of Jyoti Singh Pandey – also known as Nirbhaya, "The Fearless One" (Kapil, 2015, front inside cover) – and Kapil's acts of lying down as "memorial ritual" which connect Nirbhaya to the text and to Ban (Kapil, 2015, pp. 16-18). These installations, performances, rituals, and their uncertain relationship to the book itself – as its generative process, its points of reference, its central images or the artworks it catalogues – will become key to my sense of

[39] Kapil writes in the endnotes to *Ban*: "Kapil Muni is my ancestor. Many centuries ago he sat on a spit or island of sand" (2015, p. 100). The myth goes that Kapil Muni, an incarnation of Vishnu whose ashram was located on Sagar Island in the Bay of Bengal, brought about the birth of the river Ganges, which flows past Sagar Island. He asked that the river goddess Ganga be sent down from heaven to perform a memorial ritual, and she stayed on Earth.

how *Ban* troubles its own textual integrity, and in turn to the resistive imaginative work of the text.

This opening section leaves me asking, what is "the work of Ban"?

The implied function of this section as 'contents' – that is, paratextual commentary, peripheral but clearly corresponding to a text proper – is frustrated by these digressions and mismatches, which diffuse away from any stable structures of relation. As the 'contents' expand out of the conventional parameters of this function, to begin to unfold the thematics, imagery, and formal workings of *Ban*, it becomes essentially the first section in a work of experimental prose poetry, and not merely its prior listings. In this way, the text posits itself as its own paratextual material, as a catalogue in notes, of 'failures' in writing and performance.

This continues throughout: the next section, '[13 Errors for Ban]', describes itself as "Notes/instructions written into an AWP panel talk"; it is presented as a transcript of that performance-talk, which is itself described as "a list of the errors I made as a poet engaging a novel-shaped space" (Kapil, 2015, p. 20). The title of the long central section of the book, "Auto-sacrifice (Notes)", presents the whole work as if it were only the notes on or towards the scene which comes at this section's end. This scene blends the imagining of performance-rituals of refusal with evocations of the myth of Kapil Muni, through the action of a woman about to be burned on the pyre of her dead husband – the ritual of *sati* – taking her sacrifice into her own hands and leaping into the ocean, and being carried to sea on the back of dolphins.[40] Of course, the notion of "auto-sacrifice" offers itself up to a huge array of metaphorical interpretations too – as, for instance, a figure for Kapil's treatment of her own body and life as material for text and performance – but here the suggestion remains that the text itself is merely notes on an action or process which somehow supersedes it.

At each moment, through these manoeuvres, *Ban en Banlieue* doubles on itself, towards a posited but unreachable referent, an absent centre which *this actual book I'm reading* can only note, yet of which it is the residue or end point. The work is built on this faltering claim to

[40] *Sati* is a practice whereby, in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's words "The Hindu widow ascends the pyre of the dead husband and immolates herself upon it. This is widow sacrifice" (Spivak, 1994, p. 93). An act of supposed self-immolation, a show of dedication, an act of sacrifice, which is also of course, a violence of *being sacrificed*. Spivak discusses this at length (see footnote 43).

Kapil re-tells a version of this re-worked *Sati* event multiple times throughout the text (Kapil, 2015, pp. 10, 74, 79-82). In the initial instance in particular, it blends together the myth of Kapil Muni: "a woman who—Ban-like—contorted [leaped] out of the sacrificial [bridal] fire and is [was] carried out to sea—the Bay of Bengal—on the backs of tiny pink dolphins. […] Kapil Muni—seated—opens his third-eye as she drifts past Sagar Island—and sends a beam of gold [rose] [blue] light to her" (2015, p. 10).

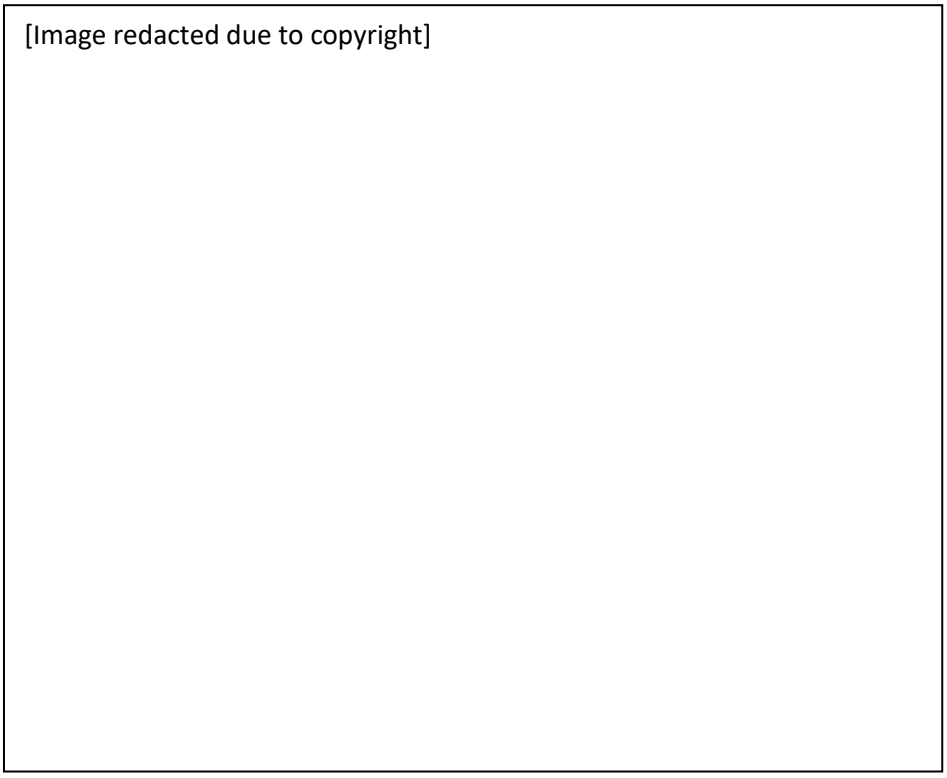
self-externality. This split is firstly towards another un-written work in language, “a novel of Ban written [from 2010 to 2014] in the contemporary tradition of Indian writing in English, itself [abandoned]” (Kapil, 2015, p. 12). This is the work referred to as “Ban” in the first section, the novel that these notes fail to be, and yet memorialise and outlive. The text is also split towards its performance actions – those listed in the ‘contents’, the act transcribed in ‘[13 Errors for Ban]’, and the acts of lying down which blend the fictionalised narrative of Ban the protagonist and the generative performance-acts of Bhanu her writer. These actions then are internal to the text, written here in front of me, and external in the posited actual event of their occurrence.

This supplementary, referential quality, alongside the emphasis on “errors”, failures and absences in the writing, suggests an absence or insufficiency at the heart of the text. In a move which exemplifies my sense of how that absence is conceptualised, Kapil’s contribution to the AWP panel in ‘[13 Errors]’ opens with a performance action: “Nude Page for Ban: ‘Would you, or someone else you know, smear this page with soot from a car’s diesel pipe or dirt from the asphalt? And let this, this dirty page, be the page that I submit?’” (2015, p. 19). Kapil here wishes to replace the presentation of a conventional paper, the reading of a text, with a performance which visually represents the emptiness or insufficiency of writing, whilst at the same time aesthetically defacing and transgressing the space where text could be. The content of this absence is placed somewhere in the gaps created by the dual split, between the text that is, and the possibility of a text that might be, and between text and performance.

The account of another of the performances listed in the ‘Contents’ section becomes key for me in further understanding this construction of an absent content, that which the text splits itself apart towards, but always inevitably fails to reach. This account begins: “At the last moment, it seems unbearable to read my actual writing aloud”. Instead of reading, Kapil gives an “improvised performance”, in which she asks three women of colour to stand to her left, and eleven white men to her right, and then invites the men to strike her partially naked body (2015, p. 17). Later, in ’13 Errors’, Kapil writes: “when the opportunity came to present my work at a literary event, I was mortified at the thought of reading Ban”; this is followed by another performance in which Kapil strips, climbs inside a red bag, or “meat sack”, and convulses her body in “a gesture-posture set for Ban” (2015, p. 24).

In both cases, the performances emerge from a strong affective resistance to reading the work aloud: it is “unbearable”, Kapil is “mortified”. She expresses here a revulsion at the work, as

if, in the atmosphere of absence, failure, insufficiency, Kapil feels that her work can never act as she wishes it to, that something of the exchange between work and reader is deeply unsatisfying. The central insufficiency of *Ban* becomes implicitly a failure of writing in general, which is also *the affect of its failure*. This in turn suggests that what the work fails to transmit might itself be affective, the subtlety of feeling and experience at its centre. Into this space, into the impossibility of the existence of a text that would not feel this way, steps the non-verbal, bodily actions of performance. As well as giving an anecdotal – still textual – account of this move, the substitution of text is also made formally, through the inclusion of photographs throughout (just as artwork in Robertson's *3 Summers* non-verbally represents, contorts and combines elements which recur in the poems), with date and location, signalling that they depict and emerge from some of those same performance-actions.



(Kapil, 2015, p. 26)

I read this additionally through the explicit articulations throughout the text of a desire to reach towards kinds of affects and experiences which can't be expressed and heard through coherent linguistic articulation: "I tried to trap the sounds made—sub-auditory—by Ban" (Kapil, 2015, p. 23); Kapil describes her obsession with the gestures in the novels of Kundera,

because “They chart what remains undomesticated not as problems, but desires” (2015, p. 69); “Approaching Ban as a pre-speech space: not linguistically, but in the sense of a body whose breath has been taken away” (2015, p. 89); “I was interested in vibration. I was interested in what happens when you don’t say anything at all” (2015, p. 99).

That which is below the threshold of hearing, which happens outside of, before, or below speech, is conceived of here in terms of the eruptions of the acted-upon body. Its “breath”, from which it draws the capacity for speech, is taken away, as through an experience of shock, of a physical blow, or, metaphorically, through a structural silencing. These bodily eruptions are conveyed and received as a “vibration”, a signal received as sound and touch, rather than through the conveyance of pre-formed ideas in language. When this sense of what is felt in the body but below speech is added to the notion of “undomesticated desires”, it brings me back to the notion of infra-linguistic affect, to desires, pains, and the whole array of affective responses which speak of the bodily potential that can’t be contained by conceptual limits. Kapil expresses her desire to do poetic work that thinks directly about those infra-linguistic bodily capacities which are hardest to express or contain in poetry, describing her performance contribution to the AWP panel as “at the limits of the poetic project—its capacity: for embodiment, for figuration, for what happens to bodies when we link them to the time of the event” (2015, p. 20).[41]

The “notebook form” (Kapil, 2015, p. 92), the self-splitting function which defers and muddies the subject of the text, positing a central unwritten and unrealisable work of Ban, feels like the formal enacting of this desire, just as it also emerges from Kapil’s resistance to reciting that which is written. *The work of Ban* becomes the dialectical longing to write into the text that which could never possibly be coherently included in a work written here, as a book, as words on a page: the affective, aesthetic, bodily contents of performance which are least verbal, which overspill the containment of writing, and behind these, the affective-bodily contents of the experiences (of pain, violence, oppression) to which those performances refer. “What do they receive?” Kapil asks, of the protesters who watch one of her memorial rituals for Nirbhaya; “An image” she answers. And extending the question: “Which hormones does it produce?” (Kapil, 2015, p. 16). The delightful coincidence of language in which Kapil invokes a term – “hormones” – which has been so key to my reading of Robertson is perhaps

[41] You might notice in this use of “the event” another echo – perhaps incidental, but close nonetheless – of Massumi’s own language, as encountered in Chapter 3, for thinking about how affective possibilities and limits are inscribed or troubled in each interaction.

just that, a coincidence. Yet, bringing together "image" and "hormones" in the question of what spills out from a protest event which forms and precedes her book, Kapil similarly figures her writing as aiming to generate these kinds of aesthetic-bodily signals that move between individual and collective.

We have a text, then, which is constitutionally built around a logic of unreachable content, a text which is aware of its own failure and insufficiency, a book which longs not to be a book, which longs to act as a kind of gesture, and which thinks of itself as embodied and gestural – which wishes to be a body, an image, an illegible mark. I take it as an implicit claim of *Ban* that these forms have a content which is more able to do the work of charting and disrupting the racist and patriarchal structural injustices at the book's centre, to convey something of the infra-linguistic affective experiences, strains and instabilities produced by those structures, and push towards the imagination of new alternatives than the novel that this work isn't. This maps on to the established link in this thesis between non-recuperable forms in writing and infra-linguistic experiences, as part of the mechanism through which poetry might gesture towards the fractures and hidden potentialities already existing within our experience of ideological subjectification. If the performances, like the photographs, are modes of non-recuperable formal practice, their inclusion in the text, and its deferral of itself as its own notes, are strategies for the work to reach out of writing; they aim to include or reach towards the infra-linguistic, through linguistic means.

The form of the work as 'notes', as it is posited to replace the unwritten more conventional novel, seems to buy into the analysis of 'realist', easily naturalizable, recuperable writing which I sketched out in Chapter 3. That is, the idea that a readily intelligible writing – even one which presents radical messaging or marginalised experiences – tends towards the reproduction of the conditions of those experiences, since they are also the preconditions of intelligibility. Yet, like Bonney at his most pessimistic, *Ban* also goes beyond those critiques by supposing that even the more experimental form of writing presented here is insufficient, or that its best possibility of working interestingly and disruptively is to include as a constitutive element an admittance of its own insufficiency. I read this emphasis on the failure of textual representation against the background of my thinking, after Althusser, on the failure of resistive action in general, and the tendency towards failure of any action or writing to do anything at all besides reproducing the conditions of its possibility. Kapil's work, as with this whole thesis, begins from the admittance of failure. Only once that admission is made is it able to investigate the cracks and instabilities in this process of ideological reproduction,

pushing towards new relations and coherences through a failing, negative or non-recuperable representational relation to the actually existing but not-yet-coherent experiences which offer some resistance to that reproduction.

Illegible subjects

In order to understand the resistive work that these formal manoeuvres in *Ban* do, I need to examine in a little more detail its relationship to the work's thematic treatment of experiences of violence and pain. In addition to the symbolic presence of the violence done to Nirbhaya and Blair Peach, *Ban* is full of examples of different kinds of overlapping violences from Ban's own life.

A member of the National Front youth league, in between urinating in his neighbours' milk bottles, witnesses a man beating his wife, and responds by screaming "'Go back home, you bleeding animal!'" (Kapil, 2015, p. 59), only able to see this gendered violence through the lens of his own violent perception, as an inherent racial animality. The longest narrative anecdote, in '*Five fictions for Ban'*, in which Ban and her friend Thippy spend a day escaping into the wet fields around their suburbs, ends with a return to the constants of underlying violence and abuse:

> We got into the car and in slow motion my father twisted from the chest up, from the driver's seat, to hit my face so hard the side of my head hit the window.
>
> At this moment, I became Ban. When Thippy grew up, and his own father dragged him from the school disco at Villier's High School, and beat him on his legs and back, he became a Sikh fundamentalist. What choice did he have? […] What I've left out is his brother, a boy I knew who also made me Ban. Not because he accompanied me; on the contrary, because he, too, made me weep. He wasn't a boy. When we were eight, he was eighteen. (Kapil, 2015, p. 55)

When the adult Kapil is "on the outskirts of Delhi" she writes: "I extend my life by trying to be a person in India. Here a person might BECOME not just through acts of descent or alliance […] but through the volume and scope of matter itself". Yet, in the next paragraph, "driving through the forest at 4 a.m." she passes a troop of BJP members – "the Hindu nationalist movement and party" – "on patrol", carrying long sticks, on their way to a rally. "It's time to go home" (Kapil, 2015, pp. 72-3).[42]

[42] The Bharatiya Janata Party – which has existed in its current form since 1980 – adheres to the ideology of Hindutva, a Hindu supremacism or nationalism, specifically in the context of the idea of the national identity of

Sikh, Hindu and British (white) nationalisms, partner and parental domestic violence, and sexual abuse overlap and intertwine here, and those who are on the receiving end of one kind of violence are shown to be capable of enacting another. There is an emphasis on painful "becoming" in these passages: "I became Ban"; the causal relationship between Thippy's experience of violence and his fundamentalism; the undermining of a more restorative version of this concept in the last example with the interruption of grim political reality. This conceives of violence as inscribing itself on each subject, in a general atmosphere of pain in which the experiences of these different forms of violence perpetuate the ongoing enaction of the others.

Moments such as those above, and particularly the long third section of 'Five Fictions for Ban' from which I've quoted, slip into a mode of fairly conventional, anecdotal story-telling which exists in tension with the other modes of the text, its fragmentation, self-notation and surrealism. Kapil writes in a final note that 'Five Fictions for Ban' was the first piece she wrote of this project, towards "the novel I wanted to write" (2015, p. 99). These anecdotal moments are the traces of the already-insufficient mode of telling. They provide concrete situations, a basis in the particular experiences of living in the world under certain conditions: growing up in the immigrant suburb, experiences of familial violence, the feeling of 'returning' to an India itself riddled with racial violence. At the same time they are the points from which Kapil must extend outwards. Even in the telling, it is a constitutional element of *Ban* that we know that this mode has only a very limited capability for addressing the problems of which it tells, and that the text must attempt to reach into what it cannot represent of them, to make these stories more than just the reproduction of themselves.

The notion of infra-linguistic experience comes into this most strongly when Kapil writes:

> I think often about low-levels of racism, the very parts of a social system or institution that are hard to address, precisely because they are non-verbal—a greater trigger for schizophrenia in immigrant populations: in women, that is, than larger events, the race riot, for example, with its capacity: to be analysed. (2015, p. 48)

India as inherently linked to Hindu culture and values. The BJP won a landslide election in India in 2014, under the leadership of Narenda Modi, who has strong ties with other Hindu Nationalist groups, and as Chief Minister of Gujurat had been criticised for handling the 2002 Gujurat riots, in which hundreds of people, predominantly Muslims, were killed. Since 2014, the often violent persecution of Muslims in particular has escalated – and continued to do so significantly since the publication of *Ban* – such that in February 2020, for example, Delhi saw some of the worst inter-communal riots since the 1980s. See e.g.: https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/bjp-incited-hatred-longer-stop-200309071037099.html

Ban en Banlieue is concerned with experiences wrought by racist and patriarchal structures, which also disrupt the possibility of fully hearing the voices of those who experience them. Yet Kapil in her turn disrupts the novel which might more conventionally tell these stories, with notes towards the infra-linguistic content of performance. The "non-verbal" is here a place of harm, as well as a source of the potential for positive articulation and imaginative work which diverges from our currently existing ideological conditions. It is a place also for the harm which is obscured, whose unnameable, naturalised presence is perpetuated by the boundaries of intelligible expressibility enforced by those conditions. These too must be brought into articulation, into the space where they can be shared, if we are to do the work of resistance, of imagining and enacting alternative conditions.

Amy De'Ath writes of the above lines:

> This incompatibility with analysis seems a key characteristic of a racialised and gendered abject sphere. The non-verbal, as these lines imply, is a register that goes hand-in-hand not with the event, 'the race riot, for example', but with the perennial experiences of those forced to endure the bubbling quotidian mix of racism, Islamophobia, sexism and misogyny emanating from the emasculated poverty of the white dispossessed, deindustrialised social landscape. (De'Ath, 2016, para. 26)

The reaching in *Ban* towards non-verbal contents, beyond positing an insufficiency, merges a raced and gendered critique of the cultural limits of intelligibility with a corresponding attempt to map out the positive presence of those elements of experience, both painful and hopeful, which are uncodified and uncontainable within currently intelligible language. In this, the ongoing conceptualising of the resistive potential of the infralinguistic in this thesis meets more familiar thinking about the ways certain marginal voices and experiences can be rendered outside of common comprehension, of being heard by the structures of understanding which privilege others – why women's, immigrants' and people of colour's experiences might not be comprehensible to a white male hegemony that isn't interested in understanding them.[43]

[43] This claim – that the constructed 'we' of Western bourgeois society renders only some voices and experiences within its frame of possible recognition, and silences others not just by refusing to listen but by constructing itself as unable to hear, rendering their voices unintelligible – seems commonplace to me, as loosely assimilated into the theoretical framework of e.g. the very online and mostly university-educated contemporary left. For a canonical account of this "epistemic violence" (Spivak, 1994, pp. 76, 78, 82, 90), we might look to e.g Gayatari Chakravorty Spivak's 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'. Spivak discusses how imperialism, "the ideological construction of gender" (1994, p. 82) and the "international division of labour" (1994, p. 84) construct a Western knowledge, a Subject who can speak and be heard, and an Other, who is outside its knowledge, whose voice it is constitutionally unable to recognise, a "historically muted subject" (1994, p. 91), "people whose consciousness we cannot grasp" (1994, p. 84). This most particularly refers to the subaltern woman, but the critique also recognises the various and interlocking effects of these ideological processes across geography, class, race and

~

Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought.

(Audre Lorde, 'Poetry is not a Luxury', *Your Silence Will Not Protect You,* 2017, p. 8)

~

Fred Moten and Stefano Harney give an account of the relationship between what they term "legibility" (Moten & Harney, 2013, p. 80) or "communicability" (2013, p. 53), and the re-production of white supremacy.

They name contemporary capitalist and colonialist regulation as "governance", which is "provoked by the *communicability of unmanageable racial and sexual difference*" (Moten & Harney, 2013, p. 53). In this account, reified and essentialising notions of the differences between racialised and gendered subjects – and their set places within the structures of racial capital, inevitably perpetuating gendered and racial violence and subjugation – are reproduced and enforced precisely by their communicability. This is intertwined with the "privatisation" of the social subject: "governance is a strategy for the privatization of social reproductive labor, a strategy provoked by this communicability" (2013, p. 53). Governance manages individuals' wide and varying affective impulses, desires, wishes and needs – that which has the potential to be unmanageable – by rendering them up as "interests", legible specifically to racial-capital, as voter or customer demographic. In doing so it buries all that is divergent and resistive, all that is incoherent to its structures of coherence, pushing each subject to understand themselves within already legible categories, desires, social functions. Any

---

gender – "if you are poor, black and female you get it in three ways" (1994, p. 90). Spivak also uses the term "recognition by assimilation" (1994, p. 90), suggesting the way in which experiences and subjectivities can only be recognised by the degree to which they conform to the intelligibility of the dominant subject position.

This essay ends with a lengthy discussion of the practice of 'sati' which also appears in *Ban* (see footnote 40). Spivak casts this as an example of the extreme voicelessness of the Hindu woman within imperialist knowledge. Between "the dialectically interlocking sentences that are constructible as 'White men are saving brown women from brown men' and 'The women wanted to die'", "one never encounters the testimony of the women's voice-consciousness" (1994, p. 94). Spivak offers an example of a purposive re-working of this framework, in the suicide of a young woman involved in the armed struggle for Indian independence. Perhaps Kapil's reworking of the symbolism through the myth of Kapil Muni is another such re-working, which must, I think, be in direct conversation with Spivak. There is surely another essay to be written – by another writer than me, and one who is much more familiar with these cultural contexts – on the relation between the treatment of the practice in Spivak and Kapil.

Another canonical space for working out the position on who can and can't be heard might be in the writings of Audre Lorde, who writes, for example, about how within the narrowness of whiteness and patriarchy "women of colour become 'other', the outsider whose experience and tradition is too 'alien' to comprehend" (Lorde, 2017, p. 98).

marginal subject becomes legible (to the dominant centre) only on terms that perpetuate their marginalisation.

~

> Those who can represent themselves will also be those who re-present themselves as interests in one and the same move, collapsing the distinction.
>
> (Fred Moten & Stefano Harney, 'Blackness and Governance', *The Undercommons*, 2013, p. 56)

~

Against legible representation, Moten and Harney propose an aesthetic of 'blackness'. Blackness is described as an "anoriginary drive", "whose fateful internal difference (as opposed to fatal flaw) is that it brings regulation into existence, into a history irregularly punctuated by transformations that drive imposes upon regulation" (Moten & Harney, 2013, p. 47). "Blackness", as Moten and Harney figure it, is multiple: it is a category around which regulation is organised and enforced, but it is also a set of shared histories, identities, cultures, and experiences, including the shared experiences of oppression on which resistance might be founded.[44] The aesthetic of blackness responds to the violence of being essentialised by a hostile hegemony by refusing comprehension on pre-given terms, pushing towards a kind of inclusive amorphousness and incomprehensibility. Blackness makes the "dispossessive assertion of an internal difference, complexity or syntax" (2013, p. 48); it is an assertion of heterogeneity which comes directly out of racialisation, an "anti-essentialist anti-racism" (2013, p. 49). This thinking proposes kinds of resistive representation which oppose the oppressive force of racial categorisation by rendering oneself illegible to those structures: "We owe it to each other […] to give the lie to our own determination. We owe each other the indeterminate" (2013, p. 20).

In the pamphlet *Threads*, written collaboratively by Kapil, Sandeep Parmar and Nisha Ramayya, Parmar uses a passage from *Ban en Banlieue* as an epigraph or opening prompt for a discussion about the function of the white-coded lyric "I", and structures of self-representation in general, for writers of colour. This develops arguments made in Parmar's 'Not A British Subject' essay, which I have quoted previously. In a discussion which shares much with Moten and Harney's arguments, Parmar argues that these available structures of

[44] This line of argument shares something of the structure of Denise Riley's argument, discussed in the previous chapter, that the category of 'women' is both the basis and the object of feminist political resistance.

lyric representation alternately or in the same movement erase the experience of writers of colour and render them up in their most legible form.

Within the white lyric "I", Parmar finds herself "transformed into a curio of voice, an embodied other, an artefact vitrined alongside those with whom I shared a passing resemblance or common history"; yet, in "anti-lyric poetries" the poet is doomed "to not need to recognise oneself, to render oneself without a voice". The latter is "only appealing or possible to those who have not been screened out, marginalised, silenced by the powers inherent in language itself" (Parmar, Kapil, & Ramayya, 2018, pp. 9-11). The negation of voice functionally naturalises the unmarked hegemonic voice, and in doing so silences the different perspectives and experiences of poets of colour (or those marginalised along any other lines).

Parmar looks for alternatives to these poles as she experiences them between different white coded poetic traditions, between the readily recognisable realist forms which re-produce (white) stereotypical conceptions of marginalised experience, perpetuating the ideological structures of their marginalisation, and forms which acquiesce in the silencing that benefits those same structures. She turns to Rosi Braidotti's concept of "nomadic subjectivity", as a way to reach towards those marginal experiences in all their incomprehensible complexity:

> The point of nomadic subjectivity is to identify lines of flight, that is to say, a creative alternative space of becoming that would fall not between the mobile/immobile, the resident/the foreigner distinction, but within all these categories. The point is neither to dismiss nor to glorify the status of marginal, alien others, but to find a more accurate, complex location for a transformation of the very terms of their specification and of our political interaction. (Parmar, Kapil & Ramayya, 2018, p. 13, quoting Braidotti's *Nomadic Subjects*)

Parmar doesn't directly discuss *Ban* in relation to this idea of "nomadic subjectivity", but instead invites this passage and its ideas to be read alongside the Kapil quotation with which she begins:

> 'What is born in England but is never English?' What grew a tail? What leaned over and rested its hands on its knees? An immigrant has a set of complex origins, is from elsewhere; the monster is made, on the other hand, from local mixtures of organic and inorganic materials […] I thought I was writing about an immigrant. I was writing about a monster. (Parmar, Kapil & Ramayya 2018, p. 9, quoting Kapil, 2015, p. 21)

We can see Kapil sidestep "the resident/the foreigner distinction", by turning from "immigrant" to "monster". In the implicit connection between this passage, Braidotti and the discussion of the lyric "I", Parmar points to the refusal of easily categorizable representation

in *Ban en Banlieue,* which can also be seen as a model of precisely the kind of racialised indeterminacy posited by Moten and Harney. Parmar goes on to describe the subjective logic of Kapil's earlier work, *Schizophrene,* saying that Kapil "form[s] a subject that is […] marginal to national borders […] One that is unfinishing, that resists the violences of both coherence and negation" (2018, p. 27).

A resistive refusal of legible subjectivity of this kind is built into *Ban en Banlieue,* and closely connected to its refusal and disruption of conventional narrative, and of text itself. Just as Ban's story cannot be straight-forwardly told, but must gesture towards something else outside of the possibilities of textual telling, Ban herself is never simply a recognisable vision of a young British-Indian girl fixed at a particular point in history. Elsewhere as in the passage above, Ban is object, monster, or the material constituents of rituals or performances, affective relations and aesthetic contents: "she is a shape or bodily outline that's familiar: yet inaccurate: to what the thing is" (Kapil, 2015, p. 20); "from one angle, Ban is slick, like the emerald or indigo tint of ring feathers. From another she is a kerosene patch set on fire" (2015, p. 36). Ban becomes the embodied contents of an aesthetic which might in some more than descriptive way make visible, and do serious thinking about, the violence of Kapil's experience within an ambiguous British/immigrant identity. Kapil's first-person writer-narrator undergoes her own metamorphosis and monstering: watching a Ban who has now herself become (switched into the place of) an adult writer, in a café in India:

> But what is she writing? In my own way, from this wet perch, one foot chained to the cage, I am staring too. A parrot. A shabby, vivid bird, pecking at her words. In times of great freedom, when the writing comes, I fly back to my own writing with what she knows. This is another reason not to write novels. (Kapil, 2015, p. 45)

Parmar writes, of the place of the "nomadic subject" against more reproductive structures of representation:

> certain poetic modes and traditions, their markets and readerships, essentialise through othering those poets who assimilate within and refuse to threaten fixed cultural hierarchies and borders. An alternate space of culture requires a rejection of culture that supersedes the complexity of the individual. (Parmar, Kapil & Ramayya, 2018, p. 14)

Kapil's turn to the illegible, gestural, infra-linguistic, is a refusal to re-present herself (to use Moten and Harney's term) – to codify the complex experiences of the text, as a stable otherness, assimilable by the reproductive force of its conditions. She responds to an already inscribed otherness, that which arises out of racial and gendered oppression, by purposively

turning it against dominant ideology, re-writing it as a defiant unknowability, refusing determination with indeterminacy.

The shift from knowable other, to indefinable "monster" parallels the move from novel to performance-gesture; each posits the longed-for content of text and experience, that which it wishes to convey, as outside of pre-existing structures of linguistic representation.

The formal muddying, the strategies of split and deferral, and positing of an unwritten content in *Ban*, are attempts to explore actual lived experiences of oppression and marginalisation without reifying categorical difference or reproducing oppressive frameworks, as might occur with their telling in conventionally recuperable terms. These strategies reach towards those aspects of experiences that are only articulable in ways which diverge from the general intelligibility of their available language, in service of a new articulation which is also an imaginative possibility of new and not-yet-legible subjectivity. In this way, the subject matter and formal procedures of *Ban en Banlieue* join together in the attempt to intervene in the dialectic between the violences of legibility and voicelessness.

~

> I think about a monster to think about an immigrant, but Ban is neither of these things.
>
> (Bhanu Kapil, 'London (2)', *Ban en Banlieue,* 2015, p. 78)

~

In the rest of this chapter, I want to trace how this intervention takes the form of a reaching towards possibilities of identification, shared understandings, solidarities and subjective connections, as a positively illegible form of contact, or touch. The figuration of this contact is made possible by the on-going links I've identified in the text, between infra-linguistic affective-aesthetic contents, the raced and gendered body, and possibilities of understanding and connection which break through normative structures of representation and reproduction of marginalised and oppressed experiences.

This argument will take me in sequence through a series of interconnected thematic areas of the text. Firstly, I consider the use of colour as an aesthetic signal, a medium for transmission at the level of the infra-linguistic. This conception meets the presence of colour as a social signal with regards to the surface of the raced body. This in turn brings me to the confrontation with the raced and gendered body in the text and its performances' use of nudity. Finally, this interconnected argumentative thread culminates in the relationship between bodily touch, infralinguistic communication, and subjective identification.

Colour and the body

One of the prominent ways the longing for contents which go beyond the representational and communicative possibilities of already-known language is met in the fabric of *Ban en Banlieue*'s written narratives and descriptions is through the use of colour. Colour exists in the text as a kind of non-recuperable aesthetic-affective content in itself, which works towards communication below the threshold of the infra-linguistic, an aesthetic content transmissible between figures but not recuperable in language.

In the early reference to Kapil Muni, the mythical figure sends "a beam of gold [rose] [blue] light" to the "Ban-like" "sacrificial [bridal]" figure as she escapes her death and is carried out to sea; Kapil writes "I wanted Ban to receive the energy too, simultaneously, here" (2015, p. 10). Talking in '[13 Errors]' of childhood trips to the Tate to see "the golden ink and peacock green or blue embellishments" of Blake's illuminated manuscripts, Kapil writes:

> The error here is that I chose to write my book in a place where these colors and memories are not readily available. There is no bank. Instead I scream them—I scream the colors each to each—and this is difficult. (2015, p. 23)

Later: "Ban fulfils the first criterium of monstrosity simply by degrading: by emitting bars of light from her teeth and nails" (2015, p. 28).

When Kapil describes a scene, "along the river" in India, in which "women are gathering raw silk and cotton in coils of dripping colour" (2015, p. 79), it pulls a thread of recollection through the "long red tail" which trails from a sheet in Kapil's AWP performance in '[13 Errors]' (2015, p. 19), and the "milky, lilac effluent" which "spools" from a factory into the Grand Union canal near Ban's home (2015, p. 30). The scene is followed by another, casting back in memory, which pulls too on this thread:

> I am born in England on a summer's day, girls with ribbons in their hair trailing an even paler red light from their bodies as they gallop past on the street below. I count their cells. Each cell gives off a tiny bit of light. (Kapil, 2015, p. 79)

Kapil writes, just before this, and just after the river scene above: "This is the day that wires me to color" (2015, p. 79).

As I read the vivid and ever-present colours of *Ban en Banlieue* – as they light up scenes, travel to, from, between bodies – I think of the work which Robertson does with colour, in the *Office for Soft Architecture,* where the coloured surface offers a feeling interaction between object and body, a moment where indeterminate, unstable and uncontainable affective

experience leaks out into the world, that it might be figured anew. I think too, of Robertson's general figuration of the aesthetic-affective content of feminine decoration; also of Sean Bonney's idea of "harmony", as a kind of musical vibration, an aesthetic-affective transmission of energy, a sub-threshold communication.

Colour enters the text as a mythical restorative "energy", as a beam of light sent intentionally to a woman symbolically escaping patriarchal violence; the "here" in which Ban might also "receive the energy" is then the here of the text, in what I take as an early expression of the desire to do restorative and resistive work with aesthetic-affective contents or signals. As the colours are later expressed as screams, they strongly suggest a relation to affective experiences such as pain which exist below the threshold of coherent linguistic articulation – that which takes its expression in the non- or pre-verbal form of a scream.

Further, the colours here are not only received by the perceiving body, but also emanate from it – in a manner which is highly compatible with Robertson's thinking, about colour as a kind of affective exchange, and about the bodily nature of the aesthetic-affective. As the coloured surface is the surface of the body – the cells and teeth emanating light – it is precisely the body which becomes the site of aesthetic-affective encounter, just as it is in the images or performance gestures that centre Kapil's own exposed body. We can see this representation of the body as meeting point between the affective and the aesthetic, conceived, as in Robertson, as e*mbodied* contents, where its sensations creep into the conception of what might happen in the language of the text, as in: "when my nervous system hurts, so does the sentence" (Kapil, 2015, p. 61), or "the bodywork language of imprint, fingertips, notochord, the watercolour map of the animal body" (2015, p. 87). Colour as an exchange of energy becomes a way to represent the longed-for non-recuperable content of Kapil's performances, the possibilities of inter-personal transmission – or communication, thinking of that term's development after Bonney – of something which is felt in the body but currently below the threshold of coherent linguistic articulation.

This last quotation brings into the text the presence of Kapil's own interest and practice in bodywork. It comes from a passage in the 'End-notes' in which Kapil writes that "conversations on embryology and cranio-sacral bodywork" lead to the idea which runs through the book that "Ban's twitches and subtle movements were a form of discharge, an activity of the nervous system" (Kapil, 2015, p. 87). Kapil elsewhere describes the particular forms which she practices as "an integrative bodywork focussing on soft tissue dysfunction

and injury," which has some relation to the practice of Rolfing, a technique invented by Ida Rolf that involves manipulating the fascia or connective tissue, "but I also include Ayurvedic/energy work too" (Donovan, 2010, p. 60, quoting personal correspondence with Kapil). As I read references to colour and energy through a theoretical and poetic framework, as figures or combinative concepts for kinds of signals, affects, aesthetics and communicative relations, this suggests that there is also a more direct and literal sense of these terms for Kapil, in terms of understandings of colour, energy and the body which come directly from her engagement with these alternative therapeutic practices. In these practices – themselves potentially antagonistic with 'Western medicine' and the determinations of the empiricist rationalism which underpins it – colour is really seen to work directly and literally with the body.

In a discussion of one of Kapil's previous works, *Humanimal,* Thom Donovan connects Kapil's bodywork practice with the idea of the monstrous and non-conforming body. That book, like much of Kapil's prior work, presages *Ban*'s use of the monster, focussing around the true story of Kamala and Amala, two girls found living with wolves in Bengal in 1920. Donovan suggests that "at the heart of this work is an admission of guilt", in the connection between the doctors who attempted to brutally "normalize" the bodies of the two girls, and her own bodywork practice, signified partly by the use of an Ida Rolf quotation as epigraph to *Humanimal* (Donovan, 2011, para. 68). Underlying this guilt, Donovan argues, are the questions: "Who gets to put the 'monstrous' body 'back together'? Who says what or who is monstrous? How do metaphors of the inhuman or liminally human affect how we encounter the human-animal other?" (Donovan, 2011, para. 68). Before *Ban,* colour and the body are already intertwined for Kapil in troubled questions of healing and normativity.

As these concerns carry across into *Ban,* the relationship suggested between Ban's "monstrosity" and the light which comes from her body further posits that the non-recuperable aesthetic content of colour makes an essential link between experiences of identity-based violence and the resistive work of transmitting what is least recognisable in those experiences. As well as the engagement with Kapil's Indian familial background through the implicit presence of Ayurvedic beliefs, the coloured surface of the body and the social content transmitted from that surface can never not be about race. The colour of the body is part of the race marker, through which an individual is marked as other, and around which much of their oppression is constructed. Kapil explicitly flags this, whilst bringing it into the field of language where colour is also a kind of aesthetic transmission, and energy

sent between bodies. Ban is described as "a woman (girl) so black she radiates a limited consciousness" (Kapil, 2015, p. 34). Later: "Is Ban a "black" person, using a mode of address she would not dare to in the United Kingdom? Is Ban black? Though now she is black. And flecked with silver" (2015, p. 56).

The social-political gesture of solidarity of identifying as black at this point in time, becomes also a transmission of energy, between already raced bodies. Ban's racial identity and experience, or the shared perception between people who are othered and oppressed by perceptions and structures of race, is also cast in the text as a kind of aesthetic content. That is, the colour which emanates from her skin is not only a social marker, but is also a kind of beautiful and ineffable monstrosity, the content of which spills out of the conceptual limits of the language available to it within a racist society, whether that's the explicit insult or the categorical and ideologically reproductive structures of representation.

The particular conception of the body – shown to be always gendered as well as raced – within this developing notion of aesthetic-affective exchange represented by the use of colour in the text can be seen in its use of nudity, and most often the nude body of Kapil herself, made visible as that of a woman of colour specifically. This is seen first in the early performances, in which, instead of reading her work, Kapil strips down, and has the audience witness her as a receiver of bodily violence. The first of these is prefaced with: "To strip down, partially, because nudity, to be effective, to be frightening, should be that" (Kapil, 2015, p. 17). The effect of the nudity and the wish for it to be "frightening" leads into the performance of explicitly racial and gendered violence, the staging of blows to Kapil's body, from white male audience members only. The performance in '[13 Errors]' explicitly flags the wish for nudity to in some way address the reality of these endemic kinds of violence: one of the earlier 'errors' is simply "How nudity functions in the work" (2015, p. 21); after the performance of stripping down, and symbolic violence inside the "meat sack", Kapil writes "The error of performance was not that I did these things—but rather—that the discharge of something long held—in the body—does not—affect—or modulate—the resurgence—of a latent—and vehement (British) Far Right" (2015, p. 24). In these performances, the exposure of Kapil's nude body is a confrontation with the audience, both bringing forth and attempting, falteringly, to intervene in the real and latent violence of its racial and gender markers. This same confrontation is enacted with the audience of the book itself, through the arresting cover image of a naked woman lying on the ground.

This function of nudity, as an aspect of performance, comes up hard against the relationship between colour and race, and the unavoidable presence of the mark of otherness on the exposed body of the person of colour in a social setting within a racist society – a signal sent unbidden and unwanted:

> Days you never see, chucking back Bombay Sapphire gin on the patio. Define patio. You could be naked out back and no one would see. Nobody. Where the two vowels ooze geneticity. Or display it. Just as the body without clothes is analogous to a race mark. I asked my nine-year-old son why he wore his T-shirt to the outdoor pool. He said: "Mom, I think there might be some racists here." I want to tell him: "Honey. Honey…" (Kapil, 2015, p. 44).

"Bombay Sapphire" here contains an unremarked suggestion of the residue of British colonialism in India, flattened as it has been by capitalist brand-management to a de-politicised symbol of minor indulgence. The passage then recalls all of the previous instances of nudity in performance, through the removal of performance and reception in the private comfort of the patio, before re-asserting the potential violence of being watched. The private space of being unseen contrasts with the entire public realm, in which – as the young child heartbreakingly comes to realise – the raced body is always seen, and seen as raced. "The body without clothes is analogous to a race mark" provides a very explicit key for reading all of Kapil's uses of nudity throughout the text. The nude body here is not exactly made to contain everything in this scene, or that which spins around it – the history of colonialism, the scarcity of private bodily comfort, the heartbreak of the son coming into the realisation of racist interpellation. Rather, the book claims, the nude body already contains all of these different and conflicting elements. It is from this that the performance and image of the raced nude body derives some of its important infra-linguistic content.

The nude female body in Kapil also always contains the traces of sexual violence. The image of Nirbhaya, and the implicit backdrop of endemic sexual violence, is present in every act of lying down in the book. Further, the description of her body "gutted with a steel pipe" in that first performance note (Kapil, 2015, p. 16) is more directly echoed, for instance when Ban is described as "a vaginal opening […] a blob of meat on the sidewalk" (2015, p. 20). The violence of the body as meat ambiguously meets the function of nudity in performance when Kapil writes "I wanted to write a book on a butcher's table in New Delhi […] Swinging from that hook in the window, I wanted to write a book. Inverted, corrupted, exposed to view" (2015, p. 42). The writer's body, its exposure in writing and in the performances adjacent to this writing are here made violent. Sexual nudity intersects with the violence of racism when

Kapil writes “I don’t want to have sex ever again in my life. | I don’t want it if it means partnering with a white man” (2015, p. 45).

The nude body, of the performer, is then a key meeting point between an exploration of sexual violence, violence enacted upon raced bodies, and the capacity of the arresting image, the non-verbal, bodily performance, to create sensational shifts. Kapil writes**:** “The form is the body—in the most generic way I could possibly use that word. The nude body spills color. Blue nude, green nude […] I should stop writing now” (2015, p. 41). Nudity acts as a way to move through the limits of language, to attenuate the power of performance and colour as evocative for the audience member, onlooker or reader – particularly in the nudity of the body of a woman of colour – as confrontational, accusatory even, to white and male audiences.

In the connection between the aesthetic transmission of colour, and the acts of non-verbal performance which strain against the failures of writing, is a dialectical conception of bodily content. The body is a site of oppression, of ideological control and prefiguration, and simultaneously the seat of those affective responses to prefiguration which, partly because infra-linguistic and uncodified, most speak of the felt resistance to and instability of that prefiguration. Kapil’s performance, her conception of colour, of nudity, of their signalling properties, is partly then about re-conceptualising the possibilities of these signals which arise from points of pain and imposition, and harnessing that in the real lived experiences of people of colour which push at the unstable edges of the ideologically available conceptions of those experiences.

Touch as resistance

> Reaching and touching as the beginning actions, re-organized in time as desire.
>
> (Bhanu Kapil, *Humanimal: a project for future children,* 2009, p. 64)

~

Through the body, this affective-aesthetic transmission becomes a kind of contact materialised as touch. Immediately after the incident with the member of the National Front youth league, an anecdote which condenses much of the everyday violence of the book’s primary setting, Kapil writes:

> To reach the point at which: “life rubs up against matter, its inner core.” And thus to analyse nudity, in a text, as friction, the sacrifice gone wrong: but also: to normalize contact with membranes of all kinds—plants, brush, nettles, ivy, asphalt, skin. What is

> the function of a non-genital nudity in a work of narrative? How can the body perform something in a new way—something that belongs neither to the scene nor to history? (2015, p. 59)

This idea of "contact" between different subjects, with each other and the world, conceived as "membranes", brings together the web of concepts developing in my reading of *Ban* – the non-recuperable formal contents of the text, of its use of performance, colour and the body. The transmission of affective-aesthetic signals, bodily gestures, beams of light, becomes also the possibility of forms of identification, or recognition (thinking about the concept of non-reified recognition that I developed in my reading of Bonney), which are bodily, as kinds of touching. The (raced) (gendered) nude body is a threshold, meeting violence and oppression with confrontation (with the white/male reader/viewer), but also with positive contact – in the sense of reaching out, identifying with, sharing that which cannot be marked out and mastered from a hostile outside. In this sense, the question "how can the body perform something in a new way" becomes a question of bodies in general, asking how the poem can sketch out resistive forms of contact which let each body perform newly, together, in monstrosity; a question of collective transformation.

This always politicised notion of identification and touch is already at the heart of the central figure of the text. Amy De'ath writes of the lying down in *Ban*:

> It is a powerful gesture of solidarity with the horizontal figures of racialised dead women, with Blair Peach, with the child known as Ban, and with all those who bear the weight of (to quote another pointed metaphor) 'the strength of the British Pound'. (De'Ath, 2016, para. 17)

When Kapil first lies down, she puts herself in the place – literally – of Nirbhaya; when Ban lies down, she does so similarly at the site of Peach's death. Through the multiple performances, memories and fictionalisations of acts of lying down, Ban and Kapil reach across time, text, and the distance of fiction placed between them, to put themselves in one another's place, to lie next to each other. In doing this, there is an attempt to make a political and symbolic act from what is shared between them, from the experiences of violence, of gendered and racial oppression which link these acts and figures.

This identification is conceived specifically in terms of touch, or the transmission of energy between bodies. Within the account of colour – of the women gathering silk, and the memory of light-emitting girls – about to leave India to return to the US, Kapil writes: "It is the last day I knew you in the time that we touched" (2015, p. 79). The "you" here, touched through

the acts of performance, writing and thinking in these spaces, is Ban, but also, perhaps, Nirbhaya.

Yet this is precisely not a kind of identification which requires the identified-with figure to be known and understood, to be assimilated into a stable understanding of oneself. It is instead a non-reified recognition of some of the infra-linguistic contents of those experiences, through the signals of performance, of colour, through that which is felt and experienced in the body but which writing cannot hold. At the very end of the work, this idea of a bodily identification is strongly articulated as part of the drive of the work:

> This is why I write: to unfold the electrical mat of my nervous system. The nerves are all blue, red and yellow with flaring nodes. This is my cyborg text. It is planar. It is a substitute for other forms of speech, or intimacy. Glissant: 'nonhistory.' The boundaries of my work are 'structurally weak': Glissant. What weakened them? Violence. (Kapil, 2015, p. 108)

In this passage from the 'Butcher's Block Appendix', which the work claims was composed through a semi-random performance process, everything connects. The writing specifically aims to activate the tactile, sensate and colourful. It does so through a "cyborg" hybridity, of text and body, in an effort to open up what cannot be contained in more conventional writing, to mimic or create something like intimacy in this tactile writing, to be porous to those it touches, to let touching cross and alter the boundaries of body and work, as a response to experiences of violence.

I find myself returning to an early passage of *Ban*, as a staged encounter which has become central for me in my understanding of how the work synthesises all of the elements I've connected in this chapter: the work's folding of the connections between non-recuperable forms – fragmentary text, performance, colour – and infra-linguistic experiences – traumas, violences, desires – into the space of the raced and gendered body; the possibility, and also the necessity, for forms of transmission, of communication, which allow these experiences to be recognised in all their incomprehensibility, against the codifying and essentialising drive of racial, patriarchal capital. In 'Ban en Banlieues (suburban)':

> The country outside London, with its old parks and labyrinths of rhododendron and azalea.
>
> Futile and tropical pinks in a near-constant downpour of green, black and silver rain.
>
> In the forest surrounding London, a light ice falls through the trees.
>
> Like glitter.

> A snake, aspen-colored, bright yellow with green stripes, slips through the bracken, its pink eyes open and black diamond-shaped irises blinking on then off. In frozen time, ancient beings emerge with the force of reptiles. In the forest, time and weather are so mixed up, a trope of bedtime stories, bottom-up processing, need. I need the snake to stop the news. This is the news: a girl's body is dressed and set: still yet trembling, upon a rise in the forest. There are stars. Now it's night. Time is coming on hard. The snake slips over her leg, her brown ankle. […]
>
> […]
>
> An April snowfall, the ground still coppery, gold. A snake has escaped from time: a water box, a shelf. Volatile, starving, it senses a parallel self, the girl's body emitting a solar heat, absorbed in the course of a lifetime but now discharging, pushing off. Without thought, below thought, it moves towards her through the rusted trees. (Kapil, 2015, pp. 39-40)

With the dense use of vibrant colour – both straight-forwardly descriptive but also more surreal with "like glitter" and "a light ice", as in rain or snow, but also perhaps something like an ice made of light – literal description and narrative is adorned, decorated, becomes otherworldly, gesturing towards the signalling aesthetic content of colour uncontainable by language.

This is the setting in which Ban lies down, in a re-telling of the more prosaic earlier comment:

> I grew up partly in Ruislip. The Park Woods that bounded it were rimmed, themselves, with landforms that kept in the boar. I used to go directly to those masses and lie down on them, subtly above a city but beneath the plate of leaves, in another world. (Kapil, 2015, p. 34)

The scene is set as one partly of banal escapism then. Ban retreats to the quiet woods, perhaps from the pains and stresses of her everyday life and of her home, from the daily violence of the immigrant suburb, hiding, seeking respite in "another world". Through the act of lying down, the scene reaches out as an emblem or symbol too, connecting this to all the other acts, to Peach, Nirbhaya, the riot. Where in the earlier, first person account this is Ban's and/or Bhanu's body, in this specific story, it becomes in the later account "a girl's body", "dressed and set", a symbolic image which begins from the single story and expands outwards into more vast signifying and identificatory potentials.

As Ban lies down, another monster figure, implicitly linked to those "ancient beings" "with the force of reptiles", adorned with colour, comes into contact with "her brown ankle". The use of colour here is not ephemeral or decorative but bodily, foregrounding the figuration of colour as an interface between different embodied, formal contents – the aestheticized and the race marker. This monster figure emerges, in the associative logic of the passage, from Ban's

"need", which is also the need of the passage's "I" narrator, or of Kapil, in a telescoping between the small-scale, the everyday life of the girl Ban, and all else that "the news" might imply of the world and its catastrophes. The need is also "bottom up processing", suggesting in the conjunction something of the deeply felt but inarticulable, a way of processing need and affect from the body, without rational oversight.

Where the snake "senses a parallel self, the girl's body emitting solar heat", the transmissive effects of colour and gesture transpose to the snake's ability to sense heat over distance, as a transmission of energy more concretely of and between physical bodies. In this exchange of energies the two figures are visible to one another, as parallel selves, in commonality, recognition, and the faint possibility of mutual comfort. Whilst the action of symbols – such as the lying down which hazily connects Ban, Bhanu, Nirbhaya, Blair Peach – is a kind of action of identification across distance, here the identification becomes a form of touch, where the formal or embodied nature of colour and symbol as a transmission of content meets the actual exchange of energies and affects between bodies, in sensing or touching. Operating "without thought, below thought", the snake becomes a metaphor for all these forms of knowledge or content exchange which engage with the brutalities and strains of the text – around racist and gendered violence – at the level of the infra-linguistic.

The snake can't stop the news – as the text cannot propose concrete solutions to its pain – but it meets the expression of that need. It is this which the text offers: the possibility of making contact, in a more disruptive, but also more intimate way than the conditions of language allow; of touching one another with a kind of understanding which, because infra-linguistic, affective, formal, bodily, can respond to conditions of violence and pain without reproducing the structures of sense and representation that perpetuate it; a possibility of recognition, which nevertheless allows bodies to be more unknowable, less fixed.

The intervention is ultimately at the level of subject to subject. This is true of the way the text conceives of the connections built or reached for between Kapil as writer-performer and Ban, Peach, Nirbhaya, or the witnesses to her many performances, but it is also true of the way the text conceives of its relationship to its reader. It is littered with various forms of address to the reader, ranging from commands to perform some action, as if in an identificatory mimicry of its own performance-actions – "Invert yourself above a ditch" (Kapil, 2015, p. 28) – to wishes for an intimacy of interaction: "If you were here, I would make you some mint tea and turn

out the sofa for a little bed. Here you are. There it is" (2015, p. 13). Kapil directly addresses the readers of her blog:

> I was writing for you. You know the truth. You know that putting Ban in this form is like wearing a three piece suit in the hot springs. I wish I had the courage to let the blog be my book instead. (2015, p. 95)

She also writes one section as though it were an email to a friend: "I did not know how to scan in the page and send it to you […] The page, as you will see, is empty" (Kapil, 2015, p. 50). This recalls the "Nude Page for Ban", covered in soot, from '[13 Errors]', as this email section goes on: "could I ask you, or someone else you know, who does not mind getting dirty, to take some charcoal or soot and, casually, smudge the page" (2015, p. 50).

This cross-reference specifically highlights an element which is present in all these examples: the consistent desire in the text for an operation which is somehow non- or extra-textual, to reach towards the contents of performances, colour, and the experiences of the body, meets a desire for the text to relate to its reader with a greater immediacy and intimacy than the boundaries of textual separation allow, to reach through the time and space between writing and reading, and touch each reader. The reader is implored as part of the text to step outside of it, to imagine, or to really enact, the text's own disruptions of textuality, to engage the text with their own performing body.

Towards the end of the book, this wish to reach towards the reader directly is folded back towards the function of colour as a transmission between figures, as a form of infra-linguistic, non-recuperable contact: "I transmit this light: to you. Can you feel it? I am sending it right now!!!!" (Kapil, 2015, p. 100).

This is the gift, and also the demand, which *Ban en Banlieue* gives to, and makes of, its readers. It negotiates the paradoxical problem of using the written word to push towards conditions other than those reproduced in and by comprehensible language, by making the figuration of that which is outside the text a constitutional element of the text itself. It brings together a structural commitment to disruption of and reaching beyond its own capacities – its de-centred self-insufficiency, its inclusion of paratext, of photograph, of performance-gesture – with stagings of infra-linguistic affective-aesthetic encounters, at the level of colour, of the body, of touch. These are interconnected ways of positing the presence and possibility of embodied meanings and experiences which run counter to and have the capacity to disrupt the

reproduction of conditions as they are, and the pains those conditions cause. They are also modes for moving towards actively creating encounters of that kind in and through this text.

As was implored in Robertson, and will be developed further in the thinking about Mendelssohn's work in the next chapter, the work makes a gesture which starts from individual survival, coping, experience, and moves outwards towards re-assessing a general sociality. It aims to posit, represent and create moments of inter-subjective communication or transmission beyond that which can be transmitted in language, firstly of the individual pains of being reproduced by and within violent structures, and then reaching out – in a combined critique of the reproductive function of legibility in language and the legible representation of our own selves and experiences – to a possibility of being, illegibly, together. *Ban en Banlieue* responds to structures of oppression by reaching out towards an illegible shared-ness (primarily as women and people of colour talking to one another) – contact as shimmering, shifting surfaces, bodies coming up against one another – as exemplary mechanisms for communal coping and reckoning with the action of pain upon the self, in the hope that the attempt allows that self to *be differently*, to survive and flourish more fully, and in some small way send waves out into the world.

~

> the gift, a color healing so radical it extends to a future self
>
> (Bhanu Kapil, '4. End-Notes:', *Ban en Banlieue*, 2015, p. 10)

Chapter 7: The works of Anna Mendelssohn

> wanting to write undetected by lasers, exposed by lasers, the floodlit pitch. one more
> sweep over the Cities
> hugging das kapital in burton-on-trent I have to congratulate the wrong answer, but
> there must be an explanation
> […]
> a sentient being who sensed antagonism from more serious-faced dissenters whose
> conversational exchange
> was more cognisant of its own creation although i would not resist the general
> direction
> but really knew it was better for me to be flying off in another direction away from
> their miserable
> groundings in what i only knew too well, that life for the majority of people is more or
> less hell
>
> (Grace Lake/Anna Mendelssohn, 'the fourteenth flight', *viola tricolor*, 1993, unpaginated [pp. 20-22])

~

Anna Mendelssohn was born in Stockport in 1948, and died in 2009. The great bulk of her poetry was written and published relatively late in her life, from the mid-1980s, after she moved to Cambridge, where she remained for the rest of her life. Though she had a prolific output of poetry, short fiction, drama and visual art, a great deal of this work is unpublished, uncollected, or out of print.[45] Her major – and most readily available – publications are three pamphlets published by Equipage in Cambridge, under the name Grace Lake – *viola tricolor* (1993), *Bernache Nonnette* (1995), and *Tondo Aquatique* (1997) – one full collection, *Implacable Art* (Folio/Equipage, 2000), the first of her works published under the name Anna Mendelssohn, and a later pamphlet, *py* (Oystercatcher Press, 2009).

Mendelssohn's poetic and other artistic work sits in the shadow, however, of an earlier notoriety. In 1971 she was arrested in connection with a series of bombings carried out by a loose group called The Angry Brigade. She stood trial in 1972 as one of the 'Stoke Newington 8', in what was until fairly recently the longest criminal trial in British history, was found guilty, and served five years in prison. Mendelssohn always protested that she had had no involvement in the bombings, though she was sympathetic with the politics of those who carried them out. Following her release, Mendelssohn retreated entirely from political activism, turning instead towards renewed study, care for her children, and towards art and poetry. Yet it remains very difficult not to see in the work traces of these events and the

[45] All of this material, along with extensive collections of notebooks and letters, is held in the Anna Mendelssohn Archive, at the University of Sussex.

retreat from them – though they are never explicitly mentioned – and I find myself reading her work partly through the knowledge of these facts.

~

> What is to be done? heard Vladimir and somewhere Krupskaya was calling him Vladimir. The baby's nappy needs changing, for this—were meine kinder deposited in the neo-liberal police force […] The Celts don't love Judaism & they stamp down hard on a little child's love for his mother. But listen, this will drive you crazy. I don't talk to the police except never
>
> (Anna Mendelssohn, '[basalt. basalt.]', *Implacable Art*, 2000, p. 71)

~

Mendelssohn's poems show a familiarity with activist politics and organising, and with the history of radical struggle, implying or making reference to revolutionary work, military conflicts (there are for example multiple references to the Spanish Civil War, which Mendelssohn's father fought in[46]), industrial and labour struggle, situations of domestic labour often starkly demonstrating gendered inequalities therein, and explicit condemnations of racism, in particular anti-Semitism, suggesting Mendelssohn's own Jewish heritage. By a similar token, the poems often mention, with great disdain, a wide array of authority figures, and those involved in the state apparatuses of power: the police and judiciary foremost, but also often artistic and academic elites. Other recurrent areas include familial conflict, implications of domestic abuse, the relationships between mother and child, children in general, and their removal from mothers, as well as not infrequent passages of lyrical pastoral imagery. Much of this chapter will be dedicated to looking in more detail at the ways some of these different concepts, events and experiences are deployed, and drawing out some of the interconnections between them across the poems.

There is a strong implicit relationship between the wider matters of Mendelssohn's poems and her own subjective experience, taking in both her family history, and her specific experience of political activism, and incarceration. For further biographical context I would add a second legal battle, which culminated in Mendelssohn – then a single mother of three, attempting to complete a Cambridge degree, through poverty and ill-health – having her children removed from her care, and never subsequently returned (Crangle, 2018, p. 472). I mention this not because I wish to treat such biographical details as having too strong an explanatory force

[46] For some account of these and other biographical contexts to Mendelssohn's work, see Crangle, 2018. This particular piece of information, p. 467.

over the poems, or to read them as stable and unambiguous referents, but rather to point to the strong presence of a lyric subjectivity with close relation to Mendelssohn's own.

~

eyelash once eleven jonquil cibachromed en route
washington vacuous quay point sizzling palermo
messages visited square bank ochre charged by bolt
magnet, curtsey, falling out, back room rat:
white sliced delivery, spanish cake shop windows,
tiled frames fused infantry, grille, behind a face
a ransacked library, daubings, bricked out.

(Grace Lake/Anna Mendelssohn, 'concilia', *Bernache Nonette,* 1995, unpaginated [p. 14])

~

The subject matters and subjectivity of these poems come to their readers obliquely, in a body of work which is highly fragmentary. In a short essay introducing Mendelssohn's work, published in the *Poetry Project Newsletter,* Sean Bonney gives a general description:

> It is chaotic, at times manic and compulsive, by turns mocking and playful, hurt and exasperated, and always exceptionally confrontational and political. At times the poems seem to begin and end almost arbitrarily, as if the reader has walked into a room midway through a conversation. They change direction rapidly: thoughts trail off and morph into associative play, from which a bewildering irruption of direct, and often accusatory speech, may appear—and just as quickly disappear back below the porous surface of the poem. (Bonney, 2011b, p. 17)

The opening of 'Concilia', quoted above, shows some of Mendelssohn's most obviously fractured language. A-syntactic strings of words, including obscure or specialist language, build up a collage of sound, suggested images, actions, places, moments of sardonic speech, and the faint possibility of some occasion which holds them together. But, as Bonney suggests, the poems don't persist in any particular mode for long, but will push off in new directions and forms without obvious prompt or warning. The following untitled poem, for instance, shows a different mode of fragmentation:

light on water, beneath shadow
unrecognizably rolling despisal
befriend writing relinquish
a close brush unseen my friends
spend my money on earth
to throw at the memory
of births in times recently past
they write nothing to an imaginary word
being unknown to me I leave myself

for my friends have destroyed creation
by latching on to derision
unopened books lie in communities
waiting for jokes where it never mattered
as long as the match met a dry day
that I was smashed by a fist
when these colour bouts over symbols
for nature, accident, vilheula–
cease to be portents of modest improvements
the bridge in the world of vision
involving my early amazement
I shall not prove and neither shall I be proven
that where we play unembossed by close métier
remains awash in arcades of high spring light (Mendelssohn, 2000, p. 27)

At the level of tone this poem is quite consistent in voicing a speaker who feels put upon, hurt, abused and betrayed. Yet the grammar is twisting, interrupted or multiple. The opening couplet begins as an almost parodically lyrical description, in "light on water, beneath shadow | unrecognizably rolling"; light and shadow skips across the moving surface with ineffable beauty. This is exploded with "despisal", laying a doubled grammar over the imagistic opening with the generalised and disembodied menace of "unrecognizably rolling despisal". The injunction "befriend writing" is addressed openly, to the reader or to the speaker herself, as a possible alternative to what she will "relinquish": "a close brush" (with what? With the law? Or the paintbrush which she abandons for writing?); or the "friends" through which, in the possessive "my", the speaker comes obliquely into view. "unseen" sits suggestively between brush and friends, linking them through a double grammar, as post- and pre-modifier of each phrase respectively, muddying the possibility of a clean grammatical break whereby "my friends | spend my money" begins a few lines of relatively clear accusatory description. The possible sense of refuge in "befriend writing" is over-written by strong echo in the "friends" who spend her money and "write nothing". As with "unseen", phrases such as "in times recently past" and "being unknown to me" reach out to the phrases that precede and follow them, to create clashing and overlapping syntaxes which yoke each phrase and moment together, suggesting conceptual or narrative connections that remain always elusive. And so on throughout the whole poem.

Each moment presents clashes, over-lapping possibilities, re-writings, as a series of un-makeable micro-decisions in reading. I find myself as a reader pulled in different directions in a fraught and uncertain reading experience. Lisa Jeschke describes how, at the Anna Mendelssohn symposium at the University of Sussex in 2017,

> several speakers and attendees admitted to having experienced, and continuing to experience, extreme uncertainty with regard to how Mendelssohn's work, so openly subversive of the academic study of poetry, might at all be approached. This moment of an openly-stated intellectual and ethical helplessness did not constitute a critical impasse, but bright, relieving clarification: suddenly it made sense to start talking, from within hell, no knowing-already assumed. (Gardner & Jeschke, 2017, p. 10)

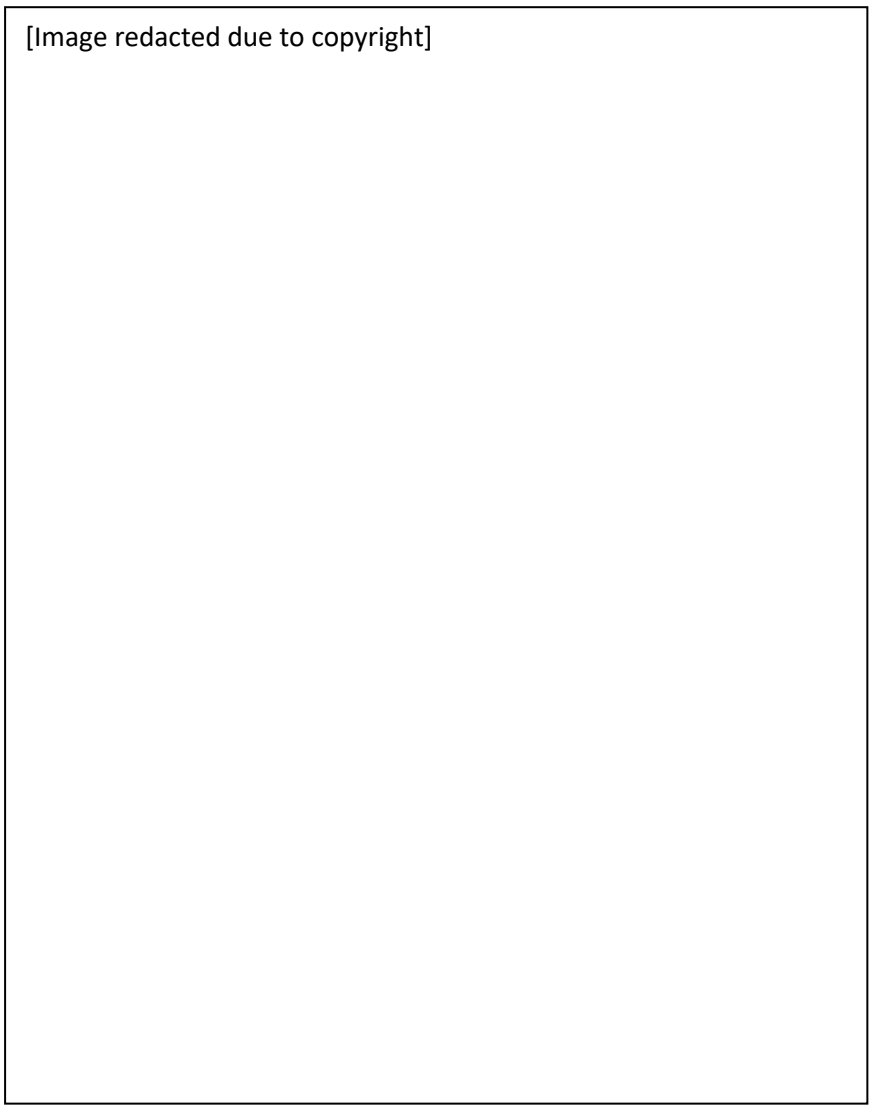
On the one hand, the dis-integral form of the poems, their recalcitrance to naturalisation, demands a high degree of openness to irresolvable uncertainties, to the suspension of intellectual understanding. Some of the clearest statements in the poems are on precisely this poetics, taking a very clear and stern position against over-hasty naturalisation, reading for easily extractible meaning, or a poetry which makes itself amenable to such reading.

Yet, for me, the poems make other demands too, which make a reading that would dwell in willing bewilderment on the conflictual surface of interrupted significations difficult to maintain with any confidence. This begins in their tone, the sense of persecution and dejection which persists in the above poem through "derision", "unopened books", "jokes", the speaker "smashed by a fist". Mendelssohn's poems are often highly painful; they suggest acutely painful experiences, but only through a series of glimpses, of scenes, events, claims, positions and perspectives, fragments of language and a tonal residue of the speaker's pain, paranoia, and her feeling of being persecuted and harangued.[47] The feeling of "helplessness" in responding to these poems is "ethical" too then, partly because these pains seem to demand an empathic response which is hard to reconcile with the abstracted or open reading that they also demand. Mendelssohn's poems give an impression of coherence, relations and conceptual dependencies, around shared knowledge of disasters and persecutions occurring just out of shot, which always shift away, not quite seen.

"I shall not prove and neither shall I be proven" speaks directly to this constellations of difficulties. It will later be key for me in a reading which connects attitudes towards poetics and the judiciary across Mendelssohn's poems. But initially it is a bold but somewhat

[47] I have in this reading treated the fractured and disorienting/ed nature of these poems, as well as their almost paranoid sense of persecution, as primarily poetic strategies. These characteristics could, however, be read quite differently, as relating to the mental distress which might result from the traumatic experiences of Mendelssohn's life. Letters between Mendelssohn and Douglas Oliver, as quoted by Joe Luna (Luna, 2019, pp. 2-10) demonstrate many of these same properties. It's absolutely not the place of a critic to speculate about Mendelssohn's mental state, and I would not wish to pathologize the poet through the lens of her poems or letters (especially given a thematic interest in precisely this point in Mendelssohn's work, in the pathologizing critic, to be discussed later in this chapter). As such I will continue to focus on the poetic effects of these properties, but at the same time I wish to acknowledge that abuse, persecution, trauma, have real, personal effects that go beyond the abstracted realm of their poetic traces, and that my sense of the ethical duty of the critic not to pathologize the poet is balanced by a similar sense of duty not to minimise those potential experiences.

disconnected statement of defiance, in possible response to the abusers and false friends of the poem, but also to any reader who would attempt to grasp at implied underlying referents or occasions. More than just encouraging a suspension of naturalisation, this line berates its reader. This combination of an uncertainty of interpretive approach with the poems' painful emotional landscape leaves me often pained, exhausted and disoriented.



(Mendelssohn, 2000, p. 40 [pencil underlining my own])

Mendelssohn's poetic works also fold in her visual art practice; renditions of her pen and ink drawings are scattered throughout *Implacable Art,* and used as cover illustrations on her pamphlets. Intricate, beautiful and abstract, these bring forward similar questions of interpretive difficulty. From typewritten poems, to poems rendered entirely in an almost unreadable handwriting, to drawings scattered with writing and then to those drawings with

no writing at all, often loosely suggestive of forms such as faces, bodies, landscapes, there is a clear line of aesthetic continuity. This continuity again makes conflictual demands on the reader, suggesting at once that the poems be experienced as drawings – through looking, privileging the formal or aesthetic over the strictly semantic – whilst at once suggesting that the formal and aesthetic in the drawings might be 'read' as the poems, for depictional suggestion, for traces of the lyric subject and her experience.

The ways that these initial problems of reading become a productive poetics in the poems is a key point of investigation for this chapter. One initial synthesis comes from Jordan Savage, who calls Mendelssohn's work "anti-confessional life writing," and claims that "the associative force of the poet's lived experience is what can decisively bring its disparate elements together" (Savage, 2018, pp. 11-12). Savage describes how the poems accumulate perspective and position through this subjective grounding and through the persistent tone of their speaking voice:

> The poem does not relay a political narrative or stage a political argument, so much as it accumulates, turn by turn, a political orientation. The language all twists through the poet herself, so that whilst it is difficult to identify specific political claims that are not colourable or deniable, and whilst some of the language may be altogether incommunicative, the salient points recur often enough to dictate an overall political tendency for the poem. Given this accretive approach to meaning-making, the poem's unifying form may be no more than the coexistence of every element of the verse in the speaker's voice. (Savage, 2018, pp. 4-5)

Bonney calls this collision of poetic tone and subjective perspective "attitude", saying "the *attitude* of the poetry is consistently one of absolute contempt for bourgeois society and its domination by police reality" (Bonney, 2011b, p. 18). This tonal work allows the poems to convey political and personal perspectives emphatically, whilst absolutely resisting modes of recuperable 'clarity' more often associated with expressive-confessional writing, and yet perhaps coming closer to the actual disjointed unclarity of living in the world.

~

where writing is supposed to
be qualified, in any costume, greek, wings, hoofs confiscated, there simply is no idea
of
the nature of the (shut up) relationship (oh christ) with a heap of rough husbands.
My poems are a heap of rough copies of other people's rough husbands.

(Anna Mendelssohn, 'Naturalia', *Implacable Art,* 2000, p. 133)

~

Describing some of the poetics which underlie his own work, but with an eye to the wider project of better delineating the principles and techniques common to his contemporaries in the Linguistically Innovative Poetry scenes of the UK in the 1990s, John Wilkinson describes "a principle of organisation which I call metastatic". This principle gives a sense of the modes of organisation through which I will be reading Mendelssohn's work:

> What gives the poems such coherence as they exhibit is not a metaphorical development, but a set of linked and transforming entities, which can be syntactical gestures, vowel and consonant patterning, imagistic or discursive modes. 'Metastasis' is a term in rhetoric, but my use derives from a brief experience of nursing in a cancer hospice, the way metastatic tumours echo about the body and these nodes define the shape of the body subjectively, through pain. Of course, the location of the primary tumour is outside the poem's real; the poem develops around the metastatic nodes, and these gestures come to evoke its physical lineaments. The reticence of the primary helps guard against a reductive essentialism in approaching the poem, that it is *about* such-and-such—in fact, there will be a number of extrinsic primaries. (Wilkinson, 2007, p. 154)

I firstly take this as an extremely useful way for describing the formal workings of Mendelssohn's poems. They resist any sense of "the primary", of central conceit or thematics, and instead, across multiple poems, they repeatedly touch on similar thematic and linguistic areas, around the implicit absent centre of particular experiential events or not-quite-said social attitudes. In this way the implicit shape of ideas – political attitudes, poetics, etc – can be traced through these scattershot and uncertain poems.

This also reflects the ways that the structure of my reading of Mendelssohn differs somewhat from the readings in the previous chapters. Rather than as a discrete encounter with a single text, taken as a relatively self-contained entity with its own structure and argument, it is an encounter with an oeuvre.[48] I will connect a number of these "metastatic nodes", through a laborious process of pattern-tracing, connection-building and speculative naturalisation, attempting in doing so to subjectively feel out the shape of the body which these multiply connected and diffuse nodes suggest or evoke. I trace not exactly the 'argument' or implicit positions of the poems, but something more like the premises which allow them to begin, the world from which they emerge, and into which the reader is inducted, conditioned by the gradual familiarisation to a set of recurrent links, seen through the process of strain through all the poems' indeterminacy, excess and misdirection. This is also a question of their poetics,

[48] I am not, of course, reading the *whole* of Mendelssohn's oeuvre. I am taking instead a partially representative sample from her most prolific period of publication, between 1993 and 2000, which takes in the three most readily available pamphlets and one collection. These share a great deal in terms of form, style, tone, and concerns, as well as a relatively close period of publication.

the principles under which the work seems to operate, the effects that the work has on the reader, and what the work can teach us regarding the possibilities of a poetics of resistance.

Though the work is from a slightly earlier period than the others under discussion in this thesis, it is an influential body of work that is only recently coming to see some scholarly attention, which I believe also reflects a renewal of interest among contemporary poets. Examples include Bonney's introduction to Mendelssohn's work from 2011, the symposium in 2017, and a number of articles appearing in the last several years, by, for example, Vicky Sparrow, Jordan Savage, Joe Luna and Sara Crangle. Fathomsun Press recently published an anthology of poetry and prose in response to Mendelssohn's writing, and a special issue on her work, edited by Vicky Sparrow and Eleanor Careless, is forthcoming in the Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry. Mendelssohn's is some of the poetry which comes closest to the unreachable notion of an actually non-recuperable language, and yet its intense subjective grounding and political commitment – albeit oblique, anti-programmatic, and full of scepticism – appeal, I believe, to certain prevalent sensibilities in contemporary radically intentioned poetics.[49] Mendelssohn's poems can therefore work as a kind of test of the poetics which I have been working out in the thesis so far.

~

> I can't be Everywhere
> ensuring that no harm is done. My poetry is not the harmful type. It stems
> from the affections not their antithesis
>
> (Anna Mendelssohn, 'My Chekhov's Twilight World', *Implacable Art,* 2000, p. 76)

'to any who want poems to give them answers'

One of the few reviews of Mendelssohn's work around the time of its original publication is by Andrew Duncan, in the magazine *Angel Exhaust*. Duncan's review of *Bernache Nonnette* shines important early attention on her work, provides valuable context and gives close attention to the forms of Mendelssohn's writing, describing, for example, how she approaches her thematic material "only by periphrasis, substitution, fantasy, and camouflage", and how critical discussion of her work risks "crumpling" it, as if "knocking nails in with my head"

[49] For a discussion of this context, see Chapter 3

(Duncan, 1998, para. 1-3) – observations which chime strongly with my sense of reading her work.

There's one particular critical move in his reading, however, which I see as somewhat inadequate in a way which is characteristic of some of the differences between common articulations of radical poetics prevalent at that point, and that which I am attempting to formulate in this thesis. Duncan writes: "At one level, *BN* and I think the whole of Lake's poetic work, is a critique of the determinism of left-wing discourse […] Lake is a social poet, writing against something always being said" (Duncan, 1998, para. 5). Note the closeness here to the terms of Robert Sheppard's distinction, after Levinas, between a poetry of "saying" and of the "said", as discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis, in which realist, clear language, or programmatic political statement, are seen as producing totalising and inflexible ideas of the world, or reproducing at a linguistic level the world as it is "already known". A frequent response, as here, is to turn towards ambiguity, openness, collaborative reader completion, to destabilise current conceptions. I have discussed at some length my partial sympathy with this position, as well as my critiques of the limits of stopping short at a radically-conceived openness, and refusing the challenge to 'say', with much uncertainty and liability to failure, something of the better world we want from within all the mess of the one we have. I aim to demonstrate across this chapter why in this instance too, I think Duncan's reading does Mendelssohn a disservice. He gives an easy answer to the disorienting experience of reading it, quickly naturalising the poems' difficulties into a contradictory programme against the programmatic, and erasing some of the more pointed political positions and imaginative possibilities which accrue obliquely throughout the work.

Somewhat paradoxically, some of Mendelssohn's most clear and explicit lines expound the virtues of unknowing and obscurity in poetry, suggesting the ready possibility of a reading like Duncan's. 'A man who snatches a ring' states bluntly "directions are not given in poetry" (Mendelssohn, 2000, p. 9); 'to any who want poems to give them answers' rephrases, "a poem is not going to give precise directions" (2000, p. 34). Yet to take such lines to represent a simple critique of "something always being said" treats these moments of comparative clarity as precisely the definitive thing they demand not to be, ignoring all that surrounds them. For example, to extend the first quotation:

> directions are not given in poetry one day caught
> By crowded brains, apart from any who, concerning themselves
> With satisfaction hold throbbing unconscious surfaces

To shore up their ever appealing inadequacies (Mendelssohn, 2000, p. 9)

The pithy phrase is immediately complicated by "one day caught", suggesting a qualification about precisely *the kind of poetry* in which directions are not given. The initially declarative tone is deflated, and the sweeping claim recedes into a tortuous syntax that suggests something more particular about the kinds of bad readings and bad readers against which it addresses itself. The poem appears to satirise those "crowded brains" who would use their readings of poems as a vehicle for personal aggrandizement, at the expense of something more valuable and indefinable in those "throbbing unconscious surfaces". Even this reading is disrupted by the interjection "apart from any who", which suggests the "crowded brains" and those concerned with satisfaction are potentially different parties; a potential satire on, say, academic reading is present but not allowed to comfortably settle.

This poem ends with a different sort of claim for poetry: "the exquisite birthday present: a poem of objects that live by magic" (Mendelssohn, 2000, p. 9). 'to any who want a poem to give them answers' goes on:

> you mustn't touch the hiding places.
> they address a different world
> where trees are decorated with diamonds (2000, p. 34)

These lines suggest a distinct aspect to the anti-programmatic sentiments of these poems. They suggest some other ineffable and aesthetic content of poetry, approached through oblique and slightly mystical images – bringing again the question of what the poems and the drawings have in common. This aesthetic content, this "different world" or alternative kind of poetry, is explicitly opposed to the kind of knowledge constituted by "answers" or "directions". We're back towards the territory mapped out in different ways in the previous three chapters, to the relationship between the aesthetic and the infra-linguistic.

In the rest of this chapter I want to trace out in more detail the way Mendelssohn's poetry deals with its own difficulty and the difficulty of understanding, ruthlessly critiquing the power relations involved in the terms on which we make the attempt to understand. In doing so, I claim, Mendelssohn's work builds its own embedded radical and more propositional poetics, suggesting a kind of counter-knowledge which in turn entails something like an ambiguity of social relation.

Against demanding explanations

The reviling of reading for answers or directions, of bad naturalisation – the speaker always "waiting for the time when it would not offend | the demands for legibility, clarity" (Mendelssohn, 2000, p. 42) – becomes across Mendelssohn's work also a condemnation of the conventional reading of the academic and critical establishment, as already suggested above, and a rejection of the scrutiny of the repressive state, often in the same breath. Take 'Friday':

> To distance myself
> From hatred I have nothing to say to inquisitorial people
> […]
> really the law should not encroach
> Upon poetry. It is a different voice that rakes embers for clues.
> Poetry can be stripped. Racketeers compromise advantageously
> Unracked by the objects of their disquieted attention
> […]
> And literature is lost, lost to the word work, lost to the temptation
> Of gradgrind rectification and its concomitant collapse (2000, p. 31)

"Inquisitorial people" initially chimes a similar note to those bad readers who might "want poems to give them answers", but quickly follows the lead of another implication of "inquisitorial", into a critic-as-cop metaphor, a reading "for clues". This mode of reading is ruinous for poetry on an artistic level; it is dismissed as "gradgrind rectification" to which "literature is lost". The "grad" in "gradgrind" implicitly frames the kinds of reading carried out by graduate students and the academics they become as overly rationalistic and disciplinary. But this reading is further ruinous because – as the proximity of "the law should not encroach | Upon poetry" to the account of inquisitorial reading suggests – it is a kind of enforcement enacted upon poetry. Those who would "rake" poems, the sound pattern suggests, might also be "racketeers"; the bad reading perpetuated by academic and critical institutions is seen as concomitant in its oppressive action upon poetry with the oppressive action of capital and the state. Similar lines of implicit connection crop up throughout Mendelssohn's work. For example, in "my long flowing sentences | rapidly turned into sentencing full of legal acrimony" (Lake, 1993, unpaginated [p. 20]), the ready pun on "sentence" suggests a fear of detection and incarceration in and through her writing. Similarly, Mendelssohn defiantly states "I shall not prove and neither shall I be proven" (2000, p. 27), shifting the refusal of a writing of certainty again into a language of legal investigation.

The terms of this intertwined revulsion with inquisitorial reading and the actual inquisition of the police keep on expanding outwards. Take two examples:

> not wanting to be understood, crooned over,
> by a liege lord, from a district, speccy four eyes,
> his voice, cannot be the only voice (Lake, 1997, unpaginated [p. 10])

> A man can demand explanations.
>
> A woman is accused of aggressive behaviour
> for querying motive[…]
> […]one can be invited to live
> in a house & find oneself being used
>
> for servitude. And Interrogated (Mendelssohn, 2000, p. 84).

Being understood, demanding explanations – once again we're in the field of language in which bad reading is associated with oppressive inquisitions, but here, the critic, the interrogator, is also creep and abuser. This inquisition, in reading and out of it, is cast as explicitly patriarchal, where being understood is also to be "crooned over", as if under the diminuating advances of an unwanted wooer. The demand for explanations (of poetry) is exemplary of unequal gendered expectations of behaviour, where men are permitted or expected to be assertive, aggressive, demanding (over women) and women aren't. As this slides into a sketch in which the unequal division of domestic labour has overtones of abuse, I am reminded that these demands can be modes of control: 'where have you been?', 'who were you with?'.

Again, this a pattern which recurs frequently, as in my first two examples of Mendelssohn's self-stated poetics: the lines that immediately precede "directions are not given" are "A man who snatches a ring will always have snatched | the world of poetry" (Mendelssohn, 2000, p. 9); the "inquisitorial people" have a "detestation | of singularity in the female writer" (2000, p. 31). In another example, "I don't want my poetry to be mouthed. | I don't want to be an executive." (2000, p. 60) begins as if rejecting a speaking of the poetry at all, but might suggest other kinds of 'mouthing', such as slavering over – as in a caricature of patriarchal objectification – or else consumption, as food. In the slip from being mouthed to being an executive, there is the direct implication that a poetry which can be consumed, which gives itself up to a speaking and an examination that can own and master it, is a poetry which is complicit in the oppressive systems of capital. There is at the same time the more indirect implication – evoked despite the parallel grammars of these phrases –that a (male) executive

is precisely the kind of person who might do the mouthing. Into the web of condemnation and rejection at the centre of Mendelssohn's poetics is folded the male gaze, as another kind of inquisitorial process, and the poems fear and guard against a figure who is at once critic, cop, executive and abuser. That which harms poet and poem, it thereby claims, is at the intersection of an institutionally sanctioned reading which reduces poems to their most readily recuperable answers, and the harm of a carceral, patriarchal capitalist state.

The gendering of Mendelssohn's persecuted and defiant poetics is extended through a recurrent association with the forceful separation of mother and child. This collocation occurs with most uncluttered brevity in '[the ribbon & white]', which goes, almost in its entirety:

> I was told off for loving my own children.
> I didn't think that they would have to be removed
> and that I would be spoken to as though I were
> pigswill. We are of different species.
> I don't incarcerate artists. (Mendelssohn, 2000, p. 23)

The biographical reading of this poem – which might connect Mendelssohn's incarceration and the removal of her children through the repressive action of the capitalist state, both in its corporeal form, cops and social workers, and its structural form, as the poverty which strips away support systems – is clear, and deeply painful.[50] But a pattern that connects these areas pervades the poems' understanding of their own poetics also:

> there is no excuse
> for approaching me on any matter
> other than writing, on no other grounds.
> no swiping my passport, having
> swiped my childrens'. no knocking at
> the door to demand flesh. (Mendelssohn, 2000, p. 46)

> really the police have nothing to do with poetry, nothing. and if
> the police would have something to do with Poetry then let them give up
> their jobs & forgo their privileges forever, and let their children
> never know what it is like to not have the normal methods of dispensation
> of judicial procedures fully accessible to them. (Lake, 1997, [p. 27])

> life is hell on earth and
> art has decided to subject us to its
> flaming will, even the power brokers
> learning to swivel in office chairs

[50] Sara Crangle's account of the events which led to the removal of Mendelssohn's children from her care connects this both to the failure, ultimately, of Mendelssohn's arguably revolutionary view that children should be cared for by their community, and also to the negative view which a family court takes of parents with a history of incarceration (Crangle, 2018, p. 472)

> forget that art is unplaced, is summoned.
> our children are kidnapped by these
> women in the service of conquering armies. (Mendelssohn, 2000, p. 43)

From what might be a rejection of an overly personal or biographical reading in this first example, or the by now concomitant rejection of the police's imposition on poetry in the second, each slides into talking of the removal of children. In so doing, the social worker or family court judge is added to the rank of institutional figures who line up together against poem and poet, and against which the poems direct themselves. Once again, this is in close proximity to other interrelated apparatuses of enforcement and authority: border police "swiping my passport", another potential cop figure who "demand[s] flesh" in a merging of carceral and sexual violence on the body, capitalist "power brokers | learning to swivel in office chairs", "conquering armies".

One final element which is woven into this expansive range of related political and personal accusations levelled at those who would mis-understand or seek to overly rationalise Mendelssohn and her poetry, is the suggestion that lurking in the mindset and practice of their reading, looking, and interrogating is a racism, and often specifically an anti-semitism. As in the above, this too is closely linked always to the question of poetics, to the dismissal of certain reading practices. Racism is made directly concomitant with the sexism and carcerality of that reading, and seen as existing through a common logic and emerging from a common cause.

This is seen with most consistent focus in 'basalt', which talks of "the Baudelairean's determination to declassify the Jewess from the functioning economy in Academia and in the Arts" (Mendelssohn, 2000, p. 71) (in addition to the lines already quoted above, "the Celts don't love Judaism […]"). Then, in the final passages of the poem:

> I am alone here, the art school refused to acknowledge that painting could be flawed. This was another perverted tactic to exonerate filthy racism, to conform […] It is stupid to write for so many people whose positions of authority now desensitizes their use of language. It is true that the reactions of the radical authorities have confirmed their unwillingness to act promptly to stem the racist abuse. The Jew is the least protected. People simply start to speak in a mock-Jewish way. (2000, pp. 71-2)

Academic and artistic establishments are here seen explicitly as racist and anti-semitic, specifically in relation to their insensitive and conformist uses of language, and stemming from their proximity to power. "Radical authorities" might also finger the closeness of experimental poetic traditions, with all their purported radicalism, to precisely the academic

settings which Mendelssohn so reviles. Another poem opens "Concentration camp styles" (Mendelssohn, 2000, p. 80). These recurrent areas are starkly brought together in 'The arrested poem', in which the obscured subject "has nothing to say in her own defence | to those who search for the final solution" (2000, p. 131). With "the final solution", reading for answers is cast as fascistic, and the critic-cops who would destroy Mendelssohn's poems and lock her up are now also Nazis, or at least acting in a manner which is consistent with the logic of fascism. In this way Mendelssohn's own persecution is seen partly here through the lens of her Jewish background – referenced throughout the work, either through historical reference, as in "Nowhere short of Nuremberg nervy with stolen sources" (2000, p. 64), or in more familial terms, as in "I was the only female in my family, my immediate family, who could read the services from beginning to end in Hebrew" (2000, p. 76) – as if anti-semitism is one of its motivating factors.[51]

'on challenge' suggests something of the conceptual connection that underlies these accusations by association. In amongst a general sneering against the implied hypocrisies of a poetic establishment, the political pretensions of "poets critical of consumerism" are offset against the claim that

> our code of poetics works
> as confusedly as a code of war
> fought by people whose disparate reading lists
>
> everywhere prevent freedom of speech,
> of movement, of thought, of style. (Lake, 1993, [p. 28])

A stanza later:

> & here are too many words which tend to order
> the rights and wrongs of feeling sorry for someone or other
> who turned out to be hidebound by racist and economic intelligence
> theories (Lake, 1993, [p. 28])

Whilst a literal reading of this stanza's syntactic structure puts the poetry whose 'ordering' of feelings it criticises at some distance from its racist, classist figure, I can't help but read it as simultaneously suggesting that the poetry and its ordering function is also "hidebound" by such embedded ideas. Though it doesn't reference the Holocaust directly, an implicit connection of "final solution" or "concentration camp styles" is more explicit here: that the

[51] Crangle describes the importance of the family's Jewish heritage in Mendelssohn's life: her parents had three trees planted in Israel for her first birthday, and Mendelssohn's mother volunteered to help refugee Jewish children during World War II (Crangle, 2018, pp. 467-8)

violent habits of thought involved in treating a poem like a specimen, an artist like a criminal, or a woman like an object to be crooned over are related to "racist and economic intelligence theories", to the historical place of bunk race science and eugenics in the academy (experiencing something of a revival at the moment).[52]

~

there is no intelligence
there's an anti-fascism and an anti-semiticism and that is all.

(Grace Lake/Anna Mendelssohn, 'twelve to midnight', *viola tricolor*, 1993, [p. 9])

~

This web of recurrent interrelations is a kind of backdrop, a sense of the basic oppositional attitude of the poems, constructed in such a way as to suggest two parallel levels of connection which hold its objects together. They are firstly implicitly connected on the level of the intimately and contingently personal. Additionally, the way the poems relate their objects of fear and derision, not through any particular argument about their interrelation, but through long-built-up patterns of proximity and association – simply talking of these things in the same breaths, and in the same ways, over the body of the work – implicitly makes the claim that these different forms of enforcement are structurally related. That is, they are seen to have, at some level, the same kind of ideological and material underpinning, in terms of the relations they perpetuate and from which they arise. The critic-as-cop is always male, brutally extracting explanations from the poet and her work, reaching across her personal boundaries, demanding of her, impoverishing her, imprisoning her (though Mendelssohn's poems elsewhere also recognise the ways women can be caught up in and perpetuate these patriarchal conditions and behaviours).

[52] It is difficult to give a comprehensive account of this, but for some examples, see: the London Conference on Intelligence, a conference on eugenics at University College London, organised by an honorary senior lecturer James Thomson for at least three years around the period 2015-2017 (https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/jan/10/ucl-to-investigate-secret-eugenics-conference-held-on-campus); in 2019, well known author and evolutionary psychology Jordan Peterson, who believes, among other things, in the natural difference of intelligence levels between ethnic groups, was briefly offered a visiting fellowship at the University of Cambridge (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iF8F7tjmy_U, https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/mar/20/cambridge-university-rescinds-jordan-peterson-invitation); a paper, 'Long Term Barriers to Economic Development', by Enrico Spolaore and Romain Wacziarg, in *the National Bureau of Economic Research*, argues that the "intergenerational transmission of human traits" – loosely translated as an inherent cultural primitiveness – prevents certain technologies from spreading to less economically developed countries (Spolaore & Wacziarg, 2013, p. 1); see also https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/02/the-unwelcome-revival-of-race-science

We can see also the ideas discussed earlier, of "attitude" from Bonney, and a subjective grounding as "anti-confessional life writing" in Savage, in action here. These events are built up around the locus of a particular speaking voice – from her moments of strain, anguish, trauma and persecution – which has a close relationship to the lived experiences of Mendelssohn herself. "Jewess" in the above quotation, in addition to the connotations of its historical usage, recalls Mendelssohn's repeated use of "poetess" (e.g. Lake, 1996, [p. 13]; Lake, 1997, [p. 9]). The speaker of these poems, like Mendelssohn herself, is implicitly always a Jewish woman poet, who has been unjustly imprisoned, has endured much hardship, and has lost her children. The extreme specificity of this experiential basis, so insistently present, is not in contradiction with the implicit structural critique, but is the basis from which it emerges, and which makes it possible; the suggestion of a structural relation between the different kinds of oppression referred to in the poems becomes also the ongoing assertion that the experience of attack coming from these different avenues has certain shared qualities, that *it feels like the same thing*.

Through my tracing of these connections then, it emerges that the critique of reading for answers is far more than simply a critique of "the said", an espousal of indeterminacy as a kick-back against too certain or programmatic a politics, though it is partly that. Bad, "inquisitorial" reading, reading for understanding, the "gradgrind rectification" of institutional education, is tied up with a whole web of fear and condemnation, of the carceral state – in the form of cop, social worker, soldier, academic – of patriarchal power and abuse, of structural racism, and of the power and depredations of capital. The hegemonic and authoritarian thought structures found in this mode of reading also entail, the poems implicitly argue, all the abuse and carcerality that the poems condemn, through the continuation of their logics of reading which stretches even to the violent rationalism of the eugenicist.

These poems form an unrelenting critique of the modes of thinking and being which underpin the social structure through which power and authority is enacted – and specifically, enacted upon the poet – under the current conditions of our being. The demand for the poet to be read well, or the construction of a poetry which absolutely refuses a reading of ready recuperation within pre-existing ideological frameworks, is also a demand for the poet, as a specific experiencing subject, to be allowed to live a life of peace and freedom. The preconditions of that life are alternative ways of thinking, more liberatory modes of thought, which would themselves entail nothing less than the complete dismantling of all of these interrelated ideological and material structures. I might then re-read the emblematic earlier claim, that the

poems "address a different world/where trees are decorated with diamonds" (Mendelssohn, 2000, p. 34), as speaking of the intersection of their refusal of a poetics of easy and intelligible naturalisation, with their wide claims for what such a reading logic entails. The poems are set up as reaching for the opposite of that logic and its world.

'searching her feeling into intelligibility'

Against this backdrop – against all that exerts unjust force, and perpetuates conditions of violence and deprivation – I believe there is also a positive counter-poetics suggested across the body of Mendelssohn's work, with specific properties which can be tentatively and speculative drawn out of it beyond – or alongside – all that the poems refuse. This extends the logic of the refusal of inquisitorial reading of poetry out into the realm of relations between individuals, as a kind of generous negativity, and as a set of relations which are radically opposite to all those condemned in the poems.

In order to trace these poetics from Mendelssohn's oblique poetry, I must first turn to one last refusal: if these poetics are not a poetry of answers, of that which can be extracted through inquisition and re-produced by and for the carceral capitalist state, they are also explicitly not the "horrible hideous concept || of knowledge" (Mendelssohn, 2000, p. 94). The rejection of knowledge here offers a point of synthesis, for the structural relation which binds together the network of condemnation I have traced above, and for its close relationship to the experiential.

I have already discussed at length how knowledge formed on the terms that are most readily recuperable under current conditions is also the form of already-known concepts which are made possible by, and primarily reproduce, those same conditions – the conditions of patriarchal and racist (etc) capital. I would further argue that the critique of institutional reading – the reading practices which emerge from and serve the intertwined institutions of the academy, the state, of capital and patriarchy, etc – is a critique of a gendered and raced rationalism. This sits alongside the arguments of my previous chapters, in which Robertson asks "show me something unknowable", connecting the resistive force of aesthetic-affective thinking-feeling, of bodily and experiential knowledge, to a feminine gendering, against the relationship between masculine-gendered rationalism, patriarchy and capital; or Kapil turns to the illegible and the gestural, to resist the racialized & gendered violence of representing her experience as a pre-figured and knowable thing.

The rejection of knowledge, for all the poets in this thesis, becomes a rejection of the kind of emotionless, supposedly objective standards which obfuscate and reify dominant subject perspectives. It rejects the silencing or speaking over of women's & other marginalised voices, the male violence it obfuscates and excuses, the creation and perpetuation of supposed racial differences (the eugenicist position being the extreme extension of the logic which would render all human subjective experience in rationalistic and quantifiable terms), exploitation of labour, and the brutality of the state.

This recurring link between rationalistic, institutional enforcement on art or the (female) artist, policing, state violence, racism, and the removal of children, can be substantiated in all the material instances where some of these issues intersect: the Holocaust, most obviously, but also the increased likelihood of safeguarding issues and interventions where a parent has experience of mental health difficulties, trauma, abuse; the cases in which the forcible removal of indigenous children by occupying powers has been an act of colonial control and violence, in which education itself is a tool for cultural eradication – "kidnapped by conquering armies". And so on.

This rationalist knowledge – the bourgeois thinking which, as Keston Sutherland told us, would reduce the full and complicated experience of the world or of a text to abstract and digestible concepts – is akin to what Moten and Harney, in their essay 'The University and the Undercommons', describe as "enlightenment-type" thinking. They argue that this is the dominant thinking of the academy, as Mendelssohn would surely have agreed. They describe its harm:

> This enlightenment-type charade is utterly negligent in its critique, a negligence that disavows the possibility of a thought of an outside, a nonplace called the undercommons – the nonplace that must be thought outside to be sensed inside, from which the enlightenment-type charade has stolen everything for its game. (Moten & Harney, 2013, p. 39)

In Moten and Harney's account, the "enlightenment-type thinking" of racial capital encloses, privatises, professionalises and delimits any potentials of more varied, resistive, collective thinking-feeling. It turns any such variation into a shallow, denatured, easily recuperable version of itself, nothing more than a commodity which allows its thinker to become a more consummate (and better paid) academic professional. Such thought structures, and those who perpetuate them, work to rule out and render illegible and unthinkable any more disruptive

kinds of thought. In doing so they are recruited in the enforcement and perpetuation of violent ideological and material conditions.

Another example of Mendelssohn's treatment of knowledge begins to suggest an alternative figuration which might act more positively: "language collapsed on language | stark freedom knowledgeable stony silence" (2000, p. 21). "Knowledgeable" here is part of a noun phrase that doesn't go anywhere, and it could just as well be a consequence or correlate of the freedom which precedes it, as it could be an opposite. Yet, with a collapsing language falling into both freedom and silence, I wonder if the poem doesn't here suggest that freedom resides in a kind of silence, which is to say a kind of language collapsed in on itself, which doesn't speak, and yet which can be seen as knowledgeable, if not conventionally so. Or else, the inverse, that knowledge, conventionally formulated, is silent, that the freedoms it affords are stark, that it is unable to offer the means for speaking. These readings don't appear so different, in the end. Both can be read as suggesting something like the infralinguistic. They figure a dialectic of articulation and silence, whereby certain experiences which lie outside of the current framework for being articulated and comprehended can best be understood through modes which themselves gesture outside of our current frameworks of knowledge, comprehension and articulation.

The refusal of knowledge then begins to open the way for alternative modes of communication. Speaking in Mendelssohn's work is often more specifically, speaking of oneself, as in: "you don't carry the same stigma, you can boast money | you don't have the same experience" (2000, p. 96). This balance, of a scepticism for knowledge of a certain kind with a lauding of personal experience, can be seen again:

> Books don't exactly. I don't exactly. Aim.
> I don't want to know what it is I am doing now exactly. Source of strength.
> A morphous lump. I should like to tell you this true story but I daren't. (Lake, 1995, [p. 17])

Against the dismissal of knowledge, of answers, characteristically suggested in this first line, I wonder what it is to tell a "true story", and why it's difficult or scary. It is cast as something different to what might be aimed for with precision, to directions, or even self-knowledge; true, perhaps, in the act of telling, in relation to the subjective experience of the teller.

Just as Bonney re-figures the concept of understanding, from a bourgeois form of reductive conceptual mastery to a way of thinking about solidarity across the non-reified or infra-linguistic affective expressions of the pains of living under capital, Mendelssohn suggests a

kind of truth, or a knowledge, which is directly opposed to the objective, rationalist, authoritarian forms those concepts take within a dominant and dominating culture. She directly makes the demand, in opposition to the knowledge she rejects, to be believed:

> we prefer to be rather than not to be trusted to be believed
> that we listened to despair and could not leave it there, personally
> […]
> the merciless and literate have advised me of what they are about to do.
> I hope they find me tasty. the sound beyond the periphery is incessant.
> I want to analyse it. we write of sensitivity and are reviled for it. (Lake, 1997, [p. 11])

The fairly explicit claim to the importance of being believed, of having one's emotions recognised as valid and listened to, even if this may not be strictly speaking known or knowable, shifts into "the sound beyond the periphery". This phrase might work as a metaphor for the attempt to put into writing those out of reach, indescribable emotions that are not quite knowledge, which is to say, a metaphor for the infra-linguistic, that which is present but can't quite be heard. This notion of indescribable affective experience is evoked on the next page, in "the blue I dreamt is untranslatable" (Lake, 1995, [p. 12]). As earlier, that which is ineffable or cannot be described in present language is evoked through reference to aesthetic perception, as the aesthetic and affective has in this thesis been established as the same experiential register.

This poem pits a notion of fitting words to experiences, of finding a space for those words to be believed and valued even as they are not "translatable" – not communicable on the terms of a false generality – directly against the bourgeois-realist forms of understanding, when the speaker asks: "How without the second world war | Can I possibly in the presence of relentless realism get it right" (Lake, 1995, [p. 12]). Taking as its backdrop the whole history of critiques of 'realism', as a primarily ideologically reproductive form of writing, realism here becomes also specifically an impediment to belief, to sensitivity, to an actual closer relationship to the specific and often not or not-yet comprehensible reality of subjective experience. Mendelssohn's poems implicitly espouse what might be thought of as an anti-realist affective sensitivity, which is able to be sensitive precisely for its distinctness from realist forms of recognition which deal in pre-reified categories of feeling.

Being believed, bringing marginal, painful affective experience into intelligibility, is given a conciliatory, comforting, or restorative function three pages later:

> had I words I could confidently write
> & not be told that they were an excuse

I might find the time to warm into less fright (Lake, 1995, [p. 15])

'half.' lays out more explicitly the posited opposition between a framework of inquisitorial knowledge and the possibility of an intervention in that ideological framework of intelligibility which is based in infra-linguistic affective experience.

First, the dismissal or diminishing of emotions by the drive to render all experience in the form of an abstract and mastering knowledge becomes a kind of academic, gendered pathologizing, with "hatred never helped me, emotions don't, in the grip of literary psychoanalytical gynaecology" (Lake, 1993, [p. 12]). This is a process of demarcation which seems to take those emotions and their validity from her: "silly theory. Personal theory." (1993, [p. 12]). This same link, between the pathologizing force of some practices of psychology – as a kind of rationalising of experiences of trauma, distress, and psychological variation – is suggested in 'concilia' with:

descriptive psychology dents & is reinforced
unglobed throat, fascistic debasement a la mode
grained in wheaten filings, securely modern ode. (Lake1995, [p. 14])

The accusation of fascistic poetic aesthetics implied by the rhyming couplet is prefaced with "descriptive psychology", relating this fascistic poetics to an impositional, rationalising, compartmentalising way of viewing both the individual and the poem. 'half.' goes on to posit precisely what it is that is being dismissed or diminished by the literary critic-cum-psychologists: "if what had been written had been a young woman's searching her feeling | into intelligibility" (Lake, 1993, [p. 12]). Where there might be some apparent contradiction here, between the rejection in the poetry of an inquiry into the poet's life and the value these lines appear to place on a writing based in intimate feeling, an important distinction can be made between the attitudes – and concomitant forms of writing and reading – taken towards the writer's experience. On the one hand is a sense of the poet-subject as already-intelligible, her experience wrenched into oppressive pre-conceived frameworks, or else punished for detected deviations; on the other hand we see a kind of not-yet-intelligible writing which reaches more fully towards the specificity of her individual experience, and in doing so, attempts to alter the grounds of the intelligible.

In keeping with my readings of Robertson and Kapil, Mendelssohn opposes a masculine-gendered rationalism – and all its complicities in the ongoing perpetuation of racial capital – with a feminine-gendered knowledge which is based in belief, in lived experience, and in the

reality and resistive possibility of infra-linguistic affective experience. In Robertson's 'Perspectors/Melancholia', those most difficult and unstable affective experiences were the most acute source of subjective, and therefore political and ideological, instability. Across this thesis I've traced multiple articulations of how those difficult and painful experiences, caused by the conditions we resist but simultaneously not comprehensible within those conditions, are seen as points of resistance, as moments of instability in the ongoing process of ideological inscription. Mendelssohn pushes this to its hardest point, through the high degree of pain, of fear, of persecution and trauma which pervades these poems.

In just the examples already given above, we've seen the poems' speaker claiming (twice) that "life is hell", bemoaning the loss of her children, fearful of the police, of fascists, of anti-semites, of "rough husbands". She has been inspected by "inquisitorial people", "crooned over", had explanations and flesh demanded of her, "accused of aggressive behaviour", "used for servitude", "interrogated", "incarcerate[d]", "mouthed", tasted by "the merciless and literate", her passport swiped, "reviled". Her personal disputes, persecution, experience of loss and violence are all mixed in with state repression, and the violence of "conquering armies". These kinds of references are scattered amongst Mendelssohn's work, irrespective of the other ostensible subject matter of any given poem. Some of the most stark examples of this pain, trauma, and abuse have still not yet been mentioned here. For example, 'twelve to midnight', from which I have above drawn a single line relating to anti-semitism, mixes this thinking about familial experience of racism with a strong suggestion of more intimate abuse. Here are three of its six stanzas:

> a quieter place which jolts a memory of being slapped, & lying under the bed
> with a book. Tyranny is nothing to brag about. Victory seethes, bed springs make dull
> music.
>
> as rivers flow by brown industrial landscapes a mattress fell over a fall.
> they don't know. there is no such thing as common intelligence. there is no
> intelligence.
> there's an anti-fascism and an anti-semitism and that is all. anything
> i did wrong was potentially anti semitic. anything. i could not speak.
> treated as a walking joke. family lore. i grew consciously
>
> stunted, seated on the bottom step whenever they called to visit us.
> struggling home from school with stomach ache, reluctancy at its limit. No God.
> Yes God. And never breathe 'maybe' because it presents a sexual possibility.
> And I won't talk. And i won't talk. And i won't talk. So i watched it. (Lake, 1993, [p. 9])

The slap, the stomach ache – regular complaints of stomach aches are treated as warning signs by school safeguarding guidelines, as displacements of other types of distress – tyranny, bed springs, the second guessing of language, all strongly imply a fear of abuse, including sexual abuse. This is in amongst other forms of distress, as a familial outcast, but also as the victim of racist violence precisely because of the familial background from which she is outcast, as well as lines which tap into the wider exploration of discursive possibility, limit, violence – "i could not speak", "I won't talk". It is on this basis of implied experience – as either victim or witness – of some serious abuse, that the poem also explores these other areas. Another poem, 'On Vanity' begins, abrupt and horrifying: "When a poetess is raped she loses her interior life" (Lake, 1997, [p. 9]). Or 'Abschied' has the heart-breaking lines, implicitly spoken to a lost child:

> By tonight I shall have lost you
> because I cannot hold you
> & be anything but abused (1997, [p. 28])

It is this speaking of the pain that arises out of the conditions of our existence, always rooted in the personal pain of the poet-speaker – but with an eye to the wider structures that create that pain – which is precisely the source of fracture and resistance to these conditions.

Mendelssohn's consistent focus on moments of trauma, abuse, personal marginalisation or oppression further opens out my theoretical question of how infra-linguistic affective experiences can work as sources of resistance, onto more practical considerations of believing the claims of marginalised and persecuted people about their own lived experience. As I have already quoted earlier in this chapter, "his voice, cannot be the only voice" (Lake, 1997, [p. 10]).

When followed through, this has much more direct and clear applications, from conviction rates for sexual assault to healthcare provision for disabled people, which are themselves necessarily radical structural challenges, to both the material and ideological hegemony of a relatively narrow set of people. As I also discussed in relation to Kapil, the more esoteric arguments about a radical challenge to the conceptual frameworks of intelligibility, and the prosaic but essential claim that marginalised perspectives must be heard and listened to, are not so far apart, really. If we are to truly hear one another in meaningful and liberatory ways, and to conceive of meaningful ways to do something about what we hear, then we must fracture and re-constitute the basic structures of our hearing. These poems argue for, and take as the basis of their poetics, an anti-realist or anti-rationalist expressivity then – an address to

the real experience of living in the world, of its pains under the current material and ideologically dominant structures, which is far more fractured and complex than that which could be captured within the intelligible language of those conditions.

~

> It is a pity that you took my body seriously, for what fears were yours
> I have raced around myself like a maypole in the act of self strangulation
> what a twisted girl you were you might have sighed before you popped
> me into the oven having broken me over your knee like a long french loaf.
>
> (Grace Lake/Anna Mendelssohn, 'Ordered into Quarantine', *viola tricolor,* 1993, [p. 8])

The strains of reading

I have already discussed at the start of this chapter the way that the thematising of deeply unpleasant experiences combines in reading with the fragmentary and disorienting nature of these poems, and their sometime hostility to the reader. Long before any synthesis can take place, the experience of any given moment of reading Mendelssohn's work is a combination of this undefined but emphatic affective register of the poems themselves, and the affective strain of reading them, a feeling that my framework for understanding isn't sufficient for the space I'm in. My common feeling is one of identifying with and sharing the pain of Mendelssohn's speaker whilst also being in an often antagonistic position with her, at once de-seated and disoriented, and also accused. In this de-centred space, with its anti-realist expressivity, I find not the naming of pain as such, but instead I take the poems as foregrounding something more like the response to pain, the cry, the eruption, the fear, which arises from moments of trauma, abuse, personal marginalisation and persecution.

A line in *Bernache Nonnette* which states "I hated Mr Gaslight" (Lake, 1995, [p. 8]) suggests something of the relationship between the experience of reading these poems and their own affective-experiential content. This line refers to the Patrick Hamilton play *Gaslight,* or its more famous 1944 film adaptation starring Ingrid Bergman. It is from the behaviour of its male protagonist that the term "gaslighting" is derived. This term describes a form of psychological abuse whereby an abusive party attempts to destabilise their victim's sense of reality, and their trust in their own memory and perception, through consistently contradicting or misdirecting them, claiming that what happened did not happen, or vice versa. This behaviour is one of the starkest intersections of patriarchal abuse and masculine rationalism

(though obviously not carried out *exclusively* by men). This line suggests both an actual experience of abuse for the speaker, and also hints at the ways we as readers are de-seated, uncertain that our understanding and perceptions are reliable in the space of reading.

In this combination of the poems' own affective base with the strained experience of reading – a sounding in concert which is itself a kind of empathetic mirroring – I'm pressed by their demand to be believed, to be felt with, just as strongly as their more explicit demands not to be interrogated or understood on interrogatory terms. It's this combination which I take to be the cornerstone of their positive poetics. In a sense the two are the same demand: to meet the poems not with a mastering intellectual reading, that which they so consistently condemn, but to meet them instead with our affective sensibility, with an openness to feeling that which we cannot fully understand or explain – "no knowing-already assumed" (Gardner & Jeschke, 2017, p. 10), as Lisa Jeschke put it. This combination of highly pressing and difficult affective content with formal fragmentation and resistance to reading itself makes the demand that I've found in the poems, for a kind of thinking which rejects certain forms of knowledge and is instead prepared to hear the felt experience of those who don't have ownership over the dominant forms of coherence, of being heard.

Bonney describes Mendelssohn's poems in a way which – whilst most directly speaking of Bonney's own poetics, with clear resonances of my reading in Chapter 4 – finds space also for their antagonism:

> a communication that only speaks to [the enemies] in order to deny their ability to read, and to refuse them a place within the poem […] the content of her refusal to communicate with her enemies is one that demands the possibility of communication, and of the reality of a community that can exist despite the accusations of its incomprehensibility and illegitimacy. (Bonney, 2011b, p. 19)

I read the concert of affective and intellectual strain through my reading of the operation of understanding in Bonney's work, where understanding was taken not as a term for the reduction of something to a pre-understood concept, but was a kind of recognition of non-reified elements of experience, an understanding as solidarity.

These poems are absolutely not the liberal call for recognition and understanding that asks only to be seen, and perhaps taken sympathy upon, by those in positions of power and dominance which they are unwilling to significantly trouble. I see Mendelssohn's poems as resources for recognition, after the necessity of a common recognition and solidarity across extreme difficulty, which work to create a radical readership. They offer meeting points with

the currently-unintelligible, but only to those who would come to them as equals. To meet their demand, to recognise what we cannot articulate, to feel alongside them, to receive them as moments of solidarity for those who might recognise something in them – "searching [their] feeling into intelligibility" – we must feel their pain too, and we must recognise at the same time our involvement in the structures which perpetuate that pain. Only as we share with the poems the experience of battling through dislocation – as we are pained alongside and in sympathy with them – can we meet them with some attempt at sufficiency, finding an adequate, if not articulate, way to meet the cry of pain. Only then can we find a strength and solidarity in and through the real pain of living in the world as it is, which is also an affective understanding of the necessity of the destruction of all the intertwined mechanisms of authority, oppression and abuse which these poems condemn.

This reading of the function of strain and difficulty in Mendelssohn's work leaves out a more over-arching point – that the wide-ranging nature of their critique of the conditions of our living and the ideological habits of thought that underpin them absolutely necessitate that the poems be hard to comprehend from within those modes of thought. Just as I have claimed that any clearly recuperable language will primarily reproduce the conditions of its intelligibility, Mendelssohn's radical critique of our conditions of relating and recognising one another as subjects must therefore necessitate a radically different structure of understanding, and a language which is likely to be very difficult for its readers under current conditions.

Further, I might claim that the strains of these poems can be read as something akin to Riley's affect of linguistic unease, but here taken to its most acute limit. Where in Riley, a sensation of unease arises from the experience of descriptive language – from the mis-match between its categorical claims and the distinctiveness of individual experience – in Mendelssohn's work this unease becomes a real, acute pain. Being named, being read, being subject to inquisition as a poet or as a subject, being seen as something recognisable within the dominant, authoritarian, pathologizing terms available, is not only painful. It also has the potential for serious material consequences – to be incarcerated, to have one's children removed, to be an object of abuse and disbelief. Mendelssohn's poetry has, at its core, a deep and painfully felt resistance to all that language can name in the world as it currently is.

In this work, then, an aesthetic of fracture, disruption, de-familiarisation, steps off from a poetic tradition which understands these aesthetics as formal mechanisms for a rejection of a 'realism' in writing – here a shorthand for an intelligibility, recuperability, bad naturalisation,

etc, which passively reproduces its prior ideological conditions. This fractured, anti-realist aesthetic becomes also a rejection of a different kind of 'realism' – rationalist, inquisitional, verifiable knowledge whose terms are dictated by those in positions of dominance & domination, as a mode of control.

Nurture and amorphousness

It can be seen in all the above that the poetics of these poems is not just deeply rooted in a political and social thinking, but contains its own implicit politics, or perhaps – since the poems outright reject any recuperable programme – something like a tentative subjective ethics, in terms of beliefs and principles about the ways we ought to relate to one another as subjects. They wish also to do the work, in the processes of writing and reading, of bringing into being subjectivities capable of relating in those ways. One way in to more fully exploring this aspect of the poems – and the relationship that they conceptualise between their poetics and the hoped-for social relations which underlie them – is through their thematics of motherhood. In 'digne', Mendelssohn writes:

> three babies.
> i can't teach moral behaviour.
> i only see people behaving as though
> other women's children were up for
> grabs.
> carelessly. playing around with
> trumped-
> up charges. confusing teachers with
> revellers in diamond snatching. (Mendelssohn, 2000, p. 53)

The combination of elements brought together here – the encroaching authority, ready to steal away children and falsely imprison, the possible implication of a corruption levelled at "teachers" which might be another jab at the academy – are by now familiar. But something happens a little differently with "i can't teach moral behaviour". This line, which fits in amongst the many lines reiterating versions of the position that poems won't "give directions", is stacked among references to children in such a way as to suggest that it is also making a claim about parenting specifically. The refusal of directions in poetry becomes also implicitly a related refusal to give her children directions, within the intelligible terms of the world in which they live, on how they might behave – a refusal of bourgeois morality when whole structures need to be overturned. Yet there is an ambiguous doubleness to the potential

tone of this line. Alongside the defiance of the above reading, I might detect a potential despondence, about the inability to comprehensively nurture values in her children, or live morally within the world as it is. Mendelssohn elsewhere writes "a mother writes this" (2000, p. 24). If I take this to suggest that the poet always writes also *as a mother*, and that nothing appears in these poems which couldn't be sympathetically read through this lens, then "i can't teach moral behaviour" becomes in this doubling of defiance and despondence less confrontational to its reader. In this reading, the line meets the refusal of teaching, or the acknowledgement of its difficulty, with a wish to nonetheless somehow perform this impossible act of poetic nurture.

Any account of the possibility of this work must begin from its impossibility. I hear an echo in "a mother writes this" of the thinking in the "reproduction" pun which I identified in Robertson; that is to say, the anxiety to escape persecution and bad reading as a mother-poet, and the anxiety of being free and able to properly nurture one's children, is also an anxiety of ideological reproduction. An earlier poem imagines a more direct relationship between the activities of nurturing children and of creating a readership, with: "I created a world of art for my children | to live in. But I am required to | Leave my world of art & Repent" (Mendelssohn, 2000, p. 13). All induction into collective understanding is both artificed and artificial – a project of collaborating with the world to create new subjects, and in turn to re-create the world, through forms of representation and interpellation, to shape beliefs, actions, ideas and conceptual frameworks. In the final turn, however, the individual nurturer must acknowledge their lack of individual control over such understanding, as over the collective world, of material and ideological relations. The problems of complicity for the poet and parent are themselves similar, in the sense that, object as we may, we are inevitably doomed to mostly reproduce the conditions in which we live, but must retain some hopeful glimpses of an alternative future.

'digne' opens out the question of the helplessness of the parent in the face of material, political, and ideological structures more explicitly as it goes on, asking: "Why were my own children plump | and Indian children not plump" (Mendelssohn, 2000, p. 54). The poem is intimately aware of its pained and partially privileged position in a world which offers unequal access to the material necessities for a flourishing life for children, outside of the scope of their individual parents, and of the wish of other parents to nurture their children as much and more than its speaker is herself able to from within that position.

In this light, I might attempt a re-reading of "confusing teachers with | revellers in diamond snatching". Where it might readily be taken as an indictment of academic or other educational authority figures for their implied complicity in capitalist and colonialist plunder – and this reading absolutely remains present – it might simultaneously suggest an opposite. The confused and confusing teacher might be the same reluctant "i" a few lines earlier, and the diamonds here recall the "world where trees are decorated with diamonds", earlier presented as an explicit alternative to a poem which gives "precise directions", positing instead a kind of ineffable aesthetic content. "diamond snatching" might not suggest plunder then, but a kind of aesthetically driven re-distribution. If poetry, especially in its most recuperable forms, is reproductive of the conditions of its emergence – if a poetry which can be "mouthed" becomes that of "an executive", reproducing the structures of capital – then this image of the poet-mother "diamond snatching" becomes a way to imagine the necessary modes of radical re-nurture which could do something very different from what could be described as teaching, and in doing so could begin to create a different kind of subject-reader and militate towards a different kind of subjective relation.

The method here – a kind of radical aesthetic and subjectively nurturing negativity – is also the aim. The value which Mendelssohn's poetics place on not knowing – on a refusal of reproductive and violent reading practices and recuperable answers, in favour of an aesthetic of affective and experiential solidarity through struggle – can be mapped on to how she thinks about nurturing her children. Her longing to bring them (and implicitly, her readers also) towards a different kind of subjectivity through her acts of creativity, through her poetic nurturing, still refuses any kind of moralising or categorical stance. Instead, both turn towards uncertainty, as their own positive content – I might think again of my evocation much earlier in this thesis of Keats' negative capability**.** I've already suggested that there is a direct relationship between the rejection of rationalist reading and a rejection of ways of understanding which are carceral, pathologizing, inquisitorial of the nature of the subject herself – what I have called *'realism' as a mode of control*. I would therefore further suggest that these poems demand, and attempt to nurture, a kind of non-recuperable subject, one who refuses to look for these forms of knowledge, to demand answers of themselves or of others.

Early in this thesis I suggested that I might talk about this relationship between Mendelssohn's poetics and its subjective ethics in terms of an ambiguity of social relation. To conclude, I want to expand on what I mean by this, beginning from one moment where Mendelssohn almost articulates outright some of the qualities of her positive political poetics:

> western art, is vastly
> construed to be in opposition to personal papers
> is scourged by obvious righteous power
> flipping over subject potential, reinforcing
> sadism, resenting comradeship, refusing
> co-ordinated collaboration, knowing that
> security unjustly has come to enshrine art,
> whereas diplomacy should continue to
> distinguish between security and art. (2000, p. 37)

"Personal papers", "subject potential", "comradeship", "co-ordinated collaboration" – these are some of the features of an art which is not also security, the features of an art which attempts to oppose the whole web of authority and oppression that Mendelssohn sets her work against, and to nurture the possibility of a radically different world. This is a kind of poetry which is more intimate, which doesn't talk to the police, which is both sensitive in its use of language, and virulently rejects racism and authoritarianism, and which might have the capacity to develop a kind of linguistic sensitivity to the complicity in structures of power that it is so persistent in calling out.

Mendelssohn's poems push towards these values then, by modifying the rejection of the reproductive or deterministic force of 'realist' recuperable writing, which is familiar and inherent in the formal techniques of difficulty, de-familiarisation, openness and ambiguity in poetry. Not content to meet the unfreedom of the world with these resources only, her work challenges this too as a too easily given answer, and instead asks us to really live with all its difficulties, to believe and hear through it at the same time as we meet its challenge of a suspension of understanding, of a more radical form of negativity.

In the link between a rejection of authoritarianism and a rejection of naturalisation, there is a rejection of what I might call the over-hasty naturalisation of the individual. That is, the inquisition, the pathologizing, the mode which reinforces reified categories of identity in oppressive ways, and which uses an understanding of *what* someone is – or what they are interpellated as within the dominant ideological conditions – to exercise power over them. Mendelssohn's is an aesthetic that refuses the mechanisms whereby individuals can be dominated, whereby identities, intentions, and interiorities can be named from the outside, placed under scrutiny, have their ownership of themselves taken away – from gendered pathology, racism, and sexism, to the reduction of people to their economic function or their bodies, or the extraction of evidence towards incarceration.

Despite its anger, pain, protestation and refusal – specifically through its aesthetic, tonal, attitudinal integration of anger, pain, disorientation, refusal of recognisable forms of sense-making, into its sweeping condemnation of the world as it currently makes sense of us – Mendelssohn's work proposes the opposite of this painful, dominating rationality. It proposes a positive space where we might nurture forms of solidarity, recognition and belief which doesn't require this use of objectifying, reductionist rationality; a set of relations which are much more hazy, more beautiful, where we might relate to one another as subjects formed by and in tension with our social circumstances always, in states of suspended confusion; where we might exist amorphously – "a morphous lump" one and all – and still cry out to one another, relate to elements of shared experience without the necessity for a strictly demarcating kind of understanding.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

I began this thesis with a wish – for things to be different, and better, and to begin to lay out some of the ways in which contemporary innovative poetries can, and do, contribute towards that making-better. This becomes, in simple terms, the question: how can poetry resist? Re-iterated more precisely, with an anxious understanding of ideological reproduction as a basic premise: how can poetry which finds its conditions materially and ideologically oppressive attempt to imagine – and contribute to the realisation of – alternative (better) realities through the language of those conditions? I feel compelled to return again to Robertson's beautifully concise version of the general problem: "practice arises from conditions | yet these are the conditions we must change" (Robertson, 2016, p. 47).

In this form, the specific question of how poetry can contribute towards resistance – how it can intervene in the process of ideological reproduction, to re-produce differently – is underpinned by the question of how resistance can occur at all, given the universality of ideology, and the specific effectiveness of liberal capitalism to recuperate divergence. Each of the poets in question demonstrates a deep awareness of the problems of ideological reproduction, in poetry, in language, and in resistive action, knowing that most forms of representation and action at our disposal will primarily reproduce the conditions of their possibility. The answer to the question of poetry in particular requires at least a tentative answer to the more general question, to even begin.

Another foundational point of enquiry is the contention that many predecessors within radical poetic traditions have, understandably, faced the all-encompassing problem of ideological reproduction, and the structural pre-figuration of linguistic meaning, with a drive towards de-stabilising, fracturing, defamiliarisation, but have been less able to account for the possibility of articulating or driving towards specific change and imaginative alternatives. I have tentatively formulated an account of how the poetries I examine attempt to think through and enact this more propositional or newly imaginative resistive work.

Since the preceding chapters are semi-discrete, reading the poetry in question as an encounter in its own right, their answers to these questions have not been given in the form of a linear argument, but have spun around a variety of related concepts, building cumulatively but diffusely on one another. I hope here to delineate some of the lines of connection that are present but perhaps not yet fully explicit.

*

The answer to the initial question – if ideology operates as universally as I understand it, how can resistance be possible at all? – begins, as the whole enquiry does, with the individual subject. A central aspect of ideological reproduction in Althusser's account is the process of subjectification – each person coming into the world as a certain kind of subject, with their conceptual framework for understanding the world and themselves, the possibilities of thought and action, pre-figured in ways which also reproduce the material relations into and through which they emerge. This initially seems totalising, impossible to escape, and indeed, it is my contention that it *almost* is. Yet, as this is the primary site of inscription, it is therefore also the primary point of resistance.

This resistance is possible if ideological construction is recognised not as a predetermination as such – an outside force imposed upon some separate and essential subject – but as the premise for any action at all. It is the premise for the very existence of each subject, who is constructed as always collective-individual – "outside from the start" (Riley, 2000a, p. 44) – their solipsistic selves always also figured by their sociality. This process of ideological subjectification is unstable too, liable to failure and difference, because the subject is unstable, the relationship between the feeling self and the social world more complicated and fractious than any pre-figuring framework, and because ideological inscription is not a single act, but an ongoing process. In each moment of inscribing repetition there is space for shifts and change, for repeating differently. The primary points of instability, the points of fracture which open up the possibility of newness and difference, in this account, are those affective experiences which are 'infra-linguistic' – felt in the body but below the threshold of coherent articulation, and therefore in a less stable relationship to the ideologically enforced and enforcing bounds of coherence.

It follows that resistance in poetry begins also from the subject – conceived as both individual, solipsistic in their experience, and collective in the formation of the articulable horizons of that experience. Any resistance in poetry might operate primarily through its interaction with the reading subject; poetry might begin this resistive work through an exploration of experiencing subjectivity.

The poems in this thesis begin their exploration of the problem of resistance accordingly, from a highly subjective perspective. They outline the felt necessity of resistance, its possibility and its impossibility, from a grounding in particular subjective experience – of the pains which cry out against the conditions that cause them, or the desires which call for some

alternative. In doing so, rather than reify certain subject-positions or pre-figured experiences, these poems treat the subject as precisely that dialectical collective individual, at once constructed in oppressive and pre-figuring ways by its ideological conditions, and also containing the possibilities of disruption, resistance and newness, in its fractious and unstable responses to those same conditions. It is those infra-linguistic responses, moments of uncertainty and tentative re-formation in affective extremity, which these poems are most interested in.

The specific capacity of poetry to activate the resistive potential of these infra-linguistic experiences begins with the concept of poetic work whose meaning is 'non-recuperable'. That work in poetry which has an uncertain relationship to coherence, whose meaning cannot be recuperated on the terms of the already-known world, might have a particular capacity to evoke and gesture towards those elements of experience which are not-yet-coherent, and in doing so work to alter the bounds of the expressible and push towards alternative ideological and material possibility.

These poems bear out this conception by taking a dialectical position in relation to communication which is closely related to the position on the subject. Each of these poetic works contains an implicit or explicit critique of 'realist' forms of coherence, which suggests that the most coherent and intelligible uses of language are most apt to reproduce unchallenged the conditions of their intelligibility. Yet their basis in subjective experience which both emerges from and wishes to alter its collective conditions necessitates some possibility of sharing those experiences, in retaining a commitment to some form of mutual understanding in their writing.

A way through these two related oppositions can be given multiple speculative names: I use "non-recuperable affective subjectivity" in chapter 3, "non-reified affective recognition", referring to Bonney's work, and quote Jordan Savage on "anti-confessional life writing" (Savage, 2018, p. 11) in Mendelssohn's work. These variously get at how these poems do not present the subject and their experiences in their pre-coherent form, but instead gesture towards that which is least representable, least coherent or intelligible, experiences whose meaning is in fluid formation, through poetic strategies that disrupt and re-form coherent meaning. The poems militate, in accordance with this, towards a kind of anti-rationalist negative thinking – the shadow of Keats' "negative capability" is present throughout the

thesis – which attempts to posit the presence and content of these experiences, as that which is experienced but not-yet-understood.

These poets use a range of different techniques in their work, and provoke a range of different experiences of reading, to achieve this effect of positing and gesturing towards those experiences which by definition cannot be clearly described. These are highly complex and various poems, but I can briefly characterise some of their most relevant distinctive moves.

Bonney's work, even at its most directly discursive, involves a high degree of self-doubt, contradiction, a shifting of didactic position which is always inflected through the doubting subject-perspective, rigorously refusing to ever settle into a definite sense of what is or could be done whilst never ceasing to recognise the need to do. Robertson's work is full of what I have referred to as a luxurious indeterminacy – sentence-forms which have a rich and expansive register of sensuous thought, alongside dense and beautiful sound patterning, in such a way as to give a sense of over-fullness, of sound and of possible meaning. These allow for a work which is provisional and exploratory, which reaches after possible senses, new sense, without quite settling on the known. Kapil's *Ban en Banlieue* mixes a thematics of failure and incompleteness with a highly de-centred and digressive structure to create a sense of the text as its own paratext, to continually posit the presence of an unreachable content, and to create a text that reaches always beyond and through the insufficiency of textual communication. In Mendelssohn's work the extreme fracture and disorienting nature of the poems is used not just to disrupt and refuse meaning, but also, within a highly subjective poetry, to create a sense of identification through shared feelings of disorientation and distress, where mere expression of these affects in their coherent form is insufficient. Robertson, Kapil and Mendelssohn's work also de-centre linguistic coherence by their inclusion of non-linguistic forms of content, such as design choices, photographs, and drawings.

These are some of the key ways these works critique and undermine the stability of the coherent expressions of the world as it is already known, whilst still reaching towards a de-centred, uncertain, unstable possibility. They strive to communicate infra-linguistic, negative content through the experience of working through and alongside their difficulties. These works uncertainly feel out the edges of their own subjective formation, in each moment newly formed, with an urgent eye on the attempt at transformation.

A final key element to this thesis's thinking on how poetry might contribute towards ideological resistance is 'musical thinking'. This becomes a re-thinking of the relationship between infra-linguistic affective experience and non-recuperable poetic work, between thinking-feeling and aesthetic perception, which dissolves the distinctions implicit even in articulating these terms. Through a variety of vocabularies – harmony in Bonney, hormones in Robertson, colour in Kapil, or more implicitly in Mendelssohn's trees decorated with diamonds – these poets find ways to figure the relationship, and commonality, between aesthetic and affective perceptions and contents.

In Bonney's work, music is treated as what I have called a "non-recuperable system of thought", which can act as a "sonic receptacle" (Bonney, 2015, p. 35) of the revolutionary potential in actual moments of social dis-harmony. Pre-linguistic affective responses to music – itself expressive in an aesthetic manner, without verbal meaning – are seen as sharing something with the inarticulate cry which registers feelings of dissonance with our ideological limits. These responses contain an aesthetic mark of the potentiality for change and re-inscription which exists in the shared affect of a resistively activated collective at key historical moments.

I develop this line further in my reading of Robertson's work, where the aesthetic and affective are treated as the same kind of content, and united through ideas of embodiment, in the perceiving and feeling body, in the necessity for all thinking-feeling to emerge with and through its particular forms, and in the interface between different kinds of surfaces. The embodied "resistance-sensation" (Robertson, 2016, p. 14) of affective thinking-feeling, the felt experience of rupture and recombination, is connected to the embodiment of poetic thinking in aesthetics. The body is the subjective threshold between these different kinds of thinking-feeling activities, in casting its eyes or fingers across the surface of the page, in its own capacity for feelings described or evoked, in the perception of its own surface, or the perception of other surfaces with and through the surface of the body. The potential for a resistive thinking in poetry can then be figured as a kind of decoration.

The figuration of colour in Kapil's work further substantiates this unifying of the aesthetic and affective, through the sensational and perceiving body. Colour is an aesthetic-affective content which we see transmitted and shared between bodies as a signal much like Bonney's harmony. Further, in specific acts of identification and infra-linguistic recognition – "below thought" (Kapil, 2015, p. 40) – between people for whom colour is also a signal of the

racialised body, and a marker for potential violence and discrimination, that aesthetic-affective signal becomes materialised as touch.

Mendelssohn doesn't thematise this meeting of the aesthetic and the affective in such explicit terms, but it has a strong implicit presence, in her lauding of an "unplaced" art (Mendelssohn, 2000, p. 43) and poetry against intellectual mastery, in favour of a negativity which pushes towards the as-yet-unknown in aesthetic and affective register, "a different world | where trees are decorated with diamonds (Mendelssohn, 2000, p. 34). It is present too in the integration of drawings and handwriting into her collections, and the experiential intertwining of formal fracture with the intensity of the emotional register and traumatic experiences present throughout her poems.

These poems are committed to the importance of affective responses to beauty, to decoration, to those formal sensations that simply cannot be explicated. They all attempt not just to thematise the possibilities of affective-aesthetic transmission – the communication of the infra-linguistic content of experience in poetry, in ways which might activate, bring into expressibility, or create, fractures within the process of ideological reproduction. They also use their own forms in such a way that these poems constitute those acts of unstable and non-recuperable communication. Bringing together the aesthetic and the affective as the basis for thinking-feeling which might reproduce differently, the poem is a kind of embodied political decoration, a sensational object which might hold and create affects at the edge of our current conditions.

*

This outlines the primary ways that this thesis has addressed its initial points of inquiry. There are, additionally, a number of important insights and lines of argument which have emerged in the process of answering these questions, but which are not direct responses to them and go beyond the parameters those questions set out. These initial questions are primarily to do with the possibility of resistance *in general*, at least nominally somewhat independent of the particular political or social horizon one's resistance wishes to agitate towards. However, in the process of answering this question, this poetics of resistance comes also to contain what I would tentatively call a subjective ethics – a set of implicit claims about the kind of world that they strive for, which emerges directly from the subjective basis of this poetics to focus on the conditions and relations which might allow for collective subjective flourishing.

These claims are not merely reflective of the specific poets' political inclinations and incidental to the poetics itself, but emerge as necessarily concomitant with the ways in which their poetics opens up possibilities of resistance in the more general sense. A poetics built around ideas of positive incoherence or illegibility – those areas of experience which are felt but can't be contained within the pre-given language of their ideological situation – also proposes the possibilities of bonds of recognition, solidarity and care not based on categorical identity and explicable sameness or difference, but reaching between widely varying and amorphous subjects across the bounds of that which we cannot naturalise or recuperate.

This is a more or less latent or implicit element which runs throughout the argument for the possibility of resistance, and the re-production of difference, in the face of a universally subjectifying process of ideology. When Judith Butler describes the "necessary failures" and "incoherent configurations" of gender (Butler, 1999, p. 185), or when Denise Riley describes the possible refusal of interpellation's announcement "you are this category" (Riley, 2000, p. 85), they open up the possibility that the reproductive force of ideology can be disrupted and resisted precisely by appeal to an acknowledgement that categorical understandings of identity are painfully reductive of the actual vast range of subjective experience. This is what allows the enquiry to begin at all.

The much earlier, but still foundational, Riley work, *Am I That Name?* opens: "A new Sojourner Truth might well […] issue another plea: 'Ain't I a fluctuating Identity?'" (Riley, 1988, p. 1), and relatedly, "the history of feminism has also been a struggle against over-zealous identifications" (1988, p. 5). The claim of this work – that the struggle for liberation, in this case feminist struggle, involves resisting the very terms on which solidarity and struggle are founded – makes possible the analogous claim of *The Words of Selves* which has been instrumental to my own account, that interpellation produces precisely the unease and failure by which it might be resisted. By a similar token, the claim that this affectively felt unease – the pain experienced as a result of the impositional force of the identities we are each interpellated into – is a source of poetic resistance, leads to another claim, that this poetics might work towards less painful and categorical ways of thinking about shared identities and experiences. Through this set of close conceptual relations, the spirit of Riley's early appeal to "a fluctuating identity" is formative at the heart of this poetics from the start.

This is a direct consequence of the position and nature of subjectivity in these poems. Each of the poetic works encountered here builds its case for resistive poetic writing not just from the

subject-positions of their writers, but from the specific pains experienced through the marginalisation of those subject positions within oppressive material relations. Bonney's work – least obviously invested in this kind of thinking – is focussed on a class analysis which explicitly marks the opposition in perspective, understanding and knowledge of the world between the bourgeoisie and those who have some direct experience of hunger, unemployment, and other damages of capital. All three of the subsequent chapters think about the intersection of these damages with those of patriarchy, through the poets' experience of being interpellated into womanhood, and in Kapil and Mendelssohn's work this also intersects with experiences of racist discrimination and violence. The other side of this is the possibility that precisely because of their marginality, these experiences and subject positions contain a resistive potential which challenges the conditions that produce them in the first place; they challenge their own reproduction, demanding at the level of felt need a set of conditions where these identities and positions no longer exist in their painfully categorical form.

I trace the push towards a resistance and a solidarity which is based on fluctuating, incoherent and amorphous identity in its more explicit form firstly from Bonney's work, where his argument for the possibility of disrupting bourgeois reproduction and breaking out of the inevitable web of "the law" (Bonney, 2015, p. 16) depends partly on his re-configuration of communication and understanding, where understanding is a kind of solidarity. If, under the conditions of capitalism and class society, a resistive form of communication must depend not on any sense of objectivity or clarity, but on solidarity across those experiences created at the edges of capital, then this is specifically a commitment to unstable, uncertain and highly subjective shared recognition, of experiences which are painful & challenging to the dominant social relations – divergent, incoherent or not-yet-coherent affective experiences which are marginalised within hegemonic discourse. The idea of 'non-reified recognition' here is a key contribution to this thread of the thesis as a whole; it attempts to recognise the simultaneous need for recognition of a common set of experiences and for a refusal of the categorical ways that commonality can be named and reproduced, which Riley identifies as a common feature of liberation struggles. The commitment to marginalised experience, and to a kind of recognition which is not quite or not yet coherent, carries through all the following chapters.

In Robertson's work, these arguments are more specifically based in a gender politics. This operates as a way to think through the direct experience of how certain identities are created and interpellated differently under current conditions, and as such open up different

possibilities, in their specificity, for resistance and newly configured subjectivity. Firstly, the analysis in Robertson's work of the dialectical relationship between ideological construction and divergent possibility – much like that which appears in Riley – is impossible without the specific experiential understanding of gendered socialisation, as a woman under patriarchy – "impairment's ability" (Robertson, 2016, p. 11). Similarly, the argument for the resistive possibilities of affective-aesthetic content – transmitting, evoking, or itself *being* infra-linguistic experience – is underpinned by the fact that women have historically been figured as closer to their body, to its physical and emotional drives, and further from the abstract and rational.

The intersections between embodiment, form, aesthetics and affect in the thesis thus begin by de-centring the forms of thinking reproduced by and for the primacy of the white and male subject. A critique of reproductive modes of knowledge – of the function of coherence, rationalism, 'realism' etc, to maintain the ideological conditions of the already-known world – is necessarily also a critique of the relationship between this rationalism and the specific reproduction of the violences of patriarchy and capital. The resistive capacity of that which is coded feminine within these structures is not essentialising then, but stems precisely from their marginality, their inversion of patriarchy's dominant modes; Robertson relies on the feminine precisely in order to undo that which creates it in this form, as subjugated. Modes of feminine-coded aesthetic-affective language use which begin as answers to the need for survival, flourishing, or 'health' for women under capitalist patriarchy can become a gift, a resource for a thinking which might more generally build towards flourishing, solidarity and disruption, since we are all more or less painfully rationalised by these structures.

In Kapil's work, the configuration of the resistive capacities of infra-linguistic affective experience comes to more clearly intersect with more conventional arguments about identity-based liberation politics. The concept of infra-linguistic experience is brought to bear on the notion that the experience of those in positions of material and ideological dominance is more visible, more intelligible, more able to be heard in the social sphere they construct, than the experience of those who are marginalised and abjected. Those experiences below the level of coherent recognition and analysis, in Kapil's work, include the pernicious and non-verbal harms of racism, as well as positive possibilities of recognition and connection. The figuration of colour as an interface between aesthetic content and infra-linguistic affective experience here includes also the very explicit function of colour as a race marker. The work of resistance in this poetry, the work of altering the ideological landscape and bringing new experiences

and possibilities into articulation in order to militate towards new material relations, comes to also involve working to make the experiences of marginalised people more visible, opening up the possibilities of recognisable expression for those whose experiences are erased or silenced.

Yet Kapil's work absolutely doesn't wish to only make those experiences more visible in a way that renders them readily up to the structures of comprehension which marginalise and oppress them. The idea of monstrosity emerges as a synthesis of these developing ideas, in a relationship between the posited resistive modes of communication, and a purposively amorphous idea of subjective relations. The attempt to communicate that which is least comprehensible to racist and patriarchal capital becomes the also defiant attempt to render oneself unknowable. The modes of communication initially figured in Bonney become in my account of Kapil's work the notions of touch and identification, as thinking about transmissions of energy, solidarity, or infra-linguistic content between bodies who don't wish to render themselves recuperable, who wish to be monstrous, or "indeterminate" (Moten & Harney, 2013, p. 20). Kapil's thinking about resistance in the context of racial and gendered violence leans into the fact of incomprehensibility to dominant conceptual frameworks as part of the experience of being marginalised. The mechanisms by which this poetry wishes to disrupt current conditions to re-produce them differently posit a mode of connecting, communicating and interrelating which includes the possibility of mutual illegibility, now as a positive value, as a willing acceptance of all that cannot be reductively and categorically understood about one another.

Mendelssohn's work makes the argument for amorphousness and mutual illegibility most strongly, in a way that is most directly related to her poetics. Her initial rejection of reading practices which are most recuperable, re-productive, susceptible to bad naturalisation develops through a series of related critiques of police, the repressive state and the academy, into a thinking whereby the modes of representation and thought which are most reproductive are directly linked to the domination of the patriarchal and racist capitalist state. What links 'reading for answers' with these structures of domination is a rationalism which wishes, through a drive that objectifies, criminalises, and pathologises, to look on a person as it might look on a poem, and know what that thing is. Mendelssohn's poems push the resistive poetics of infralinguistic affect and non-recuperable poetry furthest towards the subjective understanding of negativity, of a refusal to be known or understood. This is nevertheless still committed to an idea of communication, with being believed even where we cannot or will

not be known, with finding recognition of one another's shared and difficult experiences across this accepted unknowing.

Mendelssohn's work brings out an element – a kind of ethical imperative – which underpins the resistive poetics of the whole thesis. A critique of intelligibility in writing, and a strong value placed on subjective experience, directly leads to a position which values the possibility for subjective relations that themselves have unintelligibility, amorphousness and variability at their centre. The figuration of cries of pain, of the inarticulate or not-yet-coherent cries of those painful experiences of capital, patriarchy, racism, are cries for a world that is not painful in these ways, for the possibility of collective conditions of flourishing for all subjects.

This recalls Keston Sutherland's claim that "Capital itself is the fundamental 'antisubjective' force in the world" (Sutherland, 2013, para. 10). As this poetics is opposed to the structures of bourgeois thinking which are embedded in rationalist, reductionist and reproductive forms of 'understanding', it is also opposed to everything that is concomitant to that thinking – the individualist, hierarchical and essentialising structures that create and centre the bourgeois subject, which is to say, capital, racism, patriarchy, and all relative structures of regulation and oppression.

This ethical imperative is then towards a politics of solidarity, equity, compassion and mutual recognition which doesn't require subjects – us all – to violently wrench our material and emotional lives into categorical and essentialising structures of thinking and being, and to build our commonality on exclusionary and delimiting categories. Instead we might hope to build bonds of collectivity and community, to relate to one another, share and build commonality, to be with one another in common, whilst still being able to flourish in all our huge and uncategorizable variance, to see one another within a sociality that can revel in the beauty of that which isn't known. This might be figured as a meeting point between Mendelssohn's "subject potential" (Mendelssohn, 2000, p. 37) and Bonney's "insurrectionism and illegalism" (Bonney, 2015, p. 142) – not just a revolt against the laws as they currently are, but a rejection of any structures that would limit our potential through an attempt to codify the bounds of possible being.

*****

The above characterises what I think of as the key contributions of the thesis. Through new detailed readings of works by four relatively contemporary poets, still deserving of much more critical attention than they have yet received, it builds an account of some of what I see

as vital resistive work being done in contemporary experimental poetry. In doing so the thesis is itself a theoretical and speculative poetics, of possible future work to be done in radical poetic writing, looking to find ways to move towards new imaginative possibility.

I have framed this account as deliberately tentative, provisional, aware of its own tendency towards insufficiency and failure. In acknowledging the partiality of my own position, and the on-going and collaborative nature of the necessary resistance and resistive thinking, I hope to leave this work open to be critiqued, worked through and built upon by other poet-thinkers who might engage with it. Yet I can also myself identify a few key points where this speculative attempt has come up against its own limits.

One fairly constitutional limit to the thesis is in a tendency to posit – in a variety of different but closely related areas – the presence and importance of content which it by definition cannot fully describe or substantiate. This is most evident in the positing of non-recuperable aesthetic content of a different kind to that which can be explicated through coherent semantic means, and of related elements of experience which are infra-linguistic. I can explain these in abstract conceptual terms – and I have – but by definition I cannot describe them with a large degree of explicit detail, since it is a central feature of these concepts that they are that which is not explicable within clear and coherent language. Any version of these contents or experiences – the aesthetic-affective thinking-feeling content which is not contained by language – which does appear in the thesis is, necessarily, only a distant cousin of the thing in itself. In a sense, this is a problem with negativity itself, and the same problem that begins the thesis, of how to posit, move towards, describe, or even think, something which is outside of the conditions of possibility of our knowledge. I can claim that the poems I examine wish to reach outside of knowledge, as they repeatedly say themselves; I can say that they long, with a kind of negative capability, for conditions of living which are radically different than that which we can imagine from within our current conditions. But it is extremely difficult, or rather, a conceptual inconsistency, to actually describe what those are.

The problem of describing that which is indescribable (even if only contingently, because outside the current conditions of intelligibility) shades over into my encounters with the poetry. I have attempted to describe the particular artifices of the works in question, and the effects which their workings have upon me, in detail and by reference to specific and observable examples in the text. Yet I have often claimed only that these works “gesture towards” infra-linguistic experience, or claimed that they hope to exploit, evoke, or activate

the fractious areas of experience which cannot quite be articulated, without ever being able to substantiate or concretely demonstrate that they do indeed have these effects. I have in places moved from positing the theoretical possibility of negative or non-recuperable kinds of content in experience and in poetry, to pointing out the ways in which the poems under examination also posit this same possibility in their own fairly conventionally recuperable semantic content, in an ever receding claim to that which I cannot directly show. This in turn suggests that the works themselves might gesture towards these possibilities on a conceptual level more than they can actually enact them.

Again, though, these are claims which fundamentally cannot be substantiated through the kinds of forensic production and interpretation of textual evidence that commonly form practices of close reading. There is no way to objectively demonstrate that these or any poems create an unknowable affective experience, below the threshold of linguistic articulation, and nor ought there be. In one way this is a convenient but problematic limitation – that some of the central assertions of the thesis are unverifiable. I can only appeal to the theoretical account of its possibility, and make the further assertion that, in the experience of reading these poems, I believe that something important, but not quite definable, has *happened to me* – and this is an assertion I now emphatically make, that this sense underlies all that has gone before. My reader might share my feeling, believe me, or remain sceptical. Either way, the degree to which my assertion of feeling is convincing may not seem like a solid basis for rigorous academic enquiry.

However, I might anticipate my own worry about this as a limitation by pointing out that, as I have discussed earlier, this is arguably true of *all* literary or artistic criticism. Any appeals to critical dispassion, and to the agreeableness of the critic's account of an artwork's effects on a generally competent observer, mask the basis of that criticism in the ultimately unverifiable responses of the critic and their readership. This has ideological consequences, and privileges certain perspectives and experiences over others. I therefore plead that the limitations of this thesis are partly the limitations of any account of poetic works, made more explicit and brought to the point where usually hidden workings become points of provocation.

This brings me to a further point of difficulty in the thesis: that of undertaking this sort of enquiry – one that is wilfully subjective, dealing in unverifiable imaginative possibility, and openly highly critical of the university, of rationalist thinking, and of forms of writing which aim towards rigour, clarity or objectivity – within the framework of a doctoral thesis.

I have attempted throughout to find ways of shaping my enquiry which disrupt the demands of its own form, which insert myself as an uncertain subject, which open it up to instability and tentativity, but ultimately it isn't and hasn't been possible to bring the work I'm doing here into truly close accordance with its own premises, or with the highly critical stance of the poets towards the forms of knowledge privileged within the academic establishment. This is perhaps a failing of mine, and of this project as I have enacted it, but even more so, it is an internal inconsistency of the task which I have attempted. To enact a written enquiry which takes as seriously as possible the challenges this thesis makes to notions of comprehensibility, conceptual understanding, rationalism, and academic knowledge, would be to abandon the attempt to write a doctoral thesis at all. Instead, I would perhaps have simply written more poems; or else, engaged in some kind of more concrete action in the world, to agitate towards the conditions which I and these poems long for, or to more directly spread the visionary and transformative work which I believe these poems are capable of initiating to a wider array of readers.

Another limitation of this enquiry, as of almost any attempt at a resistive poetics, is its abstraction from action in the world. Whilst it suggests in relatively esoteric theoretical terms the possibilities of resistance and change through poetry, or the possibility through which poetry contributes to resistance and change at least, the relationship to actual political action is always oblique. Again, I might turn to my claim in Chapter 3, that the work of resistance must reciprocally involve ideological and material change, partly because the action necessary to break out of our current conditions is that action which isn't yet clearly definable, which we cannot quite imagine. This thesis deals with the ways poetry can contribute precisely to that reimagining. If my reader is justly tired of hearing that, in the face of such urgent need for radical action and change, I only plead that this work is absolutely not seen as a replacement for any other forms of resistive political action, which happen outside of the scope of the writing of poetics, but as complementary to them.

This brings me to the areas where I believe this enquiry could be extended through further work. In terms of academic study, I would firstly hope that this work could be received and engaged with by other poets and academics working in the field of radical contemporary poetry, to be taken up, argued with and modified by a confrontation with the thinking and practice of others. Further work could also include thinking about how the framework and speculative possibilities laid out in this thesis could be applied to the work of other poets – specifically, to investigate how they map on to a variety of work which has been written and

published in the four years since I began this enquiry. This might also include looking to poets who are undertaking a variety of other resistive activities in the communities in which they live and thinking about the relationship between this and their writing work. This is a somewhat different kind of enquiry to the work that I have undertaken here.

There is, however, another equally urgent implicit point of continuation which this thesis suggests, as a work of poetics: to write, and to practice. I have, from the start, undertaken this enquiry as a poet, speculatively investigating the possibilities of poetic practice, both that of myself and of others. My own poetic writing is not included within the scope of this thesis – there was a brief moment in its planning when it might have been, but that notion was abandoned – but it has been happening alongside.[53] I would hope that this poetics is of some use to my contemporaries and comrades – I might plead with you, my reader, to go forth and write! – and I can say also that a continuation of this thinking is happening and will happen in the ongoing project of my own poetic writing. This work involves thinking – in the diffuse and oblique modes of creative endeavour – about how I can incorporate the insights and commitments of these poetics into my own writing, how I can invoke my own exploratory and fractured affective experience, how I can mine the pains and longings which I feel as a person living under the often alienating and impoverishing conditions of contemporary capitalism, and invoke them in a spirit of generous collectivity, open to those who experience these pains more sharply than I do, to conjure the possibility of something better.

As this poetics also has its own ethical elements, the practice which might continue this project is also practice outside of the bounds of either academic study or writing per se. This could include any number of political agitations, whose relation would be indirect to the work contained here, but it might more directly shade into various kinds of poetic organising and pedagogy. To take seriously the belief that poetry might do resistive work on the level of the reading subject, and that that subject is collectively figured, one might naturally wish to find ways to engage collectively in the kind of reading and thinking-feeling activity of these poems. I myself have been doing this in a number of ways which exist outside of the explicit scope of this thesis, but which are absolutely interconnected with the work that I hope it does. These include: teaching undergraduate creative writing classes; running workshops on

[53] My own works include: a full collection, *a l'instar de* (Knives Forks and Spoons, 2016); *a brace as of pheasants hung* (Generic Greeting, 2017), a small pamphlet put together with illustrator and graphic designer Grant Peacock; *Cash/sex: A verse essay for voices, alto, contralto* (Generic Greeting, 2019), written in collaboration with Bryony Bates, working together through our differing experiences of gendered and precarious labour.

experimental poetry with primary school children; co-organising Poetry Emergency, a festival of radical poetry that operates on the fringes of the academy, which has hosted a range of readings, performances and discussions exploring the intersections between radical work in poetic and related forms with radical political work, whilst in its small way funnelling some institutional funding to poets whose relationship to the academy, if they have one, is mostly precarious and underpaid; co-organising a series of readings, Peter Barlow's Cigarette, which is free to enter and aims to host experimental work in a way which is casual and accessible; co-running a poetry reading group which meets every two weeks in the back room of pubs and cafes to discuss the poetic work that most excites its attendees.[54]

I don't report these activities with self-satisfaction – I would by no means claim that they are a sufficient response to the conditions in which we live. They are merely the things I am doing that are also most directly a continuation of the present study, in the sense that each of them is motivated by the same drive: for the world to be transformed for the better, and to enable thinking about the ways – at the grassroots level of subjects relating to one another in collectivity and community – that the work we do and the pleasure we take in poetry might contribute to that making better, by activating us all in transformative thinking-feeling, and opening up new imaginative possibilities. They are here illustrations of the hopeful, tentative and ever-failing attempt to engage in activities which extend the work of this study into the world. I would hope that this study also helps others, in some small way, to think about how they might do that and to extend the work that they are already doing, as it has been of great help to me.

[54] Poetry Emergency took place in Manchester and Salford in November 2018 and again in November 2019. It was co-organised by myself, Nia Davies, Imogen Durant, Tessa Harris and Lucy Burns. The 2018 programme included work by Bhanu Kapil, and a keynote performance from Sean Bonney; the 2019 festival was dedicated to Bonney's memory and work. Information and documents from both festivals can be found at https://poetryemergency.wordpress.com/. We hope it will occur again.

Peter Barlow's Cigarette has been running semi-regular poetry readings in Manchester since 2014. It is, at the time of writing, organised by myself, Tim Allen and Rachel Sills. Some traces and information on those events can be seen at https://www.facebook.com/peterbarlowscigarette/.

Bibliography

Adair, G. (1988) [Untitled letter to Robert Sheppard]. *Pages*, (65-72), p. 68

Adorno, T. (1974) Commitment. (F. McDonagh, Trans.) *New Left Review*, (87-88), pp. 75-89. Retrieved from: https://newleftreview.org/issues/I87/articles/theodor-adorno-commitment

Adorno, T. (1991) On Lyric Poetry and Society. (S. W. Nicholsen, Trans.) *Notes to Literature, Vol. 1*, R. Teidmann (Ed.), New York: Columbia University Press. pp. 37-54

Adorno, T. (2013) *Aesthetic Theory* (R. Hullot-Kentor, Trans.) London: Bloomsbury [first published 1970]

Allnut, G., D'Aguir, F., Edwards, K., & Mottram, E. (Eds.) (1988) *The New British Poetry 1968-88*. London: Paladin Books

Althusser, L. (1971) *Lenin and philosophy.* (B. Brewster, Trans.) New York: Monthly Review Press

Althusser, L. (1976) *Essays in self-criticism.* (G. Locke, Trans.) London: New Left Books.

Balibar, E. (1994) Subjection and subjectivation. in *Supposing the Subject*, (Joan Copjec, Ed.) London: Verso, pp.1-15

BBC (1973) The Angry Brigade: The Spectacular Rise and Fall of Britain's First Urban Guerilla Group. Online video. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_4KAKcIC7uA. Viewed March 7, 2019

Bernstein, C. (1992) *A Poetics.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press

Bernstein, C. (Ed.) (1990) *The Politics of Poetic Form.* Berkeley: Roof Books

Bonney, S & Dog Section Press (2018) ACAB – A Nursery Rhyme by Sean Bonney. *Youtube*. Online video. March 27. Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T6Czo8TIpHM

Bonney, S. (2003) *poisons, their antidotes.* Sheffield: West House Books

Bonney, S. (2005) *Blade Pitch Control Unit*. Cambridge: Salt

Bonney, S. (2008) *Baudelaire in English*. London: Veer

Bonney, S. (2011a) *Happiness: Poems after Rimbaud.* London: Unkant

Bonney, S. (2011b) "Minds do exist to agitate and provoke / this is the reason I do not conform" —Anna Mendelssohn. *The Poetry Project Newsletter,* (226), pp. 17-19

Bonney, S. (2011c) *The Commons.* London: Openned

Bonney, S. (2014) ACAB: A Nursery Rhyme. *Abandonedbuildings*. Blog post. December 31. Retrieved from: http://abandonedbuildings.blogspot.com/2014/12/acab-nursery-rhyme.html

Bonney, S. (2014) Comets & Barricades: Insurrectionary Imagination in Exile. *Mute*. Retrieved from: https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/comets-barricades-insurrectionary-imagination-exile

Bonney, S. (2015) *Letters Against The Firmament.* London: Enitharmon

Bonney, S. (2019) *Our Death.* Oakland: Commune Editions

Bonney, S. *abandonedbuildings*. Blog. http://abandonedbuildings.blogspot.com/

Bonney, S., Toda, K., Eltringham, D., & McDermott, A. (2011) Interview with Sean Bonney. *The Literateur.* Retrieved from: http://literateur.com/interview-with-sean-bonney/ [Accessed April 2018]

Boyer, A. (2018) *A Handbook of Disappointed Fate.* New York: Ugly Duckling Presse

Brady, A. (2002) Grief work in a war economy. *Radical Philosophy* (114), pp. 7-12

Brady, A. (2010) *Wildfire: A Verse Essay on Obscurity and Illumination.* Berkeley: Krupskaya

Bunting, B. (1999) *Basil Bunting on Poetry* (P. Makin, Ed.) Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press

Butler, J. (1993) *Bodies That Matter.* London: Routledge

Butler, J. (1995) Conscience Doth Make Subjects of Us All. *Yale French Studies* (88), pp. 6-26

Butler, J. (1999) *Gender Trouble* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge [originally published 1990]

Buuck, D. (2013) WE ARE ALL SOUND: POETICS AND PUBLIC SPACE IN THE OCCUPY OAKLAND MOVEMENT. *Revolution and/or poetry.* Retrieved from: https://revolutionandorpoetry.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/buuckporevtalk_2012.pdf

Caddel, R. & Quartermain, P. (1999) *Other: British and Irish Poetry since 1970.* Hanover: Wesleyan University Press

Carbery, M. (2016) Conference report: Contemporary Poetry: Thinking and Feeling. *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry,* 8(1). Retrieved from: https://poetry.openlibhums.org/articles/10.16995/biip.31/

Careless, E. (2011) 'I Shall Not Prove and Neither Shall I Be Proven': *Py*. *The Paper Nautilus,* (2), pp. 43-54

Careless, E. (2015) Book review: *viola tricolour* by Grace Lake. *Hix Eros,* (6), pp. 22-25

Chen, C., Clover, J. & Spahr, J. (2013) Letter to UK Comrades. *Militant Poetics.* Retrieved from: http://militantpoetics.blogspot.com/2013/06/letter-to-uk-comrades.html

Cixous, H. (1976) *The Laugh of the Medusa*. (K. Cohen, & P. Cohen, Trans.) *Signs*, 1(4), pp. 875-893

Clark, T., Gray, C., Nicholson-Smith, D., & Radcliffe, C. (1967) The Revolution of Modern Art and the Modern Art of Revolution. *Situationist International Online*. Retrieved from: https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/modernart.html [accessed 18/5/2020]

Clay J., (2015) 'A New Geography of Delight': Communist Poetics and Politics in Sean Bonney's *The Commons*. *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 7(1). Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.16995/biip.2

Cooke, J. (2013) Statement of Contradictions. *Militant Poetics.* Retrieved from: http://militantpoetics.blogspot.co.uk/2013/05/statement-of-contradictions-jennifer.html

Crangle, S. (2018) The Agonies of Ambivalence: Anna Mendelssohn, la poétesse maudite. *Modernism/Modernity*. 25(3), pp. 461-497.

Critchley, E. (Ed.) (2015) *out of everywhere 2: linguistically innovative poetry by women in north america and the UK*. Hastings: Reality Street

Crozier, A. & Longville, T. (Eds.) (1994) *A Various Art*. Manchester: Carcanet [First published 1987]

Crozier, A. (1983) Thrills and Frills: poetry as figures of empirical lyricism. in A. Sinfield (Ed.) *Society and Literature 1945-1970.* London: Methuen, pp. 199-234

De'Ath, A. & Wah, F. (Eds.) (2015) *Toward. Some. Air.*. Banff: Banff Centre Press

De'Ath, A. (2016) L(a)ying down in the Banlieue. *Mute*. Retrieved from: https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/laying-down-banlieue

De'ath, A. (2017) *Unsociable Poetry: Antagonism and Abstraction in Contemporary Feminized Poetics.* Unpublished doctoral thesis. Simon Fraser University

Debord, G., (1963) The Situationists and the New Forms of Action in Art and Politics. (Knabb, K., Trans.) *Situationist International Online*. Retrieved from: https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/newforms.html [Accessed 18/5/2020]

Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1987) *a thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia*. (B. Massumi, Trans.) Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

Derrida, J. (1976) *Of Grammatology.* (G. C. Spivak, Trans.) Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University press

Dolar, M. (1993). Beyond Interpellation. *Qui Parle*, 6(2), pp. 75-96. Retrieved November 17, 2020, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/20685977

Donovan, T. (2010) In the dirt of the line: Bhanu Kapil's Intense Autobiography. *ON Contemporary Practice*, (2), pp. 55-61

Donovan, T. (2011) Somatic Poetics. *Jacket2.* Retrieved from: https://jacket2.org/article/somatic-poetics

Duncan, A. (1998) Nine fine flyaway goose truths: *Bernache nonnette* by Grace Lake. *Angel Exhaust*, (15), Retrieved from http://poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/recordcdf7-2.html?id=13920 [Accessed 16/03/2020]

Duncan, A. (2003) *The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry*. Cambridge: Salt

Eagleton, T. (2007) *Ideology: an introduction.* (2nd ed) London: Verso. [Originally published 1991]

Elliot, G. (1987) *Althusser: the detour of theory.* London: Verso.

Etter, C. (Ed.) (2010) *Infinite Difference: Other Poetries by UK Women Poets*. Exeter: Shearsman

Evans, G. (2018) The unwelcome revival of 'race science'. *The Guardian.* March 2. Retrieved from: https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/02/the-unwelcome-revival-of-race-science

Fierle-Hedrick, K. & Robertson, L. (2006) Lifted: An Interview with Lisa Robertson. *Chicago Review* (51/52), pp. 38-54

Fiorenza, E. S. (1992) *But She Said. Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation*. Boston: Beacon Press

Fiorenza, E. S. (2013) Critical feminist studies in religion. *Critical Research on Religion,* 1(1), pp. 43-50. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1177/2050303213476112

Fisher, A. (2016) *Imperfect Fit: Aesthetic Function, Facture, and Perception in Art and Writing since 1950.* Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press

Forrest-Thomson, V. (2008**)** *Collected Poems*. Exeter: Shearsman

Forrest-Thomson, V. (2016**)** *Poetic Artifice*. (G. Farmer, Ed.). Bristol: Shearsman [Originally published 1978]

Frost, J. (2013) *The Antidote.* Oakland: Compline

Gardner, C. & Jeschke, L. (2017) Book Reviews: Poetic Artifice, Levity of Design and On Violence in the Work of J.H. Prynne. *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* 9(1), Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.16995/biip.46

Grundy, D. (2013) Practice Run: Force, Wrongness, Distribution. *Militant Poetics.* Retrieved from: http://militantpoetics.blogspot.co.uk/2013/05/practice-run-force-wrongness.html

Grunthaner, J. & Bonney, S. (2019) Their Own Pantheon: Sean Bonney Interviewed by Jeffrey Grunthaner. *BOMB.* Retrieved from: https://bombmagazine.org/articles/sean-bonney/

Hall, S. (1985) Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-Structuralist Debates. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication.* 2(2), pp. 91-114

Hampson, R. & Barry, P. (Eds.), (1993) *New British poetries: The scope of the possible*. Manchester: Manchester University Press

Hayward, D. (2013) [untitled]. *Militant Poetics.* Retrieved from: http://militantpoetics.blogspot.co.uk/2013/05/danny-hayward.html

Hayward, D. (2013) *People*. Cambridge: Mountain Press

Hejinian, L. (2009) The Rejection of Closure. *Poetry Foundation.* Retrieved from: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69401/the-rejection-of-closure

hooks, b. (2004) *The Will To Change: Men, Masculinity and Love.* New York: Washington Square Press

ITV (1972) The Angry Brigade. *World In Action.* Online video. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XDp_ceJQtP4. Viewed March 7, 2019

Jameson, F. (2002) *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, London: Routledge [Originally published 1981]

Jarvis, S. (1998) Prosody as Cognition. *Critical Quarterly,* 40(4), pp. 3-15

Jarvis, S. (2002) An Undeleter for Criticism. *Diacritics*, 31(1), pp. 3-18

Jarvis, S. (2011) Why Rhyme Pleases. *Thinking Verse* (1), pp. 17-43

Jeschke, L. & Beynon, L. (2015) *David Cameron: A Theatre of Knife Songs.* Cambridge: Shit Valley

Johnson, N. (Ed.) (2000) *FOIL: Defining Poetry 1985-2000*. Hastings: Etruscan Books

Kapil, B. (2001) *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers.* Berkeley: Kelsey Street Press

Kapil, B. (2006) *Incubation: a space for monsters.* New York: Leon Works

Kapil, B. (2009) *Humanimal: a project for future children*. Berkeley: Kelsey Street Press.

Kapil, B. (2011) *Schizophrene* New York: Nightboat

Kapil, B. (2015) *Ban en Banlieue.* New York: Nightboat

Kapil, B. (2020) *How to Wash A Heart.* London: Pavilion

Kapil, B. *The Vortex of Formidable Sparkles.* Blog. https://thesparklyblogofbhanukapil.blogspot.com/

Katko, J. (2013) Blame Solidarity Etc. *Militant Poetics*. Retrieved from: http://militantpoetics.blogspot.co.uk/2013/05/justin-katko-militant-politics-and.html

Keats, J. (2002) To George and Tom Keats, 21, 27, December 1817. in G. F. Scott (Ed.), *Selected Letters of John Keats.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press. pp. 59-61

Kennedy, D. & Kennedy, C. (2013) *Women's Experimental Poetry in Britain 1970–2010: Body, Time and Locale*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press

Kim, E. (2018) perpetual writing, institutional rupture, and the performance of no: The Poetics of Bhanu Kapil. In M. Dowdy & C. Rankine (Eds.), *American Poets in the 21st Century: Poetics of Social Engagement*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press. pp. 251-266

Kristeva, J. (1984) *Revolution in Poetic Language.* (Waller, M. Trans) New York: Columbia University Press

Kruk, F. (2009) Betrayal and the Maligned Sound of the Cuckoo: A text/music Spin on Collaboration'. *Pores*, (5), Retrieved from: http://www.pores.bbk.ac.uk/issues/issue5/poetry-and-music/FrancesKruk_BetrayalandtheMalignedSound

Lake, G. (1993) *viola tricolor*. Cambridge: Equipage

Lake, G. (1995) *Bernache Nonnette.* Cambridge: Equipage

Lake, G. (1996) *Parasol One. Parasol Two. Parasol Avenue.* Cambridge: involution

Lake, G. (1997) *Tondo Aquatique*. Cambridge: Equipage

Lê, A, (2016). Conference Report: 'Race and Poetry and Poetics in the UK', Bedford Square, London, 26–27 February 2016. *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 8(1). Retrieved from: http://doi.org/10.16995/biip.22

Leslie, E. (2011) *Bouleversed Baudelairizing: On Poetics and Terror.* London: Veer

Lorde, A. (2017) *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*. London: Silver Press

Lovell, K. (Ed.) (2020) *Pomes and Joys: A celebratory anthology of poetry and essays for Anna Mendelssohn*. Fathomsun Press

Luna, J. (2019) Poetry's Law. *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 11(1). Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.16995/bip.746

Lyotard, J. (1992) *The Postmodern Explained to Children.* (J. Pefanis & m. Thomas, Trans.) Sydney: Power Publications

Manning, E. (2017) For a Pragmatics of the Useless, or the Value of the Infrathin. *Political Theory*, 45(1), pp. 97–115

Marsh, S. (2019) Cambridge University rescinds Jordan Peterson invitation. *The Guardian.* March 20. Retrieved from: https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/mar/20/cambridge-university-rescinds-jordan-peterson-invitation

Marx, K. & Engels, F. (1988) *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, and the Communist Manifesto* (Milligan, M. Trans.) New York: Prometheus Books

Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1970) *The German Ideology*. (Ed. C. J. Arthur) London: Lawrence & Wishart

Massumi, B. (2015) *Politics of Affect.* Cambridge: Polity

Mendelssohn, A. (2000) *Implacable Art.* Cambridge: Folio/Equipage

Mendelssohn, A. (2009) *py.* Old Hunstanton: Oystercatcher Press

Milne, D, (2002) Agoraphobia, and the embarrassment of manifestos: notes towards a community of risk, *Jacket*, (20). Retrieved from: http://jacketmagazine.com/20/pt-dm-agora.html

Morris, M. (2013) *DSK.* London: Tipped Press

Morrison, B. (1980) Young poets in the 1970s. In P. Jones & M. Schmidt (Eds.), B*ritish Poetry Since 1970: a critical survey*. Manchester: Carcanet. pp. 141-156

Moten, F. & Harney, S. (2013) *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study.* Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions

Noland, C. (2009) *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press

O'Sullivan, M. (Ed.) (1996) *out of everywhere: linguistically innovative poetry by women in North America and the UK.* Hastings: Reality Street

Park Hong, C. (2014) Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde. *Lana Turner,* (7). Retrieved from: http://www.lanaturnerjournal.com/7/delusions-of-whiteness-in-the-avant-garde

Parmar, S. (2015) Not a British Subject: Race and Poetry in the UK. *Los Angeles Review of Books*. Retrieved from: https://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/not-a-british-subject-race-and-poetry-in-the-uk/

Parmar, S., Kapil, B. & Ramayya, N. (2018) *Threads*. London: clinic

Perloff, M. (1999). Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject: Ron Silliman's Albany, Susan Howe's Buffalo. *Critical Inquiry*, 25(3), pp. 405-434.

Perloff, M. (2002) *21st-Century Modernism: The "New" Poetics.* Oxford: WileyBlackwell

Peterson, J & Molyneux, S. (2017) The IQ Problem. *Youtube*. online video. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iF8F7tjmy_U. Viewed April 11 2019.

Porter, R. (2009) *Deleuze and Guattari: Aesthetics and Politics*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press

Preminger, A. & Brogan, T.V.F., (Eds). (1993) *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics.* Princeton: Princeton University Press

Prynne, J. H. (2014) *Concepts and Conception in Poetry.* Cambridge: Critical Documents

Queyras, S. (2017) Sapere Aude: On "3 Summers" and the Poetry of Lisa Robertson. *Los Angeles Review of Books*. February 2. Retrieved from: https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/sapere-aude-on-3-summers-and-the-poetry-of-lisa-robertson/ [accessed 8/3/19]

Rawlinson, K. & Adams, R. (2018) UCL to investigate eugenics conference secretly held on campus. *The Guardian.* January 11. Retrieved from: https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/jan/10/ucl-to-investigate-secret-eugenics-conference-held-on-campus

Retallack, J. (2003) *The Poethical Wager.* Berkley: University of California Press

Richards, I. A. (1929) *Practical Criticism.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd

Ricoeur, P, (1994) Althusser's Theory of Ideology. In G. Elliot (Ed.) *Althusser, A Critical Reader*, (pp. 44-72) Oxford: Blackwell

Riley, D. (1988) '*Am I That Name?': Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History.* Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan

Riley, D. (2000a) *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony.* Stanford: Stanford University Press

Riley, D. (2000b) *Selected Poems*. Hastings: Reality Street

Riley, D. (2005) *Impersonal Passion: Language as Affect*. Durham: Duke University Press

Robertson, L. & All Lit Up (2017) Poets Resist: Lisa Robertson. *All Lit Up.* Retrieved from: https://alllitup.ca/Blog/2017/Poets-Resist-Lisa-Robertson

Robertson, L. & Bernstein, C. (2016) interview. *Close Listening.* Clocktower Radio. October 20. Retrieved from: http://jacket2.org/commentary/lisa-robertson-close-listening

Robertson, L. & Stadler, M. (2015) *Revolution: A Reader*. Paraguay Press & Publication Studio [first published 2012]

Robertson, L. & Walker, K. L. (2013-14) I Want to Reclaim Every Part of Living Including Illness and Death: an interview with Lisa Robertson. *Poetry Project Newsletter,* (237), pp. 20-25

Robertson, L. (1997) *Debbie: An Epic* Vancouver: New Star Books

Robertson, L. (1999) *XEclogue.* Vancouver: New Star Books [originally published 1993]

Robertson, L. (2001) *The Weather.* London: Reality Street Editions

Robertson, L. (2006a) *The Men.* Toronto: Bookthug

Robertson, L. (2006b) The Weather: A Report on Sincerity. *Chicago Review* (51/52) pp.28-37

Robertson, L. (2009) *Magenta Soul Whip.* Toronto: Coach House Books

Robertson, L. (2010) *R's Boat.* Berkeley: University of California Press

Robertson, L. (2011) *Occasional Works and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture,* (3rd ed.). Toronto: Coach House Books [Originally published 2003]

Robertson, L. (2012) *Nilling.* Toronto: Bookthug

Robertson, L. (2013) Lisa Robertson on Denise Riley. *Lemon Hound.* Retrieved from: http://lemonhound.com/2013/06/04/lisa-robertson-on-denise-riley/

Robertson, L. (2014) *Cinema of the Present.* Toronto: Coach House Books

Robertson, L. (2016) *3 Summers.* Toronto: Coach House Book

Robertson, L. (2020) *The Baudelaire Fractal*. Toronto: Coach House Books

Rowe, W. (2013) Commentary on the exchange between Jennifer and Jacob and Tom (Poetry &/or Revolution). *Militant Poetics.* Retrieved from: http://militantpoetics.blogspot.com/2013/11/william-rowe-commentary-on-exchange.html

Rowe, W. (2020) Sean Bonney (1969-2019). *Jacket2*. Retrieved from: http://jacket2.org/commentary/sean-bonney-william-rowe

Savage, J. K. (2018) 'I Don't Talk to the Police Except Never': Anna Mendelssohn, Tom Raworth, and Anti-Confessional Life Writing. *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*. 10(1). Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.16995/biip.30

Scappettone, J. (Spring 2006) Site Surfeit: Office for Soft Architecture Makes the City Confess. *Chicago Review*, (51/52), pp. 70-76

Scozzaro, C. (2011) On 'In the Minority of One'. *The Paper Nautilus*, (2), pp. 37-42

Sedgwick, E. K. & Frank, A. (1995) Shame in the Cybernetic Fold. *Critical Inquiry*, 21(2), pp. 496-522

Seymour, R. (2017) The Murder of Hélène Rytman. *Verso Blog*. July 24. Retrieved from: https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3324-the-murder-of-helene-rytman

Sheppard, R. & Clarke, A. (Eds.) (1991) *Floating Capital: New Poets from London*. Elmwood Connecticut: Potes and Poets Press Inc

Sheppard, R. (1987) Pre-script. *Pages*, (1-8), pp. 1-2

Sheppard, R. (1988) Beyond Revival. *Pages*, (49-56), pp. 49-50

Sheppard, R. (1993) *The Flashlight Sonata*. Exeter: Stride

Sheppard, R. (1999) *far language: poetics and linguistically innovative poetry 1978-1997.* Exeter: Stride

Sheppard, R. (2003) *the necessity of poetics.* Liverpool: Ship of Fools

Sheppard, R. (2005) *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and its Discontents 1950-2000.* Liverpool: Liverpool University Press

Sheppard, R. (2011) *When Good Times Made for Good Poetry*. Exeter: Shearsman Books

Sheppard, R. (2016) *The Meaning of Form in Contemporary Innovative Poetry.* Palgrave Macmillan

Silliman, R. (1987) *The New Sentence.* New York: Roof Books

Silliman, R., Harryman, C., Hejinian, L., Benson, S., Perelman, B., & Watten, B. (1988) Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry: A Manifesto. *Social Text*, (19/20), pp. 261-275

Smith, D. N. (2013) 'An Interrupter, a Collective': Sean Bonney's Lyric Outrage. *Études britanniques contemporaines*, (45). Retrieved from: http://journals.openedition.org/ebc/746

Spahr, J. (2015) *That Winter The Wolf Came.* Oakland: Commune Editions

Sparrow, V. (2018) '[A] poet must know more than | a surface suggests': Reading and Secrecy in the Poetry of Anna Mendelssohn. *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* 10(1). Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.16995/biip.27

Spivak, G. C. (1994) Can The Subaltern Speak?. in P. Williams & L. Chrisman (Eds), *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*., New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 66-111. [essay originally published 1983]

Spolaore, A. & Wacziarg, R. (2013) Long-Term Barriers to Economic Development. *National Bureau of Economic Research.* Retrieved from: http://www.nber.org/papers/w19361

Stewart, C. (Spring 2006) We Lunch Nevertheless among Reinvention. *Chicago Review*, (51/52), pp. 65-69

Sutherland, K. (2007) 6 Poetics. *Year's Work in Critical and Cultural Theory*, (15), pp. 111-127

Sutherland, K. (2011) *Stupefaction: A Radical Anatomy of Phantoms.* London: Seagull Books

Sutherland, K. (2013) Theses On Antisubjectivist Dogma. *A Fiery Flying Roule.* Retrieved from: http://afieryflyingroule.tumblr.com/post/49378474736/keston-sutherland-theses-on-antisubjectivist

Sutherland, K. (2014) Introduction. *Hix Eros* (4), pp. 9-13

Sutherland, K. (2015) *Poetical Works 1999-2015.* London: Enitharmon

Thompson, E.P. (1996) *The Poverty of Theory* (2nd ed.). London: Merlin Press. [First published 1978]

Thornton. T. (2011) *TRAILS*. Deterritorial Support Group. https://deterritorialsupportgroup.wordpress.com/

Thurston, S. (2008) 'Need keeps the book of dying open': negative capability in Gil Ott's The Whole Note. *University of Salford Institutional Repository*. Retrieved from: http://usir.salford.ac.uk/2348/

Thurston, S. (2010) Innovative Poetry in Britain Today. *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* (60), pp. 15-30

Thurston, S. (2011) *Talking Poetics*. Bristol: Shearsman

Thurston, S. (2019) "For which we haven't yet a satisfactory name": the birth of Linguistically Innovative Poetry and the practice of a collective poetics in Robert Sheppard's Pages and Floating Capital. *University of Salford Institutional Repository*. Retrieved from: http://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/48250/

Tiwari, P. (2020) The BJP has incited hatred it can no longer stop. *Al Jazeera*. March 11. Retrieved from: https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/bjp-incited-hatred-longer-stop-200309071037099.html

Wang, D. (2015) From Jim-Crow to "Color-Blind" Poetics: Race and the So-Called Avant-Garde. *Boston Review*. March 10. Retrieved from: http://bostonreview.net/poetry/dorothy-wang-jim-crow-color-blind-poetics

Wilkinson, J. (2007) *The Lyric Touch*. Cambridge: Salt

Williams, R. (1983) Cambridge English, Past and Present. In *Writing in Society*. London: Verso, pp. 178–191

Wimsatt, W. K. & Beardsley, M. C. (1949) The Affective Fallacy. *The Sewanee Review* 57(1) pp. 31–55. Retrieved from: www.jstor.org/stable/27537883.